

**SERMON TITLE-** "Oh, The Tangled Web . . . "

**TEXT-** 2 Cor. 10-12

**PREACHED AT-** Neighbourhood Church

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As we are going through a study in 2 Corinthians which we have called, "Life In The Real World," we have seen Paul tackle all kinds of issues that surround the question of how Kingdom living looks "on the ground."

The church in Corinth was a church with problems. Not unusual problems- just the kind of problems that churches have faced for 2000 years.

There was a person in the church who had faced church discipline. That was painful.

Then Paul deals with the complex challenge of trying to live as Kingdom people in a world that doesn't share our values. That was challenging.

Intertwined in all this was solid Biblical teaching on the nature of our faith.

And now, in the middle of all this complexity, Paul steps into a really complicated aspect of the Corinthian challenge.

What could be more complicated than what we have seen so far? The answer is, a leadership challenge that has different people saying different things- each from different places of authority.

This causes a problem because now people are casting about wondering whom they are supposed to be listening to.

There are all kinds of areas that can be used to illustrate this. Currently in our denomination there is a debate taking place around an issue called, the Penal Substitutionary Atonement.

PSA was not a controversy, in my living memory but someone wrote a book that someone else took exception to and suddenly the debate is on.

And what is the issue? Very few people understand what the bones of the argument are and to me it ends up boiling down to- who do you believe? One person says this- another person says that and most of the people listening are not quite sure which arguments make the most sense- and yet they feel quite sure that they should be expressing strong opinions.

Of course this kind of debate is not limited to theology. It is part of life at all kinds of levels.

For those who don't know anything about PSA, a similar debate is raging in the province about the HST. There are very intense opinions being expressed- but when it all boils down- it seems to me that the real question is about confidence in leadership. Very few people really know enough to make an informed decision as to whether bringing in the HST is a good or a bad thing.

Once there is an authority challenge then discussions suddenly get very difficult.

What does 2 Cor say about this?

### **#1. There Are Authority Challenges In The Church**

So far in 2 Cor we haven't seen this issue really rise up but there have been clues. Last week we looked at Paul's statement-

**You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody.  
2 Corinthians 3:2**

That was a great verse to use for a baptism service and it is the reason that we tell our faith stories but to get to that verse we passed its introduction-

**Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? 2 Corinthians 3:1**

There is a clue that Paul is dealing with a leadership challenge of some kind. We don't really know what it is- and Paul doesn't do more than simply give out this little clue- but there we have it. There's a controversy brewing. For some reason or another, Paul needs credentials.

Now there is a view of the church that says that whenever there is a controversy- it means that a fundamental failure is taking place that proves that the church need to be abandoned. According to this view of the church, anything short of perfection within the church shows that God can't be involved- and on top of that anything "political" is the worst thing that anyone can become involved in.

There is a problem with this kind of view of things-

1. It is not Biblical.

The Bible never paints a picture of the community of God's people as living in a kind of utopia.

The whole purpose of the NT is to show real Christianity working itself out- and the NT is full of stories of churches working out the issues they face and this includes the most complex and difficult of the issues you can imagine.

I think that this is very good news.

2. All problems in relationships are "political."

The idea that somehow we need to get "politics" out of the church is the same as saying, "we need to get people out of the church." It is just bad thinking. Frankly, when I have heard it what I usually actually heard was, "I'm not like that- I am superior to all those people." It is rarely true.

What we do need to keep addressing is how we are supposed to behave when a leadership complication comes- and it will.

And that after all is why we are studying 2 Cor. In the church and in any group of people, there will be questions of authority- and those questions need to be faced. We can't just run away whenever problems arise.

**Background**

As long as Paul, or any other leader is solidly in charge, life has a way of finding balance- but what do we do when this is brought into question. What do we do when something has upset the apple cart?

In Paul's case the challenge he faced was- he was not present and so if someone challenged his authority the only way to sort it out was to write a letter.

Who do we listen to when one person says one thing and another person says another thing?

In chapter 10, Paul now tackles the question that he was alluding to in chapter 3. Listen to how he begins-

**By the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you—I, Paul, who am "timid"**

**when face to face with you, but "bold" when away! I beg you that when I come I may not have to be as bold as I expect to be toward some people who think that we live by the standards of this world. 2 Corinthians 10:1-2**

## **#2. Take The Temperature Down**

In this case it was Paul, himself who was faced with the challenge but he begins in the place where healing has the best chance- he tries to find the place of meekness and gentleness.

I am sure that this was not easy for Paul. He was a person who was always ready for a good vigorous fight.

This is part of the equation that we can easily pass by because he moves quickly on to the nuts and bolts of the challenge but in taking himself to that place of meekness he taking the example of Jesus seriously.

When Jesus was attacked- He did not respond in kind. When we get involved in arguments a very good rule is to de-personalize them. In many cases that is only wise. When you are arguing about PSA or the HST, these arguments don't have to be personal. These are ideas that you or your adversary did not invent- you are merely trying to find the most logical approach to them. It isn't easy to make this non-personal- but it should be possible.

But the example of Jesus and even Paul is to be able to personally step back from the argument- even when it very personal.

Jesus was attacked for who He was.

Paul, as we observe in 2 Cor, was challenged for who he was.

And yet in spite of this, if we are going to live by the Kingdom standard is, we have to be prepared to turn the other cheek. This is not optional- this is a direct command that Jesus issues to His followers.

