

Facing criticism – none of us like it, particularly if the criticism isn't warranted. This was Paul's lot as far as Corinth was concerned. In the first few chapters we see that Paul was coming under criticism from some and he now returns to his critics in the closing chapters of the letter.

1 I, Paul, make a personal appeal to you — I who am said to be meek and mild when I am with you, but harsh with you when I am away. By the gentleness and kindness of Christ 2 I beg you not to force me to be harsh when I come; for I am sure I can deal harshly with those who say that we act from worldly motives.

The criticism that we are going to look at in this chapter is that Paul said one thing when he was away and another in his letters. We'll hopefully see by the end of the sermon that things in writing have a different role to face to face relationships and it's important to use the right medium for the right purpose.

The first part of the chapter is a plea - I beg you; don't force me to be harsh when I come. Why should he be harsh? Because the attitude was that there were people that said he acted from worldly motives. And that got his goat! It's a warning to those that claimed he acted from worldly motives: don't push me!

There was a good reason why he did not want to be pushed – because he didn't act from worldly motives! Quite the reverse, he was engaged in a spiritual battle that required spiritual weapons:

It is true that we live in the world, but we do not fight from worldly motives. 4 The weapons we use in our fight are not the world's weapons but God's powerful weapons, which we use to destroy strongholds. We destroy false arguments; 5 we pull down every proud obstacle that is raised against the knowledge of God; we take every thought captive and make it obey Christ.

We use ...God's powerful weapons .. to destroy strongholds. What is Paul trying to say here? The picture is one of a stronghold. I recall preaching on this a couple of years ago and I give you the picture of Caerphilly Castle. It was built to protect a strategic route. If an enemy invaded, it would be a stronghold which would have needed to be taken by Welsh rebels if they wanted to re-assert themselves in that area. It couldn't be avoided as the English who held the castle would always be there to cause problems if the castle wasn't taken. It never was.

So what are the strongholds Paul is referring to? They are ideas, arguments that we have in our own minds or our collective minds that hinder the work of God, and hinder our own growth as believers. They are things that stick there that are not of God, but which continue in our minds because we think we can't change them, or won't change them.

Ed Siloso “ *A mindset impregnated with hopelessness that causes us to accept as unchangeable, situations that we know are contrary to the will of God.*”

Neil Anderson “*Mental habit patterns of thought that are not consistent with God's word.*”

Paul gives us what strongholds are made up of: *We destroy false arguments; 5 we pull down every proud obstacle that is raised against the knowledge of God*

They are made up of two things: false arguments and personal pride

As many of you know I have a Ph.D and had to do a three years study into how political views changed in relation to how and why we protect the British landscape. The sensible way of making policy is doing a study, examining the issues and forming a strategy. That's not the way it's usually done. Policy usually comes from dogma and conventional wisdom that nobody questions even if it's blatantly wrong. One old chestnut after the war was that as little agricultural land should be lost to urban development in post-war Britain. People remembered the rationing during the war and invested heavily in agriculture. They considered that as a consequence of that, the beauties of the English countryside would always be protected. Not so. No-one ever bargained on modern agriculture, which had a profound and negative impact on the countryside and on nature. But the conventional wisdom meant that it actually took decades to change how we do agriculture to make it more friendly to the environment. The old conventional wisdom meant that it actually took decades of reports, bad legislation and arguing politicians to make people realise that a new attitude towards agriculture was necessary.

False arguments are strongholds when it comes to the work of God. They are things that conventional wisdom say is OK – after all, we've always done it haven't we so it must be OK. Recent strongholds: the AV, the organ, Thee and Thou in prayers, formality in worship

Current strongholds in church: resistance to change, judgmentalism, acceptance of social trends, half a glass is enough, fear of evangelism, lack of confidence, feeling that God doesn't do what He says He can. Conventional wisdom in Christian circles is hard to break because we tend to spiritualise it and even justify ourselves doing wrong things from scripture. Think of some examples. My PB past. Change can be very hard.

