

2 Corinthians 10:1-6
Destroying Prisons of the Mind

[1] I, Paul, myself entreat you, by the meekness and gentleness of Christ—I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away!—

[2] I beg of you that when I am present I may not have to show boldness with such confidence as I count on showing against some who suspect us of walking according to the flesh.

[3] For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh.

[4] For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to **destroy strongholds**.

[5] We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ,

[6] being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete. (ESV)

There is one show that my wife watches that I absolutely cannot stand.

It's not because it's raunchy or inappropriate. It's because it makes me so very sad, and also grosses me out at the same time, and I often just can't look away.

It's the show "Hoarders" - and if you don't know anything about the show, it's about people who hoard stuff.

Houses, rooms, attics, and garages packed from floor to ceiling with...stuff. Sometimes, it's just clutter or memorabilia - things that these "hoarders" have held onto for years and even decades. In another hoarder house, there are mountains of bags in every room full of brand new clothes and shoes because of a shopping addiction.

A team of cleaning crews, movers, and counselors intervene to try to cleanse and treat the hoarders' home and habits.

Oftentimes, you hear things in the show like, "I'm keeping this just in case I need it one day" or "I can't possibly throw that away, I have too many memories with it."

That's a bit understandable. I think most of us have a hard time letting go of certain items, unless you're a stone-cold minimalist. But these cases are extreme.

In one notorious episode, a woman saved every piece of food. Every. Piece. Of. Food.

Leftovers, expired groceries, and half-eaten dishes piled high on every flat surface in the house. Along with that, as you might imagine, there were animal infestations, mold issues, and pungent odors.

Until there was this intervention on the show, this poor woman had become a prisoner in her own home. It took a team of qualified, caring people to demolish the literal walls of junk, and to free her from the mindset and habits that led her down the path to hoarding.

Now, the reason I don't like the show is because I think it walks the very fine line between helping these hoarders, and exploiting mental health disorders for advertising revenue. Whatever the case, what's true is that these are real people with real struggles that lead to real consequences.

The counseling team on Hoarders try to get to the root cause to treat their compulsive hoarding - and it always starts with the mind. What thoughts, ideas, or disorders caused these people to extreme, debilitating hoarding?

Was it greed that led to storing things for the hope of a future payout?

Was it trauma or fear that led to a scarcity mindset?

Was it clinical anxiety or severe Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder?

Whatever the reason, hard work has to be done to free them from the prisons of their homes, by freeing them from the prisons of their minds.

The same is true in the spiritual battle we find ourselves in today. The spiritual battle that has been raging since Genesis 3 - a battle of the mind. But through Christ, a battle that we can fight, and claim victory over.

MAIN IDEA: The enemies of our souls create prisons of the mind. Truth and obedience destroy those prisons and lead us to the mind of Christ.

Beginning at the first verse in this passage is a good place for a recap:

Point 1: Face to Face

[1] I, Paul, myself entreat you, by the meekness and gentleness of Christ—I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away!—

[2] I beg of you that when I am present I may not have to show boldness with such confidence as I count on showing against some who suspect us of walking according to the flesh.

Paul had started the church in Corinth, and had visited at least two times, but in the course of his absence, the church was quickly led astray and false teachers rose up.

Because of this, Paul wrote a series of 4 letters to the church in Corinth to address his concerns. We have two of these letters - 1st and 2nd Corinthians.

Throughout his letters, the apostle Paul defends his ministry from the false teachers that had come up, and he's writing to the people who had fallen into their camp to bring about genuine restoration and true worship. We can reconstruct that some of these false leaders might have been spreading rumors about Paul.

We know from snippets of Paul's writings in the New Testament that his appearance and stature wasn't of high regard in the ancient Greco-Roman world. According to some 2nd century writings, which we can't know for certain to be true, but interesting nonetheless, Paul is described as: short, bald, with a hooked nose, a thick black beard, and a unibrow. (Thecla) He had health problems. He was a poor public speaker.

Paul's life verse might have been 1 Samuel 16:7 - "Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature...for man sees the outward appearance, but the LORD sees the heart."

So, in person, Paul did not have the gravitas that was respected in the ancient world. But he certainly wrote his letters with Holy Spirit inspired power. The rumors might have been exactly what Paul writes: he was "weak" in person, but bold in his letters.

In his continuing apostolic defense, it's almost like Paul takes a deep breath, and says, "Listen, I'm trying to entreat/implore/urge/encourage you with the all meekness and gentleness of Christ in this letter, and not just my own gentleness, because you better hope I'm not as stern in person with you as I have been in this letter."

