

## Is Your God Like Santa Claus?

2 Corinthians 10:3-5

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Note: The text below was prepared for oral delivery rather than for publication in print. As such, be aware that sentence fragments are intentionally used and that this document has not been edited to correct the errors in grammar, sentence structure, etc.

- I. Introduction: Our text for today is taken from 2 Corinthians chapter 10 if you want to be turning there. Well tomorrow is the 1<sup>st</sup> day of December and we already are beginning to hear Christmas songs over the airways. Along with the traditional Christmas carols we also hear the cheerful songs about that jolly fellow that's said to come down chimneys each year with lots of toys for all the good little girls and boys. One familiar song about this character that I particular enjoyed as a child includes these lyrics:

*He sees you when you're sleeping  
He knows when you're awake  
He knows if you've been bad or good  
So be good for goodness sake*

This sounds like an all-knowing fellow doesn't it. Well, because stories and songs such as this ascribe some qualities of character to Santa that truly only belong to the one, omniscient (or all-knowing) God, there are some who object to introducing children to these stories about Santa Claus. That objection typically is derived from the fact that the definition of idolatry includes the ascribing of qualities of character to objects or other beings – qualities which only belong to the One true and living God.

But I have no intention of entering into that debate this morning because sadly, there is a far more serious myth that many cling to throughout their lives – unlike this childhood fantasy that eventually gets dispelled for every child as they grow older. The mythical figure that I'm referring to is one that many consider to be their god. And I'm including in that the popular god of much of so-called "Christianity." With those thoughts in mind, I titled today's message, "*Is Your God Like Santa Claus?*" And I ask that question because we all need to be confronted with the scriptural truth that the "god" as we naturally and initially all imagine him to be, is in fact just as imaginary – and not at all like the one true and living God of the Bible. But sadly multitudes don't grow out of that misperception so as to learn better. The eternally vital confrontation with reality we all need requires a work of God – that we be taught of God, through His preached Gospel of grace – the Gospel I hope to communicate this morning from our text in 2 Corinthians 10:3-5.

- II. 2 Corinthians 10:3-5: First, the context of this passage – False apostles who sought to undermine the Apostle Paul’s authority and discredit the Gospel Paul preached had made charges against him and his ministry – so much so that Paul thought it necessary to vindicate both his message and his authority before he visited Corinth which is the reason for his writing this letter to them. Here in chapter 10, Paul is primarily refuting the false and malicious accusations made by these false teachers against him and his ministry. And in the process of addressing these accusations, Paul gives a detailed description that distinguishes the nature of a true Gospel ministry from the false. And that is what we will look at in these 3 verses, beginning in verse 3 where Paul writes...
- A. Verse 3: ***For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh***: When Paul says that we walk in the flesh, in this context he is referring to the physical body and our physical existence in these bodies in which we walk around in our respective lifetimes. But he says our warfare is not physical. So Paul is saying that even though I am in the flesh, a physical body in a physical world (with all my many physical weaknesses and infirmities – weaknesses that his accusers had been quick to point out), I do not war accordingly – not after the flesh. Paul is asserting here that his ministry, the ministry of the true Gospel is a SPIRITUAL warfare – and that in contrast with his accusers and the ministries that promote a false gospel which stand in opposition in the battle vying for the souls of men. And then Paul proceeds in verses 4 and 5 to describe (1) the nature of the weapons that are to be employed in spiritual warfare (on God’s side of this battle) and (2) at what these weapons are to be targeted. Verse 4...
- B. Verses 4-5: ***(For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) <sup>5</sup>Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ;***
1. We see the contrast right away. Warring after the flesh vs. a spiritual warfare. Using carnal weapons vs. spiritual weapons. The language here presupposes the concept that there is a war of sorts going on – and it’s interesting that God calls it that. We can relate to that in the physical realm. People engage in war to defend the rights of men and women, to defend property or territory, in defense of liberties, to weaken an enemy’s power and sometimes to dominate an enemy. Likewise, we see in the spiritual waging of this war, the defense of the truth and glorious liberty of the Gospel for the weakening of Satan’s kingdom. And this takes place by liberating captives from the bondage of sin and Satan, bringing them into captivity to Christ and God’s way of salvation – captive to Him in that it’s a way that is exclusively by and through the Lord Jesus Christ.