Strongholds in our personal lives:

Addiction. Fear. Traumatic Experiences. Personal insecurity. Past failure. Negative spiritual experiences. Prejudices. These and more are the sorts of things that hold God's people back in their walk with Him and in their relationship with Him. They can stop them growing and in some cases, lay shipwreck to their faith. On a spiritual level, people become Christians, but never deal with all the issues in their lives which have a potential to hold them back in their faith. What it means is that at some point, things not dealt with either pop back up to discourage us, or satan latches on to them and uses them against us to damage our relationship.

How do strongholds get a hold of us in the first place. 2 Corinthians 10 gives us the idea – they come from the world. Before we came to Christ we were conformed to the world, it's ideas and pressures – a world hostile to God. And even if we are believers, we can easily act in the flesh, to allow ourselves to become conformed to the world's thinking and not be transformed as we are supposed to be in Christ.

Besides, we know from our own upbringings, that our lives are shaped by our families, schools, community, friends and the like. I've got to say, that most of it positively develops us rather than creates strongholds that can influence our Christian faith badly. I was fortunate to have been brought up in a Christian family where I had good foundations. The problem is that satan can easily cause the bad things to be hidden amongst the good. I had a fantastic grounding in the scriptures when I was young – encouraged both by my parents and the church. But amongst them was stuff that had crept in that looking back, just was indefensible from the point of view of God's Word and I've already mentioned some of them.

Then there are traumatic experiences. We have all had them. Needless to say, if you've been abused in your life, it will cloud how you think about people and how you respond to them and how you build up relationships. Similarly, people often found the loss of somebody close to them a shattering experience and they have difficulty in their relationship with God. How many people do you know that have had bad experiences in life and no longer walk with the Lord because it has shaken their faith. That trauma is a stronghold. Maybe we haven't gone that far but a past experience really bugs us and that gives us faith problems? God wants us to be free of it.

These mental strongholds are all things that are lies which as a child of God each of us has the ability to tear down. No Christian, no matter how bad their past experience has to remain a victim. In Christ we are new creations, and this passage is about the breaking of strongholds. Breaking strongholds is about freeing ourselves from those things which hold us back.

How do we break them down. Let's go back to these verses: *4 The weapons we use in our fight are not the world's weapons but God's powerful weapons, which we use to destroy strongholds. We destroy false arguments; 5 we pull down every proud obstacle that is raised against the knowledge of God; we take every thought captive and make it obey Christ.*

We use God's weapons, not our own. What are they? The answer is more implicit than explicit here but in Ephesians 6 the weapons are pretty explicit and would fit here. *Eph 6:7 And accept salvation as a helmet, and the word of God as the sword which the Spirit gives you. 18 Do all this in prayer, asking for God's help. Pray on every occasion, as the Spirit leads. For this reason keep alert and never give up; pray always for all God's people. 19 And pray also for me, that God will give me a message when I am ready to speak, so that I may speak boldly and make known the gospel's secret.*

Here there are two weapons, the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God and praying – asking for God's help and praying on every occasion as the Spirit leads. They are God's weapons as it is the Spirit actively working in people's lives.

By word of God, we might think automatically of the Bible and in one sense that's correct, but the words sword of the Spirit suggests correctly is the Spirit speaking into people's lives. A favourite verse is Hebrews

4:12 *For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. God takes His words and the Spirit speaks them deep into people's lives.*

What breaks the stronghold is the power of God speaking into people's lives. And what's our role: *Do all this in prayer, asking for God's help. Pray on every occasion, as the Spirit leads. For this reason keep alert and never give up; pray always for all God's people.* It's prayer because it's prayer that keeps us in step with the Spirit and He can use us in His work.

How do we break the things in our lives we think can't change? Allow the Spirit to speak into that situation. How do we break that which is false thinking in the church? By bringing the word of God to bear on that situation and let the Spirit speak into it.

That's why I want us as a fellowship to engage in prayer more, because it's that realisation that the Holy Spirit is the one who changes lives and situations and learning to do His work rather than trying to persuade Him to do ours is what's makes a difference and gets rid of ideas like "we can't do better", "it's always been like this", "this is what Suffolk is like".

How do we use the weapons? By using them in our own lives – by personal worship, meditating on God's word and personal prayer. The other way is through spending time in worship word and prayer. Not just in theory stuff but practically addressing issues that we know to be strongholds.

Church – addressing them – prayer, evangelism

Personal – knowing what holds us back – praying for one another.

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