

SERIES: Power through Weakness
SERMON: Spiritual Predators in the Church
SCRIPTURE: 2 Corinthians 10:12-11:15
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My message today is about predators in the church—not a pleasant topic. We’ve heard a lot over the past few years about sexual predators among the clergy. Although the Catholic church certainly has no corner on this plague, I think it’s pretty obvious why they have had the biggest problem in regard to sexual abuse—because they do not allow their clergy to marry. Forced celibacy is neither biblical nor natural, and as long as they continue to require it, the Catholic Church will continue to be plagued by an overwhelming problem with sexual predators in the church.

But I’m more interested this morning in another kind of predator—the spiritual predator, and this is a problem which is probably a bigger issue in the Protestant church, including evangelical denominations. The reason is that there is a lot more competition among Protestant churches for members and money than among Catholic churches, and spiritual predators thrive in that competition. Sadly, there were even spiritual predators in the New Testament church, especially at Corinth, and in the text before us today the Apostle Paul confronts them with no holds barred.

I think it is important to define our terms this morning, because there might be a tendency to refer to anyone we disagree with as a spiritual predator, and I want to make it clear that I am not using the term nearly so loosely. It might be helpful to think about a variety of difficult people in the church and to distinguish between them.

There are a variety of difficult people in the church, and we must not treat them all the same.

Irregular people. I think this term was popularized by Joyce Landorf to describe the kind of people whose personalities are difficult, sometimes even obnoxious. (We would probably call them *dysfunctional* today). Maybe they talk too much, maybe they are socially dysfunctional, maybe they just always seem to act inappropriately to the occasion. We all know someone like that, and indeed many of us have an irregular person in our extended families. What should we do about irregular people? Well, prayer can help and counseling may help, but mostly we should just love them. Jesus would. In most cases we are not going to be able to change them, because usually they behave as they do because they experienced difficult emotional challenges early in life.

Critics. The next category I want to mention are people with the gift of criticism (and frankly some really do have such a gift). They can spot the flaws in anything you do or say a mile away, and they always seem to know a better way. I think the best way to respond to the critic is to listen to him or her and do our best to consider their suggestions objectively. They create conflict for us, of course, because none of us likes to be criticized, but it is what I call healthy conflict. Unfortunately, sometimes leaders are too insecure to accept even *constructive* criticism and anyone who offers it is immediately deemed an enemy or at least suspect. That’s very *unhealthy*.

Squeaky wheels. These are people who are never quite happy with the direction of ministry and let everybody know it. They don't offer constructive criticism; they just complain. Sometimes they can't even tell you why they're unhappy—their personalities are just negative. Larry Osborne, pastor of one of our largest Free churches, writes about how not to respond to squeaky wheels:

The natural response is to oil these squeaky wheels. We alter our plans or give them extra attention in the hope of silencing their criticism. Unfortunately, it seldom works. Most squeaky wheels keep right on squeaking for a simple reason: they don't squeak for a lack of oil; they squeak because it's their nature to squeak. Wise church leaders know an important paradox: Church harmony is inversely related to the amount of time spent oiling squeaky wheels.ⁱ

The best response to a squeaky wheel is probably to humor them and make sure you don't take their complaints too personally.

Antagonists. In his fascinating book, *Antagonists in the Church: How to Identify and Deal with Destructive Conflict*, Kenneth C. Haugk, a Lutheran pastor and psychologist and the founder of Stephen Ministries, defines antagonists as ...

... individuals who, on the basis of non-substantive evidence, go out of their way to make insatiable demands, usually attacking the person or performance of others. These attacks are selfish in nature, tearing down rather than building up, and are frequently directed against those in a leadership capacity.ⁱⁱ

The antagonist is much more dangerous than the irregular person or the constructive critic or the squeaky wheel, and he requires unusual discernment and wisdom on our part. He can destroy the unity of a church in no time, to say nothing of the reputation of his targets. By the way, we need to be careful not to identify too many people as antagonists. If we're seeing antagonists behind every bush, it's probably a reflection of some serious problems in our own leadership or relationships. I would say I've known only two or three true antagonists in 30 years of pastoral ministry, and only one was what I would call "hard-core" (And he wasn't in this church, OK? I don't want anyone trying to figure out who I'm talking about).

