

CHAPTER TEN

The Struggle Against Ungodly Forces

BACKGROUND: In writing this epistle, one of Paul's primary objectives is to establish his credentials as an Apostle, in answer to his detractors who question his authority to teach the Gospel. They accuse him of being weak and ineffective when among the Corinthians but bold in his letters to them from the safety of distance.

10:1. Now I, Paul, myself am pleading with you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ—who in presence am lowly among you but being absent am bold toward you. With irony, Paul refers to the misconception of his personality held by his enemies. Though generally *meek and gentle* in imitation of Christ, which his enemies perceive as weakness, he is also, like Christ, capable of great boldness and righteous anger when confronted with false teachings or sinful conduct (Mk 11:15-17). The Hebrew word for *meek* actually means "capable of being molded." The original Greek word for *gentleness* means, more precisely, "forbearance." To be meek and gentle in the context of Scripture, then, means to be willing to let God mold us in His image, according to His will, and to have self-control and patience under adverse conditions. Those who succeed in this are strong, not weak.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (a). Does being meek and gentle like Christ necessitate allowing oneself to be manipulated or to be intimidated into watering down expressions of faith so as not to offend? What is the proper Christian attitude toward non-believers?

10:2-3. But I beg you that when I am present I may not be bold with that confidence by which I intend to be bold against some who think of us as if we walked according to the flesh. For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. True Christians are like everyone else in that they live in the world and are subject to the consequences of fallen human nature. But those who love God are also spiritual beings. They continually engage in spiritual warfare against those forces that want to prevent them from fulfilling their potential of union with God. Paul hopes he will not have to contend spiritually with the disobedient in the church in Corinth when he arrives.

With all our strength let us hold fast to Christ, for there are always those who struggle to deprive our soul of His presence; and let us take care lest Jesus withdraws because of the evil thoughts that crowd our soul (Jn 5:13). Yet we will not manage to hold Him without great effort on the soul's part. Let us study His life in the flesh, so that in our own life we may be humble. Let us absorb His sufferings, so that by emulating Him we may endure our afflictions patiently. Let us savor His ineffable incarnation and His work of salvation on our behalf, so that from the sweet taste in our soul we may know that the Lord is bountiful (Ps 34:8). Also, and above all, let us unhesitatingly trust in Him and in what He says; and let us daily wait on His providence toward us. And whatever form it takes, let us accept it gratefully, gladly and eagerly, so that we may learn to look only to God, Who governs all things in accordance with the divine principles of His wisdom. If we do all these things, we are not far from God.

PHILOTHEOS OF
SINAI¹

10:4. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds... Satan uses individuals, institutions and philosophies to help him achieve his goal

of leading people away from God. In doing so, he creates strongholds which are difficult to stand against. But God has provided those who love Him with truth, righteousness, peace, and the Cross of Christ, as protection against Satan's attacks. The disciplines of prayer (which includes fasting), watchfulness, and perseverance strengthen us from within. When we use these spiritual weapons to help us live a Christ-like life, we deliver a mighty blow to the Devil's ambitions, against which he cannot stand (see Eph 6:10-18).

A modern example of the battle the true Christian engages in is provided by the success Satan has achieved in so distorting society's moral sense that a large segment of the world's population has no understanding or acceptance of the absolute truths revealed to man by God. His universal standard of right and wrong is not widely recognized—everything is relative. Sin is rationalized away. The sinner is absolved from personal responsibility, always able to find someone or something to blame. Real heroes are few, and the more outrageously and irresponsibly one behaves, the more attention s/he attracts. The general public has a startling fascination with athletes and movie idols, who seem to set society's standards. The only way a Christian can stay on the road to God in this environment is to fortify himself with scriptural truths and spiritual disciplines.

The baptized Christian must struggle with his whole free will so that in true cooperation with God he will be able to reach a condition of unity with God. This journey is called the Christian life.²

Carnal weapons are those things in life that Satan tries to make seem of most importance:

Wealth, glory, power, fluency, cleverness, circumventions, flatteries, hypocrisies, whatsoever else is similar to these. CHRYSOSTOM³

Many individuals use most of the precious time from their lives trying solely to amass these carnal weapons, though they are useless in that which, in the end, is the only thing that really matters: the spiritual struggle to stay on the road leading us closer to God. Sometimes individuals (clergy and laity) become a part of the Church for the wrong reasons: political and social connections membership may offer or the worldly power or prestige a position in the Church may bring. This is contrary to the message of the Gospel but should surprise no one because it has always been thus. Of the twelve Apostles Jesus chose, one was motivated primarily by financial considerations (Jn 12:6).

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (b). With His foreknowledge, Jesus knew Judas would betray Him. Yet He chose him as an Apostle. Why?
(c). Should offenders of the Gospel be routed from the Church?