III. Romans 6:17-18: Look with me at Romans 6 where Paul speaks of this. Here he expresses His thankfulness for other believers who have been taken captive under the spiritual warfare of the Gospel as he says this to them, beginning in verse 17, ***“But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, <on the other side of this battle> but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine <speaking of the Gospel of God’s grace> which was delivered you. <Or literally to which you were delivered> <sup>18</sup>Being then made free from sin, <liberated from its bondage or dominion> ye became the servants of righteousness.”*** - Your thoughts having been brought into captivity to righteousness – the obedience of Christ. That’s His righteousness which believers are brought to trust solely in as the ground of their eternal salvation – captive to the simplicity (or singleness) of Christ – that singular hope of salvation in and by Jesus Christ.

IV. Exposition of 2 Cor. 10:4-5:

A. Verse 4: Now as we read in 2 Corinthians 10, verse 4, the weapons employed by a true Gospel ministry are not carnal. I.e – they are different from that which carnal men (lacking the Spirit of God) would fight with. Our weapons are different. It’s obvious that spiritual warfare doesn’t involve physical weapons such as guns and swords. Christ’s kingdom is not of this world and so, it is not to be defended and propagated according to the ways of this world. But in this passage, the distinction is made in contrast to the weapons that the false apostles used – their fleshly wisdom, natural reasonings, their eloquence and persuasiveness which they accused Paul of lacking. And those carnal weapons are consistent with their false doctrine and the false refuges (or strongholds) they promote. After all, if salvation is presumed to be conditioned on some response from the sinner or something he or she does (on a sinner being less obstinate or more cooperative than those presumed to remain lost) – if that’s the real difference-maker and not the finished work of Christ alone – His righteousness freely imputed being the only ground of salvation as Paul preached, then it stands to reason that the persuasiveness of these false apostles would effectively win converts in belief of a false gospel – that in contrast to a true Gospel ministry in which the weapons are only said to be effectual toward achieving their end because they are “mighty through God” – salvation being truly (and completely) of the Lord as Jonah put it.

The weapons of a Gospel ministry are not powerful of themselves; they are passive instruments – which are only effective (or efficacious) when the ministering of the Gospel is attended with (what Paul calls in 1 Cor 2), the “demonstration of the <Holy> Spirit and of power:” Look at that with me in 1 Cor 2 beginning in verse 1 where it reads, ***And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. <sup>2</sup>For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. <sup>3</sup>And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling.*** <In other words, “If I used carnal weapons in ministering the Gospel, it would be like me bringing a knife to a gun fight” given these weaknesses as he continues saying...>

**<sup>4</sup>And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: <sup>5</sup>That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.**

The weapons of our warfare are not carnal – but MIGHTY through God!!! In Romans 1 we're told the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation because therein is revealed the righteousness of God (Rom. 1:16-17) and that revelation of faith is a mighty work of God. So when the Gospel ministry (its teaching and its preaching) is attended with the "demonstration of the Spirit and of power:" then (AND ONLY THEN) is it effectual to achieve its objective – to the pulling down of strongholds – as we read in vs. 4 of 2 Cor. 10. Strongholds here refer to fortresses, the walls of a man's heart (his mind, affections, and his will). From the context (casting down imaginations, bringing thoughts captive), we see that the battleground is indeed the heart of sinners, and it begins with our minds, our understanding of things. We see then that the preaching of the Gospel (in a true Gospel ministry) is aimed at the understanding and calls on sinners to reason with God based on revealed truth (Is 1:18 – come let us reason together, saith the Lord).

