

Paul the Destroyer Man

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[0 : 0 0] Joy. Thanks, Matthew. Thanks, Ali, for leading us. Good morning. My name's Martin Ayres. I'm the senior pastor here at St Silas, and a warm welcome to you, whoever you are, wherever you're watching from. And especially warm welcome if you're a Scottish rugby fan. Many congratulations on the big win at Twickenham yesterday. Magnificent performance, and I'm sure you enjoyed it much more than I did, but very well done. Let's pray as we come to God's Word now. Let's pray together. Gracious God and loving Heavenly Father, we acknowledge that whenever we engage with your voice in the Bible, there is a spiritual battle, and we pray that your words will not just be worldly words to us this morning, but rather that they will have your divine power to break into our thoughts, our attitudes, the direction of our heart, and turn us to see your Son, our Saviour, as Christ and Lord. Take our thoughts captive, we pray. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, if you think for a moment, what sort of things do I worry about? What do I worry about? What keeps me awake at night? Most of us wouldn't think false teachers. I'm really worried. I woke up at four in the morning, couldn't get back to sleep. I'm really worried about false teachers taking over my church.

Why wouldn't we worry about that? Most of us think if a false teacher walked into my church, I'd spot them a mile off. It's as though we think they'd walk in and they'd have something written on their t-shirt that marks them out. And then we read this book, 2 Corinthians, and we have to think it must be more difficult than that. Here is a church planted just a couple of years, literally a couple of years earlier, by this great Christian leader, the Apostle Paul, who had been an eyewitness to the risen Jesus. And he's having to write to them and visit them in this turbulent relationship because some people arrived in Corinth with a message that was similar enough to Paul's and yet dangerously different and seductive and it's carried them away. What does it show us? It shows us that these guys are incredibly hard to spot. Many, many churches lose their way. That's been true all across church history, all across the world.

Churches lose their way. And if you think about it, very few of them will have had members and leadership that will have consciously decided one day, you know what? I think we've had enough of the Bible. I think we want a leader around here who will reject the Bible and its authority.

People have not thought like that. And so we need safeguards today, just as the people did in Corinth. That's why we have this letter in the Scriptures. It would be really naive for any of us to think, I would never fall for that. So what's going on in Corinth? Well, in verse 7 of our reading today, if you would help me if you could have that open again, it's 2 Corinthians chapter 10.

You can find it on Bible Gateway. We're spinning forward in 2 Corinthians from where we were the last few weeks. And in chapter 10, verse 7, Paul says to this church, you are judging by appearances.

[3 : 40] They want visibly impressive church leaders with a visibly impressive message. And Paul just doesn't fit the bill for them. These new false teachers, they're just so much more Instagrammable. They've seduced the church with high production values and style and gloss. They've got well-groomed facial hair and they smile with perfect American teeth. I'm not saying, by the way, that you can always spot a false teacher by their teeth. Alistair Begg heads up Truth For Life Ministries in America. Great teacher, great teeth. Paul Rees in Edinburgh, Charlotte Chapel, used to be a dentist. Good teacher. The problem, though, is when we let somebody's appearance, we let their style be the way that we judge them. And we allow their impressiveness visually to kind of con us into failing to hold up their ministry against the Scriptures, really scrutinizing it against the Bible. So Paul is defending the genuine article here.

What does authentic gospel ministry look like? And we can use that to evaluate our own ministries, where we're involved in any kind of ministry, in a small group or children's work or youth work.

We can use it to evaluate the ministries we're under. And we can use it to evaluate the ones where we're called to serve others. So Paul tells us three things this morning. He tells us he's a builder man, he's a demolition man, and he's a gentle man. First, we're looking at Paul the builder man. If you have a look at verse 8, he talks about what he's called to do. He says, verse 8, so even if I boast somewhat freely about the authority the Lord gave us for building you up rather than tearing you down, I will not be ashamed of it. So this building project, it's not getting a new church hall or getting a balcony in the building. Paul describes a different kind of building work, and it's God's agenda for his church. In fact, this is God's agenda for the world today. If you want to line up the energy that God has given you for your short life behind the big thing God is doing in the world today, you line it up behind his building project, building his church.