Please understand that antagonists are present not only in the church—you can find them at work, at school, in sports, perhaps even at home. I was talking to a woman who was undergoing real persecution at home. Her husband might be called a hard-core antagonist, for his primary goal seemed to be to make her life so miserable that she would leave; that way he wouldn't be responsible for the divorce.

How do you handle an antagonist in the church? The answer is, *a lot differently* than you would the previous kinds of difficult people. I think church leaders have to isolate them, even discipline them, or in the worst case, excommunicate them. Paul told his young protégé Titus, "Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned" (Titus 3:10, 11). I think Paul was talking about a hard-core antagonist.

Just to be sure we understand the difference, let me put these four in perspective:

1. The irregular person is dysfunctional and deserves to be pitied, not despised.
2. The constructive critic is a friend. He creates healthy conflict for us, and we can prosper *if* are willing to listen to him.
3. The squeaky wheel is an irritant, but while the conflict he or she stirs up may require special grace and patience to live with, he presents no significant threat to the church.
4. The antagonist is a bona-fide trouble-maker. Watch out for him!

Now the final and most dangerous category of difficult person in the church is the spiritual predator, and this is where we will spend the remainder of our time because this is the person our Scripture text is addressing.

Spiritual predators. One of the factors that makes the spiritual predator more dangerous than all the other difficult people is that he's in leadership. The other categories we have considered are usually *not* in leadership, certainly not in top leadership, but the spiritual predator is; in fact, he's usually in control. I would like to spend the remainder of our time this morning pointing out from 2 Cor. 10 and 11 why the spiritual predator is the most dangerous kind of person in the church. But I don't want this message to be entirely negative. As Paul exposes these individuals he is also going to exhibit how godly leaders are different. In other words, as he talks about these false apostles, he is, at the same time, going to describe the marks of a true apostle, a true shepherd of God's people.

Spiritual predators are dangerous because they measure success by humanistic standards.

Everyone likes to succeed. And everyone likes to be part of something that is dynamic and growing and positive. However, it is very important that we think carefully about the appropriate standards for success. We will begin our reading in verse 12 and then skip to verse 17 of 2 Cor. 10.

They commend themselves. (10:12, 17-18)

"We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise...But, "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord." For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends."

To gain a true estimate of anyone's work or ministry, some standard of comparison is needed, and the false teachers in Corinth used the standards of the world. This was a major theme of last week's message on the first half of chapter 10, so I won't belabor it here. If you've never been to a pastor's convention, you should perhaps consider yourself fortunate. It's amazing how a large gathering of clergy can generate an incredible amount of self-commendation, of comparing degrees, titles, size of churches, size of budgets, size of staffs, length of sabbaticals, *ad infinitum*, *ad nauseam*. The last thing Paul wanted to do was get into competition with a collection of bloated egos all striving for the top place in the hierarchy. But that is a characteristic of spiritual predators.ⁱⁱⁱ

Paul responds to this tendency toward self-commendation by saying in verse 13 and 14: "We,

however, will not boast beyond proper limits, but will confine our boasting to the field God has assigned to us, a field that reaches even to you.” Paul refuses to compare himself with others in giftedness or accomplishments but confines his boasting to what God assigned *him* to do and to how faithful he was being with the gifts God had given *him*! Do you remember what he said in 1 Cor. 4:2-4?

Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but (even) that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.

Verse 17 of 2 Corinthians 10 contains a direct quote from Jeremiah 9:23, 24, and I think we should read exactly what the prophet wrote:

*This is what the LORD says:
Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom
or the strong man boast of his strength
or the rich man boast of his riches,
but let him who boasts boast about this:
that he understands and knows me,
that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness,
justice and righteousness on earth,
for in these I delight,” declares the LORD.*

What matters most is not whether a spiritual leader can outshine his peers but whether he knows God and receives the approval of his Master.

They take credit for work done by others. (14-16)

“We are not going too far in our boasting, as would be the case if we had not come to you, for we did get as far as you with the gospel of Christ. Neither do we go beyond our limits by boasting of work done by others. Our hope is that, as your faith continues to grow, our area of activity among you will greatly expand, so that we can preach the gospel in the regions beyond you. For we do not want to boast about work already done in another man's territory.”