Nothing takes the temperature down more than a person who is prepared to take a direct hit- just because his Master has told him to. It is one of the really hard instructions Jesus gives us-

**But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. Luke 6:27-29**

So if we are going to live by the gentleness and meekness of Christ- that's what it looks like.

There is something else that Paul mentions in these verses that is very important-

## **#3. We Mustn't Let "Normal" Set The Rules**

At one level, that should already be obvious from the fact that we are to be people who are prepared to "turn the other cheek." That isn't "normal".

But there is something else that is to set us apart from normal.

I said that all relationships are political. There is no escaping that unless we become hermits.

But what is it about "political" that we want to avoid? It is the business of dividing ourselves off into adversarial teams. This is as normal as breathing.

Whenever we find ourselves in a disagreement with someone else we immediately begins looking for people who agree with us. And naturally the person we disagree with does exactly the same thing. That is political- that is as normal as the air we breathe.

That is doing things “**by the standards of this world.**”

BUT that is exactly what we are to conscientiously avoid.

This is a very challenging instruction because for all the very pious sounding things that we say about hating “politics” the reality is that when a controversy arises we immediately love to line up in teams and we start working at getting the most powerful team line-up that we have the ability to assemble.

We are now in the hockey play-off season and sport is a great illustration of life. One of the things that they play-offs bring on is teams getting a “hate on” for the other team. That intensity drives teams to get that extra needed to be the ultimate winners. That’s what it takes to win the big prize.

Don’t ever kid yourself- when you get into an argument that is exactly the mechanism that starts to kick in. No amount of pious denial will change that fact. If you don’t start off by looking for allies you will have a hard time resisting it once others start.

That’s just the way our natural instincts are set up.

If that is how our instincts direct us- how do we avoid going down that road- what is the alternative?

The alternative is actually quite simple- it is keeping our eyes focused on the real question- which is-

#### **#4. Focus On- What Is Right**

This is such a simple rule- one that everyone will agree with but like a lot of simple rules there is a real challenge in it.

What is the “right thing” in the Kingdom of God? The “right thing” in the Kingdom of God will always relate back to what we actually do. This is a theme that reoccurs again and again the NT. The “right thing” is not if we win an argument or not- the right thing boils back down to how we behave.

The Apostle James says-

**If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. James 1:26-27**

Now this doesn’t matter what you say- if what you do doesn’t reflect who our Master is.

Those who keep that focus on doing the right thing have a powerful influence on the world around them.

I experienced an example of that a couple of weeks back when I was talking to one of the leaders of Willingdon Church, one of our very large sister churches. This man was talking about the joys and challenges of running a very larger church and he said something that struck me. He said, “We always go back to what Pastor Carlin said in our meetings- always remember that we aren’t chasing our purposes- we are servants of Jesus.”

Now Pastor Carlin has been gone from that church for 5 years already and still his voice and example still echoes in the hearts of the leaders of that church. That is a legacy that we all have the power to leave behind. It is the legacy of always going back to the question of “What is right?” no matter how intense we feel about an issue at a given moment in time.

Does this mean that we don't have to worry about the things people say?  
Absolutely not.

The reality is that bad ideas do arise. The other reality is- a lot of bad ideas are very tricky and have a way of sneaking in. We need to be ready to think critically. It is not good enough.

Paul is definitely not glossing over bad ideas for the sake of keeping the peace. Paul is very blunt-

**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. 2 Corinthians 10:3-4**

There he is- a hockey play-off warrior at his best. Paul is playing to win. And he continues-

**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. 2 Corinthians 10:5**

Do you want warrior language? Do you like the thrill of a good argument? There you have it- Paul at his warrior best.

Bad ideas and bad influences are part of life among Kingdom people.

Some of those bad ideas come from a corruption of ideas about God and salvation. In the Corinth was a problem but in that church the bigger problem seems to have been a group of people who were undermining Paul's authority as a leader. In that case the attack against Paul was very personal. In the next several chapters of 2 Corinthians Paul has to dive into the details of what was a very personal attack. Reading those put you into the heart of a real leader trying to give answers to personal challenges.

And Paul doesn't just ignore the challenges because they are complicated and hard to answer- just does his best to respond. Turning the other cheek, as Jesus instructed us, is not a passive action. Turning the other cheek simply means that we are prepared to take the blows to our own beings.

But unless we really do keep going back over and over again, to the question- "What is right?" we will surely get caught up in the "politics" of a dispute. In no time at all the original dispute will be lost and all kinds of wounds and grievances will take over.

The challenge we must remind ourselves of, over and over again, is "what is this argument really all about?"

We are not going to be able to move verse by verse through these chapters in the time frame we have before us but I want to point out one more short phrase-

**You are looking only on the surface of things. 2 Corinthians 10:7**

#### **#5. There Is A Lot Below The Surface**

The longer that I am in my place as pastor, as hear the stories of peoples' lives- the more the reality of this truth weights on me.

Why is this so important? Because the things that you don't see can make a very big difference.

Fishing season is starting again and around here we fish with something called a "downrigger". This means that you are dragging your gear deep in the water where you can't see what is down there.

But down there are all kinds of obstacles and if your gear hits one of these obstacles- it can tear the gear right off the boat.

What you don't see matters a lot.

In the course of talking to people over the years I have hit so many below the surface obstructions that I have become very aware of this fact.

What can you do about this? Basically don't be reckless when you are trolling in water you aren't familiar with.

That is a very good rule to keep in mind when controversies occur.