In a way, Paul is being feisty and bold here. But ironically, Paul's accusers were absolutely right. In person, in his everyday life and actions, Paul was humble, meek, and full of grace.

Kent Hughes writes,

"Paul's enemies obviously suffered from a values-deficit because they regarded humility not as a grace but as a weakness. Apparently, they were influenced by the classical Greek tradition that regarded great men as anything *but* humble. In fact, classic literature couples meekness and humility with servility, which stands opposite to nobility and dignity. Thus, Paul's arrogant detractors were living their lives in profound dissonance with the values of the [Scriptures] and of Christ himself."

In this upside-down kingdom of Christ, gentleness, grace, humility, and meekness (which is not weakness, but strength under control) are of higher value than power, pride, and prestige. Paul is begging them to understand this. There comes a time and place for boldness and firmness, but it comes much later - after humility and grace have run their entire course.

Point 2: Flesh versus Flesh?

[3] For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh.

[4] For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh

In these verses, Paul is playing on the word "flesh" and it's important to work it through - because at first reading it might seem contradictory.

This word "flesh" - in the Greek, it's the word "sarx" - and it has multiple meanings and metaphors in New Testament Greek.

First, "sarx" literally means skin, meat, flesh. The physical substance of the body, whether of humans or animals.

Second, "sarx" is used to symbolize the beastly, animalistic instincts toward violence, food, domination, sex, or anything that leads to physical satisfaction.

Therefore, "sarx" is often used as a general symbol of humanity's sinful, beastly nature. It is a metaphor of anything and everything that is separate from the Divine nature of God.

So, in our passage, the false teachers had accused Paul of “walking according to the flesh.” For some reason, in building up a case against Paul, they tried to contaminate his reputation by saying his ministry was “fleshly” - according to worldly nature.

Why was this? There are a number of potential explanations that commentators have offered: First, maybe this was just a lazy character assassination by the false teachers. A gross rumor.

Second, maybe this was an accusation toward Paul supporting his ministry by continuing his trade of making tents. The argument was possibly that Paul didn't fully trust God's provision for ministry.

Or, as we know from 1 Corinthians, the gifts of the Holy Spirit were being abused. Worship services were chaotic and messy. Paul directed them toward right order and reason. Maybe the false teachers carried it even further, and claimed that Paul actually lacked the Spirit. Some of the Corinthians seemed to value manifestations and orations - and Paul was admittedly not a gifted public speaker. They may have thought he was lacking in the Spirit.

There are other hypotheses why this accusation was raised against Paul - maybe his former life persecuting Christians in Jerusalem when he was a zealous Pharisee never really was always looked at with suspicion. Maybe they just thought his letters were way too mean! Maybe it was a combination of all these. The false teachers had built a case against Paul that he walked according to the flesh.

So Paul does a word play on “flesh” if you can see it now.

In effect, he's saying, “You say that I walk according to the metaphorical flesh? Well, in a way, you're right, I do walk in the flesh - the literal flesh - because I'm a skin-and-bones human. But, that doesn't mean that I want to fight against other skin-and-bones humans according to the systems of the flesh - specifically, domination and violence. And because of that, I don't use weapons of the flesh - physical weapons - but spiritual weapons.”

It's important to see how Paul uses this interchange of the word flesh.

Although this battle had brewed between Paul and these false teachers, Paul clearly understood that his fight wasn't with the physical persons, but rather it was a spiritual battle taking place in the mind. It was the spiritual enemies of our souls that had sought to create division and false teaching.

Paul firmly believed this.

Ephesians 6:12 - “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

Though at times it seems to get so close to seeming like people versus people or us versus them, our fight is never, ever with other flesh-and-blood humans, but with the systems and spiritual forces that take minds and hearts captive to lies and disordered desires.

Point 3: Fight for Freedom

[4] For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds.

[5] We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ,

[6] being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete.

The weapons Paul is claiming here have the divine power to destroy strongholds.

This word, stronghold, in the Greek "*ochyroma*" can have a couple different connotations. It's often also translated as fortress - the place where an army maintains its strong position. This plays very well with Paul's theme of spiritual warfare and military language. I certainly think that's going on here.

But another way this word "*ochyroma*" is used, for instance in the Greek Old Testament, is prison. For example, Joseph, when he is arrested after being falsely accused by Potiphar's wife, is thrown into a stronghold - an "*ochyroma*" - and there are many other instances where this word has ideas of imprisonment and captivity.