Building the church in number through evangelism, through gospel sharing, so that people put their trust in Jesus and join the church, and building the church to maturity through edification, the work of building people up in their faith, people growing in their faith, so that the church, what does the mature church look like? It looks like Jesus Christ. He is the cornerstone, the capstone of the building project, and we're to look more and more like him as a church. And that's what unites us. The mature church is not a group of people who believe all kinds of different stuff and somehow manage to muddle along together. The mature church is a group of people who are diverse in all kinds of ways, but have this great thing in common that we're united by a shared faith in the Jesus that we find in the New Testament, the historical Jesus revealed to us in the writings of the apostles. And it's good to remember that's the goal, because sometimes being built up like that feels like being torn down. Sometimes it's a painful process. In verse 2, Paul says he's going to have to be bold towards his critics. In verse 10, he warns them.

He says, some say that his letters are weighty and forceful, and that in person he's unimpressive, and his speaking amounts to nothing. He's bold when he's away. He's timid when he's here. And then he warns them in verse 11, what we are in our letters when we're absent, we will be in our actions when we're present. So he's warning them when he meets with them. If they are in kind of rebellion against God and his truth and his word, he as an apostle is going to have to be critical of them in a way that's going to feel like being torn down. It's a bit like when people say, I've got something constructive to say, and it's often quite painful. It's critical. Sometimes to build a healthy new structure, you have to take down things that are there that are not right.

[8 : 17] But the overriding goal is to build. That's what Paul's reminding us of. And what does the built-up church look like? It looks like Christ. So authentic Christian ministry aims to build people up by helping them see Christ better. Paul told us in chapter 3 that the way that we get changed to become more like Christ is by contemplating Jesus. We spend time with him, and he rubs off on us as we see God's glory in him. So I think of a friend, Andy, who went to visit a church in London, and it was a really high-profile church, and especially the minister was a very high-profile minister. He still is, actually. And he's written various bestsellers, and he's often on the TV. He's a bit of a media darling. And I was asking Andy how the church was when he visited, and he said, you know what? The most striking thing about the church, about the sermon, was it was all about him.

It was all about the things that he does. He was the hero of his own sermon. Well, Paul, you'd never have found that with Paul. Paul's agenda in his ministry is that people see Christ, that Christ is the hero, because he trusts that the Spirit transforms us to be more like Christ as we see Jesus and we know him. And as we have that encounter with Jesus through the Scriptures over time and become more like him, we can be fitting ambassadors for him in the world, drawing people to know him. So Paul is the builder man. How does he do it? That's our second point, and we're going to spend most of our time here. Paul, the demolition man. Now, these rascals have turned up in Corinth, and they say that Paul isn't spiritual enough. In verse 2, you can see that he's defending himself there. He says that some people think we live by the standards of this world. They think that

Paul is just too down to earth with all his teaching about practical godliness and how the Lord Jesus is concerned about how you do your job and how you treat your family and who you sleep with. It's so worldly. You can leave this world behind, they're saying, if you just follow our spiritual programs and turn on the right taps for a higher spiritual experience that has less to do with the body and being in this world and more to do with an encounter on a higher plane with heavenly things. So they're saying Paul is worldly, and Paul responds in one sense saying, of course I'm worldly. We live in the world. So verse 3, he says, for though we live in the world. He has a physical body. The Christian life is incarnational. We're not called to retreat to a monastery or a commune. We live among people in the world. But there's nothing worldly about the work of Paul's word ministry, if you have a look at verse 3.

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.

Paul fights not with any physical weapons, but with the teaching about Jesus Christ, and he says it's supercharged with the power of God. If you think about a castle, the stronghold is the last line of defense.