Paul came to Corinth as a missionary. He founded a church, disciplined the people, appointed elders, and then moved on to other cities to do the same thing. He was a pioneer, always heading for virgin territory, always trying to reach the unreached. In contrast, however, these false teachers had come into an already established church and tried to move it away from its foundation and turn it toward a new paradigm, toward something more relevant and acceptable to Greek society. They bragged about the wonderful job they were doing, when as a matter of fact they hadn't done anything to establish this church; in fact, they were in the process of destroying what Paul had started.

Meanwhile Paul has a great desire to take the Gospel to the regions beyond—probably a reference to western Europe, perhaps even Spain. The spread of the Gospel mattered far more to him than maximizing his own reputation. Spiritual predators rarely start churches or launch ministries to

unreached people groups. They are far more likely to try gaining a foothold in a ministry started by someone else and then change it into what they want it to be.

Spiritual predators are dangerous because they are doctrinal adulterers. (11:1-4)

Let's consider the first three verses of chapter 11:

I hope you will put up with a little of my foolishness; but you are already doing that. I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

Here we see the first charge regarding doctrinal heresy:

They lead people astray from sincere and pure devotion to Christ. (11:3) Paul is self-conscious about defending himself, and that is why he sounds apologetic for even raising this issue. After all, he has just made the point that God's commendation should weigh more heavily with us than our own opinion of ourselves, and now he finds it necessary to talk about himself. He would much rather be teaching them truth or encouraging them in their spiritual walk, but his opponents have forced him to take valuable time to defend himself and his Gospel. What he has to say is not really foolishness, however; it's extremely important and relevant.

The reference to jealousy here reminds us of the fact that jealousy is not always a vice; sometimes it is a virtue. Webster's defines jealousy as "hostility toward and intolerance of a rival," and that can be a character asset, as when the rival is a real and present threat to one's marriage or one's commitment to the Lord. God Himself is called a jealous God in this positive sense over 40 times in the Bible.

Paul portrays himself as a proud father who has betrothed his daughter, the church at Corinth, to the best of husbands—the heavenly bridegroom, Jesus Himself. But now his daughter is on the verge of giving her heart to another,^{iv} and Paul lays the responsibility directly at the feet of the these predators. They led the people astray, "just as Satan deceived Eve." Paul hints at a conscious effort on the part of the spiritual predators to move the church away devotion to Christ, and the church didn't have the discernment to know it was being hoodwinked. We aren't told exactly how the false teachers led the Corinthians believers astray, though there are some hints. Of course, one thing they did was to undermine the people's confidence in the Apostle Paul, and since Paul was himself devoted to Christ, that tended to lead the people away from their devotion to Christ. Another thing they did was to draw attention to themselves. As someone has said, "You can't at one and the same time convey the notion that you yourself are clever and that Jesus Christ is powerful to save." You can take some of the attention to yourself or you can give it all to Christ; you can't do both.

There are many other ways, of course, that people can be led away from devotion to Christ. It can happen through apathy, becoming lukewarm or just plain cold in our relationship with Christ. It can happen through intellectualism, i.e. treating the Christian faith as just an

intellectual, theological endeavor, cramming as many facts into our heads as we can and in the process neglecting the heart. On the other hand, it can also happen through emotionalism; i.e. people can substitute a warm feeling or emotional response for truth. However it happens, it is a tragedy.

The second charge regarding doctrinal heresy is even stronger:

They preach another Jesus, a different Spirit, and a different Gospel. Here Paul really nails the predators. Look at verse 4: “For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.” The criticism here is actually directed at the congregation, the people who allowed this to happen to them, but one can’t escape that Paul is also indicting the false teachers. The clear implication is that he is talking about these predators when he says, “For if *someone* comes and preaches another Jesus ...”