10:5. casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ... Through the power of the spiritual weapons God gives His people, every intellectual argument, social force or act of the will against Him can be shattered and brought under subjection to Christ. With these weapons at his command, Paul brought many to the Kingdom and subdued many who were its enemies (read Acts 19:11-12, 17-20).

10:6. and being ready to punish all disobedience when your obedience is fulfilled. Paul has delayed his return to Corinth to give the faithful there a chance to show their love by separating themselves from the false apostles who cause disruption in the Church. Upon his return, he

intends to deal with the disobedient to restore harmony.

10:7. *Do you look at things according to the outward appearance? If anyone is convinced in himself that he is Christ's, let him again consider this in himself, that just as he is Christ's, even so we are Christ's.* True Christians develop spiritual gifts as fruit of their struggle to grow in holiness. One of these gifts is the ability to discern right from wrong, good from bad. Those who have this gift are not deceived by outward appearances, so would not be fooled by Paul's detractors who speak against him. They would recognize him as a man of God (Heb 5:12-14, 1 Cor 2:14).

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (d). How does one acquire the gift of discernment?
Of what assistance is this gift in the Christian life?

10:8-11. *For even if I should boast somewhat more about our authority, which the Lord gave us for edification and not for your destruction, I shall not be ashamed—lest I seem to terrify you by letters. “For his letters,” they say, “are weighty and powerful, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.” Let such a person consider this, that what we are in word by letters when we are absent, such we will also be in deed when we are present.* Paul refrains from expounding upon the power and authority God has given him because he does not want to give credence to his detractors' claims that he tries to intimidate them with his letters. Those who accuse him of being weak and ineffective in person will find that he is as bold and powerful as his letters when necessary.

10:12-13. *For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise. But we will not boast beyond limit, but will keep to the limits God has apportioned us, to reach even to you.* Paul was chosen by God to bring His word to certain areas, one of which is Corinth (Acts 18:1-11). He, therefore, compares himself with the Apostles, chosen by God for the specific task of bringing Christ's Gospel to the world (Mt 28:19)—not with those who create their own agenda, with their own rules, and then boast about themselves without basis and authority. When Paul stresses his power and authority, he does so not in a boastful, dictatorial manner, but to put himself in a position from which he can carry out his mission. To shrink from that position in the name of modesty or humility would be to make him impotent, unable to fulfill his responsibilities.

This verse also speaks well to the variable morality of society. Many extol the virtue of “values,” but unless those values are grounded in God's truths, they mean something different to each person.

10:14-16. *For we are not extending ourselves beyond our sphere (thus not reaching you), for it was to you that we came with the Gospel of Christ; not boasting of things beyond measure, that is, in other men's labors, but having hope, that as your faith is increased, we shall be greatly enlarged by you in our sphere, to preach the Gospel in the regions beyond you, and not to boast in another man's sphere of accomplishment.* Paul hopes his efforts in Corinth will bear fruit so that God will expand his mission to teach into other areas to which the Gospel has not yet been brought.

10:17. *But “He who glories, let him glory in the Lord.”* Those who try to do the work of the Lord must not boast about what “they” have done, only what the Lord has done—sometimes

through them.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (e). Is it possible for God to work through modern man as He did through Paul?

10:18. For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends. God alone is Judge, through His Son. He will determine whose life showed faith through love and obedience to His truth, and whose did not. We are judges of ourselves to the extent that the degree of harshness with which we judge others will be the standard that God uses to judge us (Mt 7:1-2). What we say or think about ourselves is not what matters, but what God knows about us.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (f). There are those who believe that each person should seek “his own” truth. What does this verse say to them?

FOOD FOR THOUGHTS COMMENTS

(a). Does being meek and gentle like Christ necessitate allowing oneself to be manipulated or intimidated into watering down expressions of one’s faith so as not to offend? What is the proper Christian attitude toward non-believers? To be meek and gentle like Christ requires that we not return evil for evil, no matter how reviled or provoked. However, we need not and should not be without strength of conviction. The Christian model is to pray for guidance, to try continually to grow in grace and in knowledge and to be bold in following through with what God expects of us.

What should we do about those around us who are not believers? Certainly we should pray for them, not just occasionally or as a matter of routine but all the time, in the hope that they may have a change of heart and so find their way to God.

But we should also give them every opportunity to learn the truth of Christ from us, not so much, perhaps, by preaching it to them in so many words, but by the way we behave toward them. Our attitude should reflect the attitude of Christ.

So when they are hostile, meet them with gentleness. When they make angry accusations, respond with calm words. When they abuse you, pray for them. At the same time, don’t compromise your beliefs or water them down to make them acceptable. It is possible to stand firm against violence and error while remaining perfectly calm and gentle. Don’t be trapped into playing their game.