To be sure, both are often at play in the context of warfare. Strongholds are used for both military might, but also for prisoners of war.

And this is important, because there is most certainly a battle for our minds. And through lies and deceit, the enemies of our souls take many, many minds captive. Many have become prisoners of their captured minds.

This is why Paul's plea is to reverse course. Destroy the prisons of the mind with truth and obedience, and in turn, take back our own thoughts captive for Christ. Our minds belong not to our spiritual enemy, but they belong to Christ.

From the very beginning, there has been a battle for our minds.

In Genesis 1 and 2, Creator God plants humanity in paradise to rule and reign with Him. All Creation is given to them, except for that one tree: the one tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

But, the enemy makes its first appearance in Genesis 3. It makes Eve question the thing she knows God said - the battle for the mind had begun.

"Did God really say..."

"You will not surely die..."

And so, the two humans eat of the fruit. They take for themselves from the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

Instead of living in beautiful relationship with Creator God, humanity takes what they desire for themselves. It leads to shame, separation, and sin takes its full effect in the rest of humanity's story.

Paul is convinced this battle for the mind is still at hand. The enemy is still prowling, desiring division and disgrace instead of repentance and restoration and right relationship.

It starts in the mind. In the next chapter, Paul uses the imagery of the Fall in Eden to describe the ongoing situation in Corinth.

2 Corinthians 11:3 - "But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your *thoughts* will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ."

The enemy's first place of attack is in the thoughts we have about God.

If he can disorder humanity's knowledge of God, he can disorder our affections, which leads to destruction.

Author Ralph Waldo Emerson famously stated, "Sow a thought and you reap an action; sow an act and you reap a habit; sow a habit and you reap a character; sow a character and you reap a destiny."

The thoughts Satan first planted in Eve and in Adam at the beginning of time have reaped actions, habits, and characters that have opposed God and the goodness of His Creation.

It all started with lies that infected the mind.

In a terrific book I revisited for today, entitled "Live No Lies", Pastor John Mark Comer writes about this battle of lies that infect the mind. He describes how American Christianity in the last few decades has preferred to use descriptions like "faith journey" or "Christian lifestyle" rather than "a battle for the soul."

In this critical moment, however, we *must* recapture the truth that we face real and powerful enemies of our souls - what the church fathers called "the world, the flesh, and the devil."

He writes, "Our war against the three enemies of the soul is not a war of guns and bombs. It's not against other people at all. It's a war on lies. And the problem is less that we *tell* lies and more that we *live* them; we let false narratives about reality into our bodies, and they wreak havoc in our souls."

Did you catch that? It's less a problem that we *tell* lies and more that we *live* them.

Powerful.

So here is John Mark's Comer's working theory of the devil's strategy to get humanity to live by lies:

“Deceitful ideas that play to disordered desires that are normalized in a sinful society”

Deceitful ideas - told by the devil

Play to Disordered Desires - the flesh, the beastly desire for self-gratification

Normalized in a sinful society - the world.

He writes,

1. For Jesus, there is an invisible but real intelligence at war with God and all that is good, beautiful, and true.

2. The devil's end goal is to drive our souls and society into ruin. To decimate love.

3 ...His method is lies. His primary stratagem—his go-to, signature move—is deception.

What are some of the lies that Satan tells that cause disordered desires to be normalized in sinful society that lead to enslavement?

Perhaps the one that is most prevalent currently is the disordered desire for **sex**.

The 1960s began with what has been famously called the “Sexual Revolution.” It was a movement that claimed to seek “freedom” from the traditional, “oppressive” values that repressed sexuality and freedom of expression.

It's a movement that proclaimed “liberation” but has resulted in enslavement.

As essayist Mary Eberstadt put it in her book “Adam and Eve After the Pill,

“Contrary to conventional depiction, the sexual revolution has proved a disaster for many men and women; and . . . its weight has fallen heaviest on the smallest and weakest shoulders in society— even as it has given extra strength to those already strongest and most predatory.”

Listen to all these stats, all with footnotes to peer-reviewed studies for the fact-checkers:

“Consider that divorce, while cited as an example of liberation from the patriarchy, has been shown to disproportionately benefit men.

Or that those who cohabit before marriage are less likely to marry, are more likely to get a divorce if they do, and often develop long-term trust issues.