What does Paul mean that they preached “another Jesus”? Please understand that not everyone who talks about Jesus is talking about the same person. Muslims claim to honor Jesus as a great prophet, but you wouldn’t recognize the Jesus they honor. Protestant liberals have written many books about “the historical Jesus,” and in most of them, too, you wouldn’t recognize the Jesus you have come to believe in. He often comes across as a wimpy forgive-everything, allow-anything, accept-anybody peace-nik. The Jesus of the Gospel is the one Paul talks about in 1 Cor. 15, the One who died for our sins according to the Scriptures, was buried, and was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. We’re talking about the pre-existent, Virgin-born, sinless Savior of the World, the Way, the Truth and the Life! If anyone talks about Jesus and doesn’t hold to these truths about Him, he’s preaching another Jesus! So, let me just stop and ask you, “Have you done business with the Jesus of the Bible?” He is the only One who can forgive sins and give you eternal life.

Not only do these spiritual predators preach another Jesus; they also have convinced the Corinthians that they need a different Spirit, one not recognizable as the Holy Spirit Paul preached. In the church today, as well, there are those who have so distorted the Spirit’s ministry that you can hardly recognize Him. Instead of the Spirit of order, he appears as the Spirit of confusion and crass emotionalism. Instead of glorifying Jesus, he is seen as glorifying Himself or even the preachers who talk about Him. Instead of advancing the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, he generates disunity and conflict. They are talking about a different Spirit.

Thirdly, the spiritual predators preach a different gospel. Back in Galatians the Apostle dealt with the same issue; there the false gospel was a gospel of legalism, and I suspect that is the same gospel these teachers at Corinth are proclaiming. Listen to Galatians 1:8: “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!” It doesn’t matter who the preacher is, what his credentials are, or where he hails from (heaven or earth)—if he preaches a different Gospel, he is condemned.

There is no other gospel that deserves the name of “Gospel,” good news, for there is only one way of salvation; all other ways are dead ends, and therefore they are not good news but bad news. Those who preach a health/wealth gospel, friends, are spiritual predators. Those who preach a gospel of salvation by works are spiritual predators. Those who preach a gospel of self-actualization are spiritual predators. Those who preach a gospel of tolerance and relativism and many ways to God are spiritual predators.

Spiritual predators are dangerous because they attack the faithful, pawning themselves off as “super-apostles.” (11:5-11)

Let’s read verses 5-11:

But I do not think I am in the least inferior to those "super-apostles." I may not be a trained speaker, but I do have knowledge. We have made this perfectly clear to you in every way.

Was it a sin for me to lower myself in order to elevate you by preaching the gospel of God to you free of charge? I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you. And when I was with you and needed something, I was not a burden to anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied what I needed. I have kept myself from being a burden to you in any way, and will continue to do so. As surely as the truth of Christ is in me, nobody in the regions of Achaia will stop this boasting of mine. Why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do!

Let me explain what is going on here. Paul’s detractors in Corinth, in an effort to draw the congregation away from Paul and toward themselves, had begun to challenge his claim to be an apostle. You will recall in Acts 1 that after Judas committed suicide, the leaders of the early church gathered to elect a new member of the Twelve to take his place. In the process they laid out the qualifications:

Therefore, it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John’s baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection” (Acts 1:21, 22).

Two men were nominated, and Matthias was elected.

Whether they should have even done this has been hotly debated by Bible scholars. Some believe it was God’s intention for Paul to take Judas’ place. Be that as it may, the false teachers in Corinth are taking advantage of the fact that the early church leaders believed it was necessary for a true apostle to have known and walked with Jesus during His earthly ministry. Clearly Paul did not. In fact, Paul was a persecutor of the early Christians before His Damascus Road experience, and he didn’t even become a believer until after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

So these leaders challenged Paul’s claim to apostleship. I think it is possible that some of them may have come to Corinth from Jerusalem and perhaps even claimed to have known Christ during His earthly sojourn. Perhaps they referred to themselves as “true apostles,” in contrast to Paul. (He facetiously labels them as “super-apostles” because of all the authority they were claiming for themselves). Authoritative titles, you know, are something predators often claim for

themselves. It may start with Rev., then Dr., then Bishop, then Apostle, and who knows what else. But rarely are they satisfied to simply claim such authority for themselves. They will usually, in addition, denigrate the authority of those who are truly God's faithful servants. In other words, they build themselves up by tearing others down. The spiritual predators at Corinth certainly did that to Paul—in two respects that are revealed here (and in other ways elsewhere).