Show them that we regard them as our brothers, children of the same Creator and simply want them to become also our brothers in Christ, sons of the same Father. Our attitude should be that of the Lord. If we imitate Him, we won’t go wrong.

IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH⁴

(b). With His foreknowledge, Jesus knew that Judas would betray Him. Yet He chose Judas as an Apostle. Why? With the gift of free will with which man has been endowed from the beginning, each of us either tries to fulfill the purpose for which we were given life (to seek God and live in a way that will lead to union with Him—Acts 17:26-27), or he rejects or ignores God

(there is no middle ground—Mt 12:30, Rev 3:16). God knows the outcome of our life, not because He wills the results, but because He is omniscient and has foreknowledge. He allows each of us to live our life (to act out what He foreknows) so that on Judgment Day we will all realize that we had a chance for eternal blessedness and that His judgment is fair. Jesus chose Judas as an Apostle to illustrate this truth, though He knew the consequences for Himself.

As the parable of the *wheat* and the *tares* illustrates (Mt 13:24-30), the word of God is brought to everyone so they can hear it and desire the Kingdom of Heaven. Some choose instead a kingdom on earth, as did Judas. They are the “tares” (weeds, useless or harmful growth): those who allow the *enemy* to sow lies in their hearts. Wherever there is “wheat” (those who attempt to grow in holiness), Satan works hard to uproot it (Rev 12:17). God allows this because He wants the consequences of the gift of free will to take their course in each person’s life in order that the gift be complete, and because many lessons are taught in this way.

Do you think, Brothers, that the tares do not reach to high seats? Do you think they are all down among you, and none above? That we may not be such!...But I tell you, in the high seats there are good wheat and there are tares; as among the people there are good wheat and there are tares. Let the good be patient with the wicked; let those who do evil change their ways and become as the good. Let us all, if possible, come unto God. May we all, through His mercy, escape the wickedness of this world. Let us seek good days, for we are in the midst of days that are evil: but in these wicked days let us not blaspheme, that we may reach unto the good days. AUGUSTINE⁵

(c). Should offenders of the Gospel be routed from the Church? If it seems to us that someone in the Church is there for the wrong reasons, we must first remember that not everything is necessarily what it appears to be:

We have to deal with an adversary who is a great liar...Yet we can rejoice that we have a Judge Whom our accuser cannot deceive. Had we a man as a judge, our enemy could invent for him as he willed; for there is no one more clever at inventing than the Devil. Even now it is he who invents all the false accusations made against the saints. Since his accusations avail nothing with God, he scatters them among men...he knows the evil he can work with them, unless the vigilance of faith resists him. And it is for this he circulates evil about the good: that the weak may then think they are not any good and so let themselves be carried away by their own evil desires and become corrupted, saying to themselves: Who is there that keeps a commandment of God? Or who observes chastity? And when a man believes that no one does, he himself becomes this “no one.” It is in this way that the Devil works.

AUGUSTINE⁶

Secondly, it is important to keep in mind that the Church is the best place for the spiritually unawakened or wavering to be—where perhaps the Holy Spirit can soften their hearts and bring about repentance. Whenever possible, actions and behavior should be evaluated against the precepts of Scripture and dealt with lovingly but firmly (see Chapter Seven, Food for Thought Comment (c)), but we should not judge the person—that’s God’s province (see 1 Cor 4:3-5).

We are anxious that, if it were possible, nothing evil should remain among the good. But it was said to us: *Let both grow until the harvest.* Why? Because you are prone to error.⁷

Hear what He says: *Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, first gather the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn.* Why hasten then, zealous servants, He says? Do you see

that the tares stand in the midst of the good growth, and you wish to uproot the bad? Remain quiet; it is not yet the time of harvest. Let it come, and let it reveal to you the true wheat. Why need you be angry? Why are you impatient that the bad should not be mixed with the good? They may be among you in the field, but in My barn they shall not be with you.

AUGUSTINE⁸

(d). How does one acquire the gift of discernment? Of what assistance is this gift in the Christian life? God gives His spiritual gifts to those who indicate, by word and by deed, that they want them, so if we seek wisdom, we should ask for it (Jas 1:5). At the same time, we should study Scripture for the guidance it contains, as the *fair-minded* Jews did when confronted with Paul's teaching that Jesus was the Messiah Whom they had been taught to await (Acts 17:11). The other important tool to which we have access is the writings of the Fathers of the Church, which preserve the original understanding of God's word to His people. Just as practice makes perfect with any skill, it is important to apply all acquired spiritual knowledge and understanding to the problems and circumstances of life day by day—for we continue to learn and grow when we actually try to live the Christian life.