It involves the casting aside, the pulling down, the destruction of strongholds of the mind—the preconceived notions and imaginations we naturally presume about God, about Christ, His work, and His way of salvation – a gospel we are naturally inclined to believe. The Bible teaches us that we all start out as spiritually dead sinners, that all gone out of the way (Rom 3) and that unless a mighty work of God – a spiritual awakening, a new birth takes place, we will remain allied with the enemies of God, inside the fortresses of our natural reasonings – reasonings the Bible tells us seem right to us, but lead to death, reasonings that men highly esteem; but things contrary to God and the revelation of who He is; things naturally and highly esteemed by us that the scriptures say are an abomination to God. (Luke 16:15b).

Now these fortresses are indeed strong and they take a mighty work of God to be pulled down. Strong because of who we are—depraved sinners, all initially strangers to and at enmity with God. Some commentators believe that this alludes to the falling of the walls of Jericho, at the sound of the ram's horns—a feat that MUST be ascribed, not to those passive instruments themselves, the horns, but to the power of God that accompanied the means he instructed. God will use the means He determines to use—the ministry or preaching of THE Gospel, but God must do a work & if it were any other way – who would get the glory?

Now how does this truth, (that in contrast to the weapons being carnal, that instead, they are mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds) how is this useful to religious minded people such as you and me? It's useful as a viable means of examining which side we are currently on in this warfare over the souls of men. From this passage we know that genuine believers should be able to identify that such a transformation has taken place in their own hearts – in their minds, affections, and wills. It is a miraculous transformation, a new birth – regeneration and conversion! And that's not in reference to some vision or mystical, or highly emotional experience – although emotions may be involved. But rather it is miraculous in that it causes those who are saved to reverse courses, to change sides in this warfare – in this battleground of the understanding.

If you consider yourself to truly have God-given faith, and yet the knowledge and understanding that you now have of God and how He saves sinners (your Gospel) is not different from what you once imagined – a 180 degree reversal of what you formerly and naturally thought would commend you to God or find you in His favor; then these verses should cause you to ask yourself—has God really visited me with His mighty power so as to pull down my former strongholds, those things I naturally (but erroneously) once thought would gain God's favor and remove His wrath. Like me, you might not be able to identify a specific point in time when that took place, but if you have been converted under a true Gospel ministry wherein these spiritual weapons are aimed, then you should be able to personally identify with what Paul has written here – that you've come to see things radically different from that which you had previously imagined – your former strongholds pulled down.

Now I know that such a reversal might seem more subtle for those fortunate to have been raised from their youth up under a true Gospel ministry, but even for them there comes a point when they first get serious about religion and are prone to initially ask themselves, “Now that I'm serious, what do I really need to do to insure I'm saved” – an imagination that the sinner can do something in order to be saved. That inclination is as natural to us as taking our next breath. So even though that seems more subtle perhaps than it was for someone like me who was brought up under the popular heresy of salvation by works (though we called it “grace”), but admittedly a way based upon the free will decision of man, but any idea that I can do something to be saved is an imagination that is cast down by the mighty work of God in true regeneration and conversion. Now look with me further at verse 5,