[11 : 53] We were at Bamburg Castle in Northumberland in October last year, one of the brief moments when you could travel. And if you were defending a castle, you could see it somewhere like Bamburg Castle.

If you were defending a castle from a marauding army, you've got your castle wall that's your main line of defense. But if that were to get breached, you would retreat to the stronghold. It's the last line of defense. It's the place you barricade yourself into, and nothing can penetrate and get in. Now, Paul gives us that picture for his ministry, that through his gospel work, he is, by God's divine power, able to break down what nothing else can. So what are these powerful strongholds he's describing?

Look at verse 5. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. Now, that problem was going on in Corinth, and it's going on all around us and within each one of us today, that there are what he calls there arguments and pretensions. In other words, there are ways we think. There are ways we think that are barriers to us submitting our lives to the message that Jesus is Lord of our world and of our lives. They're barriers to us trusting who he claimed to be and obeying him and living for him.

There are ways we think that make that claim of Jesus implausible to us, and that's true if you're not yet a Christian, and it's true for those of us who are already Christians as well. It goes on.

Now, for the non-Christian mind, we're going to spend a few minutes here, we sometimes call these strongholds defeater beliefs, because they're things that defeat the Christian faith. They're ways we think Christianity can't be true because of this thing that I believe myself, and then we give a reason. It can't be true because... So, for example, Christianity can't be true because human beings are innately good. That's something that people very commonly believe around us today in Glasgow, in Scotland. We got that from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the philosopher who wrote very influential works about humanity and education. He actually sent his five own children to be raised in an orphanage, and he never used to meet with them. Anyway, Rousseau is... He said human beings deep down, we're all essentially good, and today we get told that everywhere. It's one of the pillars of our education system. Essentially, if people are left to themselves in a nice environment, they'll come out nice people. If we believe that, we resist strongly the Christian worldview. The Christian worldview, says, no, God is perfectly good, and what explains humanity is that because he made us in his image, we are capable of the most wonderful goodness and incredible achievements, but we have become corrupted in our sinful nature, and so we're not who we ought to be, and that's true in every human heart.

[15 : 17] And so, on our own, we cannot stand in the presence of a holy God. It would be like a rocket hurtling towards the sun for us to meet with a holy God. We would be consumed, and we need a saviour.

So we reject that if we think, no, no, no, no, everyone's essentially good, and we reject all kinds of associated claims. We find it hard to believe that God would punish sin, that God would be against people as they stand against him. We reject it. But that philosophy that human beings are innately good, it just doesn't make sense of the world around us. It doesn't actually make sense of human behaviour. You know, change people's environment, and we're still capable of terrible selfishness. It comes naturally to us to be self-centred. So that thought pattern, it's a stronghold guarding us against giving our life to Jesus, but it doesn't actually make sense of the world.

It needs to be broken down. Or another example of a stronghold, nobody has the right to tell anyone what's right and wrong. I have to make up my own mind what's right and wrong. And then we hear the message Christians believe, that there is a God who's deeply concerned about right and wrong, and he's the one who defines what's right and wrong. And we think that can't be true. That would conflict with my fundamental belief that I get to decide what's right and wrong. It's a stronghold.

And again, it's a stronghold that doesn't actually hold up to any scrutiny. If you think about it, to believe that, just ask yourself the question, is there anyone anywhere in the world doing something that I think is wrong, even if they themselves have made up their mind that it's right?

Of course there is. Of course that's going on all around us. There are people who do things that we would hold are definitely wrong, and they believe they're doing the right thing. But our hearts use that as a stronghold to take a stand against this claim that there's a God who has that right.

[17 : 29] Or another example could be, the only way we can know anything at all is if we can establish it through science. So we come to the claim, the Christian claim, that God has revealed himself to us in the person of Jesus, and we can see him through the Scriptures because he's a historical figure. And we reject that because we say, no, there's not enough evidence. There's not enough evidence for that God. And what we mean is we can't prove it through science. But we've already committed ourselves there. We're not giving appropriate weight to the evidence that God has given us.