For him who possesses it, discrimination [discernment] is a light illuminating the right moment, the proposed action, the form it takes, strength, knowledge, maturity, capacity, weakness, resolution, aptitude, degree of contrition, inner state, ignorance, physical strength and temperament, health and misery, behavior, position, occupation, upbringing, faith, disposition, purpose, way of life, degree of fearlessness, skill, natural intelligence, diligence, vigilance, sluggishness, and so on...It reveals the nature of things, their use, quantity and variety, as well as the divine purpose and meaning in each word or passage of Holy Scripture...and the significance of the interpretation given by the Fathers.⁹

Discrimination is born of humility. On its possessor it confers spiritual insight, as both Moses and St. John Climacus¹⁰ say: such a man foresees the hidden designs of the enemy and foils them before they are put into operation...Discrimination is characterized by an unerring recognition of what is good and what is not, and the knowledge of the will of God in all that one does.¹¹

He who lacks discrimination cannot achieve anything; while the person who possesses it is a guide to the blind and a light to those in darkness (Rom 2:19). We should refer everything to such a person and accept whatever he says, even if because of our inexperience we do not see its import as well as we would like. Indeed, he who has discrimination is to be recognized in particular from the fact that he is able to communicate the sense of what he says even to those who do not want to know it.

PETER OF DAMASKOS¹²

Among beginners, discernment is real self-knowledge; among those midway along the road to perfection, it is a spiritual capacity to distinguish unfailingly between what is truly good and what in nature is opposed to the good; among the perfect, it is a knowledge resulting from divine illumination, which with its lamp can light up what is dark in others. To put the matter generally, discernment is—and is recognized to be—a solid understanding of the will of God in all times, in all places, in all things; and it is found only among those who are pure in heart, in body and in speech.

CLIMACUS¹³

(e). Is it possible for God to work through modern man as He did through Paul? In every age, God has worked through those who love Him. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Noah, Job, Daniel, the Holy Prophets, the Apostles, Martyrs, Saints (ancient and modern, known and unknown) and ordinary people of every description have been instruments of His will. He can

and will work through each of us if we ask Him to, allow Him to, and try at the same time to grow in obedience to His word. This is why, although the patristic age is generally considered to include those important Christian writers from the end of the first to the end of the eighth centuries A.D., it never really ends. Each age has the potential to produce a “Father” [or “Mother”] of the Church.¹⁴

(f). There are those who believe that each person should “seek his own truth.” What does 2 Corinthians 10:18 say to them? God is the only source of eternal Truth, defined as that which comprises His divine plan for man. While each person has been given free will to respond to God in his/her own way--or even to reject Him--it remains that ultimately everything will be judged against the standard God has set. Self-created "truths" have no real power, except to confuse, distract and lead the misguided away from the unalterable, unchanging divine word. Satan, the deceiver of the world, was the first to go his own way (Rev 12:7-9), but he has many followers. They help him to accomplish his goal of depriving as many as possible of the joys of the Kingdom (union with God), which, for the true believer, begins in this life.

There are also those who claim that the seeker should look inside himself for the solutions to life’s problems. But he who does will find that which has been absorbed into his being during his lifetime—which may be true or it may be false. That which is not based on God can lead to self-worship: idolization of self via one's own thoughts and ideas.

Christianity calls us to look to our Creator for the answers to the questions of life. We cannot know Truth on our own, only in communion with Him. If those who love God plant His precepts in the hearts and minds of those they can influence, they will be giving them access to His Truth, His values, His light, His power. To find the precepts of Truth, it is logical to look to that which has been preserved, protected and taught by the historic, early Church before heresies divided the Body of Christ. This is the treasure Orthodoxy offers.

¹ Palmer, Sherrard, Ware, “Texts on Watchfulness,” (20), Vol. Three, p.24.

² Stavropoulos, p.49.

³ Schaff, “Homily XXI,” Vol. XII, p.376.

⁴ Winter, “Our Attitude to Unbelievers,” (Day 25).

⁵ Toal, “The Tares and the Wheat,” Vol. One, p.339.

⁶ *ibid*, “Meditation on the Mystery of the Word Incarnate,” Vol. Four, p.167.

⁷ *ibid*, Augustine on “The Tares and the Wheat,” Vol. One, p.338.

⁸ *ibid*, p.337.

⁹ Palmer, Sherrard and Ware, “Discrimination,” Vol. Three, p.152.

¹⁰ Luibheid and Russell, “Step 25,” (On Humility), *Ladder*, p.218-228.

¹¹ Palmer, Sherrard & Ware, “True Discrimination,” Vol. Three, p.158.

¹² *ibid*, “Discrimination,” p.243.

¹³ Luibheid and Russell, “Step 26,” (On Discernment), *Ladder*, p.229

¹⁴ Ware, *Church*, p.204. See also John Chryssavgis, "In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers," p.4.