- C. Verse 5: Paul, under the inspiration of God the Holy Spirit, has declared that a true Gospel ministry (when attended by the mighty power of God to those who are saved) effectively pulls down the strongholds or refuges in which they previously trusted. And in verse 5 he continues describing this as involving the **“Casting down <of> imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ;”** Here we see further where the weapons are targeted. They call men and women to faith and repentance – repenting of that which was false so as to turn by faith to the only thing that will find any sinner acceptable before God – the obedience of Christ on our behalf (in our place) – His righteousness imputed. This spiritual warfare (or ministry of the Gospel) is described by Paul earlier in this same letter to Corinth as a ministry of reconciliation back in chapter 5. Look at that with me in 2 Corinthians 5, beginning in verse 18 as Paul tells the believers there...
1. 2 Corinthians 5:18-21: **“And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation;”** <sup>19</sup>*To wit, <or namely> that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them;* <This ministry’s message liberated them from their bondage to sin as they learned of not being charged with their sins> **and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.** <This is the engagement of God’s preachers (and those who support a true Gospel ministry ) in spiritual warfare through the preached Gospel.> <sup>20</sup>**Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God.** <On what basis?> <sup>21</sup>**For he** <God the Father> **hath made him** <God the Son> **to be sin for us,** <Christ> **who knew no sin;** <Not imputing their sins to them, but having put them on Christ’s account> **that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.** In keeping with verse 19 and the non-imputation of sins to those who are saved, we know from the context that His being “made sin” for those He saves is the imputation of their sin to Christ instead of them being charged with their own sins. And not only are they not charged with their sins, he states that likewise (in the same way) the merit of His work of righteousness (His perfect obedience unto death on the cross) is made to be theirs – imputed or credited to their account.
  2. Listen – this righteousness that is accounted to those who are saved is no less than the merit of the very sinless, perfect, finished work of obedience (even unto the death of the cross) that Christ rendered to fully satisfy the justice of God the Father in their place – as their Substitute and Surety. A true Gospel ministry directs sinners to look to Christ and Him crucified – His work of righteousness. That’s the same as bringing every thought (as it pertains to our ground of salvation) into captivity to the obedience of Christ – His righteousness. So look back again at 2 Cor. 10:5.

- B. We can know this is not speaking of our every conscious thought being continually focused on Christ's work of obedience. E.g. – The scripture elsewhere exhorts us to be good employees as we work for a living and that demands our attention to the task at hand. What God conveys here through Paul is that when it comes to the basis of our hope for salvation, that the whole understanding is to be brought captive to this one work of righteousness – this obedience which Christ rendered – so as to embrace it as the sole ground of our salvation – of how we, though sinners in ourselves, are accounted righteous – holy and unblameable and unproveable before a holy God (Col. 1:22). We must have this righteousness which we can't produce – the very righteousness of God in Christ, freely imputed to us.
- C. Any other notion as to the ground of our salvation is an imagination or high thing that exalts itself against (or in opposition to) the knowledge of God as He truly is. (*Mention Toplady quote.*) Knowing God as He is – as both a just God and a Savior, as He is uniquely revealed in the Gospel of Christ and Him crucified, is a big deal – it's essential and vital to our eternal welfare. Christ Himself told us that in John 17:3 when He prayed, ***“And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.”*** Anything in opposition to the knowledge of God as He truly is would be an idol – whether it is made evident by religious indifference whereby we neglect to even seek after the one true God, or our being consumed with other worldly interests that would rival or displace our interest in Christ through whom we come to know the one, true God; or more specific to the context in which Paul is writing, this refers to the sincere religious imaginations concerning God and how He saves sinners – thoughts of being accepted by God based on anything other than (or in addition to) the imputed righteousness of Christ. We know that because that's what Paul was addressing due to the accusations made against him by these religious accusers who were promoting a false gospel.
- D. The Greek word translated “imagination” (those which are to be cast down) is a word that simply means “reasonings” (or “thoughts,” as that same Greek word is interpreted in Romans 2:15). But remember what the scripture says about our thoughts – what we all naturally think. As we so often quote from Proverbs, ***“There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.”*** (Prov. 16:25). In other words, apart from a mighty work of God making effectual to us the preached Gospel of God's Grace in Christ so as to pull down our former strongholds and cast down our former imaginations, we all will remain mistaken. So that's why it is eternally vital that our imaginations or thoughts be cast down – because our natural thoughts or imaginations will have us worshipping an imaginary god – not the true and living God of the Bible.