In fact, Christians would hold that our confidence that we can trust the scientific method depends on there being a God. It was the foundation for modern science to believe that there's a God of order and not chaos. So the things that we see going on in the world today and in the universe today, what we observe, the patterns, will happen tomorrow in the same way they have today. We can go out and investigate. Now for God to be there and to be as big as that, he can't be a God we find through science.

He's a God that's beyond that. And the only way to know him is through revelation, through him choosing to reveal himself to us. So we have to break down that stronghold that science is the only way to know things. Science is good, but it's good and valid because of the God who made us. So these ways of thinking, they're like strongholds that make the Christian faith seem implausible. How does Paul's ministry then have this divine power to demolish those strongholds? How did those strongholds get demolished for those of us who were Christians? Well, what Paul does is he preaches the gospel.

He preaches the truth about Christ. That's what he's told us in his letter. In chapter 4, he's explained that he sets forth the truth plainly about Jesus. He carefully reasons with people the truth about Jesus. And when he does that, he told us in chapter 4, the Spirit of God can shine in people's hearts, opening their eyes and their hearts to see God's brilliance, his glory revealed in the face of Jesus. He said in chapter 5 that he urges people on Jesus Christ's behalf to be reconciled to God, to come back to know God and be right with God through Jesus. And we can do that because God made him who had no sin, Christ, to be sin for us so that in him, we might become the righteousness of God. We can be approved of by God because at the cross, God made Jesus sin for us so that we can have his righteousness. I take it that when Paul's describing his demolition work here in chapter 10, he's not talking about anything different to what he's explained his ministry is earlier in the letter that we've seen the last few weeks. He has a

Christ-centered Bible-based ministry. And folks, our task as a church is the same. When we take friends' questions seriously, we might end up talking about science, we might end up talking about archaeology and the evidence in history for the backs that supports the claims of the Bible. We might end up talking about philosophy. But as Christians, we also know, and we need to remember, that the divine power to demolish strongholds is the message about Jesus. So if I'm in a conversation with a friend about why they're not a Christian, my goal is to get to a point where I'm telling them good news about Jesus.

[21 : 23] That's where the divine power is, to bring people from the dominion of darkness into the kingdom of the sun. But after we become Christians, these strongholds remain for us. We can harbor unbelief in our lives, an unwillingness to submit areas of our life to God because of strongholds, ways that we're still in patterns of thought that mean we don't trust and obey Jesus. For us, it might be something like that we're unable to trust God's grace, that we think, well, look, my experience in life is people only accept you if you earn it. You have to earn people's approval and acceptance.

So then we struggle to see God as a gracious heavenly Father who's adopted us and loves us. And we have this view of Him that's more like a driving examiner or a harsh judge waiting to catch us out. And so our lives are not marked by security and joyful obedience. They're marked by a resentfulness and an insecurity. Or maybe we have an issue with trusting God's goodness in the Christian life.

And so we might think, you know, yeah, I'm a Christian, but I know that I'll only really be happy if I'm rich. Or I'll only really be happy if I'm married. Or I've got children. Or I've got freedom to express myself sexually however I want. So we don't surrender the key decisions in our life to the Lord Jesus because we're in a pattern of thinking that's come from the world and it holds us back. And these ongoing harbors of unbelief, what do we do about them? We go to the demolition man.

We go to the Apostle Paul. And twice here, Paul uses the word demolish in end of verse 4 and beginning of verse 5, describing his ministry, the Apostle's teaching. So God calls us to go to the pages of the New Testament, to Paul's ministry, his words, the New Testament writers. And we go through this painful process throughout our Christian lives of letting our values and our opinions and our ways of thinking get dismantled by the living God. And friends, that is a painful process. And I guess it's going to be a lifelong process for us until Jesus returns or calls us home. I remember the pain of the first time I studied the book of Romans in a small group Bible study as a young Christian. This pain of, it was as though having ways of thinking dismantled and rearranged and all this confrontation and challenge to my attitudes and the ways I was thinking as I brought my life to God's Word and saw the truth.