Or the research on oxytocin and vasopressin, the two chemicals released by our body during sex that bring our attachment system online and cause us to bond to another person. It seems that the more sexual partners you have, the less capacity your body has for intimacy.

Or the much-documented but little-talked-about data on the effects of abortion on women's mental and physical health, causing some to hypothesize the Left will eventually change its now hard-line view.

Or that 25 percent of children spend a portion of their childhood without a father in the home. Overwhelming evidence indicates that this experience is damaging to both boys and girls.

Or that sex reassignment surgery and hormone therapy for those who identify as transgender do not benefit their emotional health (which is the main rationale behind them).

Or the stats on the epidemic of sexual addiction across the West.

Or the fact that porn is becoming increasingly violent, misogynistic, and cruel and is now a multibillion-dollar industry, intentionally targeting children.

Never mind that while #metoo was dominating headlines, the Fifty Shades of Grey trilogy—a story about male sexual domination—was becoming the highest-selling book series of the decade and one of the highest-grossing film franchises of all time.

Never mind that sexual abuse and sexual assault are getting worse, not better. Statistically, one out of every four women will experience sexual violence at some point in their lives.

Never mind that rape culture is a raging problem, even on the most liberal, progressive campuses of elite universities.

These facts are conveniently left out of the discussion, if there even is a discussion.”

Wow. Deceitful ideas [about sex] have played to disordered desires that have been normalized in a sinful society.

And that’s just one example. The lies rage on. Lies about resources and greed. Lies about politics and power. Lies about happiness and pleasure. Lies that call good evil, and evil good.

The same lie at the Tree of Genesis 3.

But! The new Adam, Jesus Messiah, has shown us the better way.

He has given freedom from the grip of sin, and freedom from minds and hearts that were once ensnared by the enemy. He has begun the work of freeing minds and hearts from the grip of the enemy, and giving us *His* heart and his mind. And, He has equipped His followers to continue that work of freeing minds that are trapped in the flesh.

Jesus says in Matthew 11:29, “*learn* from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2 for those who have surrendered to Christ, “We have the mind of Christ.”

Or his encouragement in Phillipians 2, for the saints to be joined in unity. To have the same mind, that is, the “mind of Christ.”

But once again, it's a battle. It's warfare. Christ has given us weapons to reclaim minds from the grip of the enemy.

So, what are these weapons? Paul doesn't expound as much here, but going back to Ephesians 6, in that well-known armor of God passage, we know what our spiritual weapons are. If we strip away the imagery of the armor - the breastplate, the helmet, the shield, etc. - we are left with these weapons:

Truth, Righteousness, the Good News of Peace, Faith, Salvation, the Word of God, and Prayer. These are our weapons in the battle for minds. We must use them in the fight to free, to renew our minds.

If the lies Satan tells attacks our mind, we must be renewing our mind. Romans 12:2 - "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind"
If spiritual warfare is happening in the mind, it must be renewed daily.

We must learn to take care of our minds. We must commit and practice to not fill our minds with sources that feed the lies of the enemy. How can we make strides in defeating our enemy if we are consuming his propaganda?

Destroy the strongholds of empty entertainment and disordered desires. Easier said than done, I know. But in this world where we are steeped in the enemy's propaganda, we must battle to stifle the sources of lies. That has to be the first step in the renewal of our minds - get rid of what shouldn't be there. Guard your mind from garbage. It's a fight.

LEAVE THE BAD

Once you get rid of what shouldn't be there, we need to fill our minds.

LEARN THE GOOD

Fill it with knowledge. Learn. Fill it with good. Read solid books. Listen to excellent podcasts. Love the Lord your God with all your mind!

Proverbs 18:15 - "An intelligent heart acquires knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge"

Proverbs 23:12 - "Apply your heart to instruction and your ear to words of knowledge."

John Mark Comer again: "The Scripture writers constantly advocated for a faith that isn't opposed to knowledge but based on knowledge."

We must be people who leave the bad, learn the good, but also who **LISTEN TO THE LIES** that are popping up everywhere around us. As Paul wrote,
[5] We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God."

What arguments need to be dismantled around us? Pay attention.
 What ideas do those around us need to be rescued from? Be aware.

Leave the bad / Learn the good / Listen for the lies around you.

LATCH ONTO SCRIPTURE. Fill your mind with it. Take parts to memory, but also meditate on the whole story. Let the Word of God form you.