- E. So we aim our weapons at casting down that which is opposed to the knowledge of God, opposed to the Gospel that teaches salvation is conditioned on Christ alone, because that doctrine of Christ is what UNIQUELY reveals to us the knowledge of God—how all of God’s attributes are not pitted against one another as if God dispenses with justice in order to show mercy, but rather how they are brought together so that we behold the glory of God in His redemptive character (as both a just God and a Savior) through the Person and finished work of Christ – how God can justly punish sin and still show mercy to the sinner.
- F. Now any thoughts, reasonings, imaginations, or ANY high thing that exalteth itself (that is placed in rivalry or in opposition with) knowing God as He is uniquely revealed in the Gospel is targeted to be discredited and proven vain by a true Gospel ministry. We don’t know what is right apart from having learned where we’re wrong about God and how He saves sinners. If you think there is any merit or saving contribution derived from anything proceeding from you, the sinner, then that is exactly what you do—you are placing that in rivalry with Christ and His righteousness and that needs to be cast down because that thought exalts itself against the knowledge of God. To persist there is to remain on the carnal or worldly side of this warfare.

V. Closing:

I hope today you’ve seen from 2 Corinthians 10 the nature of a true Gospel ministry, the ministry through which we see how reconciliation / peace truly has been made between God and all those He saves by the doing and dying of Christ (and that alone). To summarize, this ministry or spiritual warfare that God’s people are to engage in is identified by 2 clear and vital truths that will have been applied (and this is my emphasis today) – applied to all who have been (or will be) blessed by God so as to be saved under such a ministry: 1) Their natural refuges or strongholds (how we naturally would presume to be saved) will be pulled down and their natural imaginations cast aside; so as to... 2) bring their thoughts captive to the obedience of Christ. Neither of these occur apart from the other. So until both of these things happen, our “god” is like Santa Claus in that it is a mere figment of our spiritually dead imaginations.

Just as we cannot know what is right without knowing what is wrong, the reverse is likewise true. We don’t come to know what is wrong without seeing what is right. Therefore faith (turning to what is right) is always accompanied by God-given repentance (turning away from what was wrong). By faith we turn to the true and living God which requires turning away in repentance from the former idol of our imagination. We don’t perceive that we’re on the wrong side of this war until by God’s mighty power, in heartfelt belief of this preached Gospel, we’re shown what is right (the righteousness of God we must possess) – the absolute necessity of Christ’s work for us whereby we come to understand and embrace how God reconciles sinners unto Himself – by having imputed my sins to Christ and His righteousness to me.



And until we're convinced of the impossibility of being accepted before a holy God any other way, we have not yet been brought captive to the obedience of Christ – not captive so as to look to Christ and His righteousness alone.

I don't know any child of sound mind who ever grew up without eventually discovering the truth about the bearded fellow in the red suit with the big round belly. But tragically, many grow old and die continuing to place their hope in a "god" who is like Santa in this sense – a "god" who is a mere figment of our natural-born, spiritually dead imaginations. I once worshipped a "god" like Santa but I thank God for so ordering the events of my life to bring me under the sound of this Gospel of God's sovereign grace wherein the righteousness of God in Christ was revealed to me; and whereby, Christ alone is exalted and God receives all the glory! I pray for all who hear this Gospel message that, by God's mighty power, it will be made effectual to the pulling down of any remaining false refuges or strongholds and to the casting down of imaginations so as to bring your every thought (concerning the ground of your salvation) captive to the obedience of Jesus Christ!

Footnote from the author: While this sermon was prepared and delivered by me, I often utilize the commentaries, study helps, and teachings of others to supplement my own prayerful study of the scriptures. Since this document was not originally prepared for publication in print, please excuse and recognize that it was unfeasible to properly identify and credit all of the various original sources used to develop the content herein. Ultimately, it is my sincere and foremost objective to accurately present the gospel of God's grace found in the only infallible source, God's word itself – the Bible.