Seeing things differently. It's painful, but it's the best thing for us. Jesus, remember, says, if you hold to my teaching, then you're really my disciples and then you'll know the truth and the truth will set you free. So there's this paradox that true freedom is on the other side of God demolishing the strongholds in our life and taking our thoughts captive to make them obedient to Christ.

[24 : 50] There we find true freedom. And for any of us, that is achievable because of the divine power that's lined up behind God's Word, that we can come to God's Word prayerfully dependent on the Spirit of God to shape our thoughts and attitudes to be more like the truth. So Paul is God's builder man. That was our first point. To be that, he's God's demolition man. It sounds brutal, doesn't it, to be demolished or to have strongholds demolished, but then we hear about Paul's manner. That's our third point. He's God's gentle man. He warns the church, as we've seen, that he might have to be very bold in verse 2 and in verse 11. But even his strategy of writing this letter before he visits is part of a gentleness from Paul, to give them an opportunity to hear the correction and take time to reflect and respond before he visits. And look back up at verse 1 and we see Paul prompting to think, for them to think about that. Verse 1, by the humility and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you. If anyone had reason to be forceful, Jesus Christ did. He is Lord of our universe and there's not a single square inch of the universe and of our lives over which Jesus doesn't say, that's mine. And he has defeated the devil and he's conquered death and he's going to be crowned forever. And we're warned in Psalm 2, kiss the son lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way. And yet in his becoming a man, he displayed the most incredible, awesome humility. As a man serving others, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross, a shameful death, unparalleled humility, valuing others above himself. Isaiah prophesied about him, a bruised reed he will not break. And we see that in the manner of Christ, in his life, his gentleness, his lawliness. You think of him with the Samaritan woman in John chapter 4, the outcast of outcasts, has been married six times, she's on to her seventh man and he meets her at the well and he offers her living water that means she'll never thirst again.

He speaks tenderly to her. Folks, it's so ironic, isn't it, that the church in Corinth would be critical of Paul for being timid. It shows they don't know much about the manner of Jesus Christ, his gentleness and humility. And yet we fall for that as churches today. Remember the angle on this passage in this section of 2 Corinthians is beware of false teachers. But depressingly often, we see churches and ministries today growing enormously under the charisma and boldness of a particular leader. And then allegations emerge that, you know what, they're a bit of a bully actually and they have to step down. We get attracted to the leaders who can get things done, who shake things up and who draw in a crowd. We want to see a crowd and we think, oh, this guy really brings people in. But if the leaders we choose for ourselves are people who are strangers to self-doubt and we like them because they change things and make things happen, why would we be surprised to find that there are some people who get run over along the way?

There's a retired minister in Melbourne who's visited us at St. Silas before, Peter Adam. He shares his daily prayers around and one of them that I pray that he shared with me is, Lord, help me not to confuse a healthy zeal for gospel progress with an ungodly desire just to get my own way. That's the discernment he's looking for from God day by day. He wants a healthy zeal for gospel progress in our world, but he doesn't want to confuse that with an ungodly desire just to get his own way. So friends, here are Paul's insights into authentic ministry, a ministry modeled on the Lord Jesus Christ. So as we see Jesus in the Bible ourselves, let's seek to be built up to be like him.

When we lead others, let's look to be like Jesus in the way we lead. And when we follow others, let's look for leaders like him. Let's pray together. Father God, may you be with us in your divine power as we spend time in your word, that you would break down and demolish the strongholds of our own hearts, that you would take our thoughts captive to make them obedient to Christ.

And in the ways you call us to serve you with your word, would you grow in us the gentleness of Christ so that we're gentle just as he is gentle and work always to build others up towards maturity in him. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

[30 : 08] Amen. We're going to sing in response to God's word. So responding to God's word together wherever we are. And even though it's hard not being able to meet physically here right now, at least we can sing wherever we are. Let's do that together by singing this song.

Amen.