Once again, from John Mark Comer's "Live No Lies":

"The goal of reading Scripture is not information but spiritual formation. To take on the 'mind of Christ.' To actually think like Jesus thinks. To fill your mind with the thoughts of God so regularly and deeply that it literally rewires your brain, and from there, your whole person."

Did you catch that? That filling our minds with Scripture can actually rewire your brain? The leading research on neuroscience pretty much conclusively shows that learning and forming lasting habits literally changes the structure of our brains. New neural pathways and synapses form with what you set your mind to. Isn't that wild?

Dr. Jeffrey Schwartz, a leading OCD neuroscientist, in his book "You Are Not Your Brain", states: "Directed Attention [aka what you set your mind on] can literally rewire your brain."

This has such massive implications that I wish we could spend more time on. I think it shows how truly intertwined the spiritual and the physical actually are. This also has massive ramifications to issues such as mental health and disorders.

Forever, it seems like there have been two extremes in this area.

One the one hand, mental health issues were met by many in the Church with the reply, "just pray about it more."

On the other extreme, the reply was, "only drugs and therapy can help."

Here's the truth, though. Prescription drugs usage for mental health conditions is at an all time high. And yet, even with those taking treatments, depression, suicidal ideation, aggression, anxiety, and other disorders are still outpacing prescription drug usage. Something is not working right.

In fact, I'm sure some of you saw this earlier this year, the landmark study from the 1980s that seemed to prove mental disorders are caused by a serotonin imbalance - was implicated in scientific fraud, and now their results and the entire scientific paradigm of prescription SSRIs is under renewed scrutiny.

My point is, both extremes try to give cheap, quick solutions to solve the mind prisons of so many who are suffering. Either say a couple more prayers, or take a few drugs. Both terrible over-simplifications.

What about immersive, disciplined spiritual formation in communion with God and others that leads to a renewal of the mind, and a literal rewiring of the brain? What about hopefully meditating on Scriptures and the promise that God is making all things new? And yes, maybe certain prescriptions when absolutely necessary. And therapy and counseling are great tools that have been incredibly helpful to many.

But we know now, that directed attention, what you set your mind to, can heal your brain from the inside-out.

I know this is such a tricky subject, and I'm not trying to glibly offer a silver-bullet solution either, but one that has worked in my life and the lives of countless others who have surrendered their pain, depression, and anxiety to Jesus. He offers healing and deliverance to those who ask.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Last time I'm quoting John Mark Comer, I promise:

"If we give in to the thoughts at war with life and peace, they become strongholds in our minds and hold us in captivity. But we can break free if we set our minds on Scripture. You cut new neural pathways that eventually take root in the neurobiology of your body itself. You become what you give your mind to."

Give your mind to Christ. Every. Day.

A lot on this topic has also been on my mind the last couple of days. One of my favorite Christian musicians released a song called "God & Prozac" - gritty title, I know. He sings:

"The better part of my twenties
Spent writing songs about God
On a Prozac prescription
Doesn't that seem odd?
'Cause I believe in a Gospel
And a God who is good
But these chemicals don't
Always work like they should"

"I've been tryna move forward
And not get stuck in my head
There's a foolproof solution
I haven't found it yet
Just gotta know a day's coming
When You'll make all things new
But 'til then, I'll just try to be honest with You"

LIVE FOR COMMUNION

In the process of destroying the strongholds of the mind, and renewing our minds, and rewiring our minds - honest prayer and honest fellowship are vital.

Communion with God through prayer and Communion with fellow believers in love is the glue that holds everything else in place.

Most of us know this. Much of this isn't new. But for anyone really struggling, these are vital steps of action to take in the battle against our minds. We must live in obedience and loyalty to King Jesus.

As C.S. Lewis once said, "Obedience is the key that opens every door."

Obedience and truth sets the mind free to fully live in the Savior's love.

Obedience and truth are the sometimes unglamorous, but highly effective, weapons of our warfare against the enemies of our soul.

As Biblical scholar Michael Heiser writes,

"Spiritual warfare is about leading a life obedient to Jesus, following his obedient example for the cause of God's vision for a kingdom on earth..."

While not spectacular, adherence to truth and committed discipleship is what constitutes spiritual warfare in New Testament theology...

Paul's characterization of spiritual warfare as adherence to the gospel and other scriptural truths, and a prayerful, persevering life of righteousness, are clear headed and on target. Being obedient disciples is what makes us fit soldiers for Christ. The mission of every Christian is to carry out the Great Commission, the means by which the kingdom of God grows and the kingdom of darkness recedes."