They attacked Paul for his lack of training as a speaker, ignoring his content. When Paul says, "I may not be a trained speaker, but I do have knowledge," he is clearly responding to the attacks of these leaders. He hadn't taken rhetoric at Athens University, as some of them had. He hadn't graduated from Toastmaster's. But Paul was not an ungifted speaker; he just refused to use the gimmicks that others used. He refused to use a big theological word if a simple one would do the job. He refused to sprinkle his sermons with Hebrew words to impress. He refused to use theatrics and clever manipulative tricks. He himself put it this way in 1 Cor. 2,

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence ... My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

Paul's contention is that the message is always more important than the messenger. The truth is always more important than the speaker's style. Please understand that, friends. We tend to be so shallow in the way we evaluate preachers and teachers. We are wowed by those who are entertaining and flashy and put off by those we deem boring or dry. I would never want to make an excuse for poor public speaking. But frankly we need to pay more attention than we do to the content that is being shared. Sometimes I am shocked when I attend a conference and hear people's evaluations of the speakers. They can be totally blown away by a speaker who has absolutely nothing to say! But he sure knew how to say it! I read this observation the other day: "The man who has nothing to say, but says it with grace and skill, is still a man with nothing to say."^v Don't forget that most cults and aberrant religious movements have been started and perpetuated by world-class communicators!

They attacked him for not charging for his ministry, ignoring his motives. In verse 7 Paul is forced to ask a question that is, on the surface, ludicrous: "Was it a sin for me to lower myself in order to elevate you by preaching the gospel of God to you free of charge?" These false teachers accuse Paul of charging nothing for his ministry because that's all it was worth. They in turn acted as though a man's value can be judged by the size of his fee, and they charged plenty! Honoraria, plus expenses, plus book and C. D. sales, plus love offering, etc., etc.

But Paul's motive in not taking money from the Corinthians was absolutely godly. He loved the church, and he didn't want to be a burden to them; he didn't want anyone in that pagan city to have an excuse to question his financial integrity. In fact, Paul had a standing policy not to charge pioneer works but to ask established churches to support him (he calls that "robbing" them, almost humorously). And then the spiritual predators have the gall to turn around and use it all against him!

Spiritual predators are dangerous because they masquerade as apostles of Christ. (11:12-

15)

... And I will keep on doing what I am doing (defending myself) in order to cut the ground from under those who want an opportunity to be considered equal with us in the things they boast about.

For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.

Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. This is a very important truth to get through our heads. When you see Satan portrayed in a red suit with a pitchfork and horns and a tail, that's playing right into his hand. Such a caricature causes people to take him less than seriously. Satan knows that most people will never be tempted by a hideous creature who promises to destroy the things they prize most. But they can be tempted by power and influence and beauty and skill. They can be attracted to empty promises of bigger and better things. And that's why you are much more likely to find Satan in a clergy collar or dressed to the hilt as an attractive religious figure.

His servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Spiritual predators don't go around with the letters S. P. on their chests. They don't advertise that they are into religion only for the financial benefits they can get out of it. They hide their heresies or make them look appealing by cloaking them in ambiguous language. But ...

Their end will be what their actions deserve. The implication is that God is going to deal with them, and it won't be pleasant.

Conclusion: So what is our take-away this morning? I must admit this hasn't exactly been a heart-warming message that causes you to want to go out and love your fellow-man more. It hasn't been particularly evangelistic either, appealing to the lost to come to Jesus. Instead it has been a hard-hitting warning that there are those in God's church bent on destroying her. Let me tell you friends, the most dangerous people on the spiritual scene are not the Islamo-fascists rioting around the globe, not the ACLU and its comrades in the mainstream media, not the open enemies of the cross, but those who masquerade as its friends and take millions into hell with them, having convinced them that all is well.

J. Philip Arthur, a pastor in England, writes,

Any British town of modest size will contain a number of former church buildings that are now used for other purposes. I can think of one in my hometown that now houses a Sikh temple. A hundred years ago, these places were often the homes of robust evangelical witness. By slow stages that witness was undermined by (looking the other way as) theological liberalism (wormed its way in). Little by little, congregations were introduced to a Christ shorn of his miracles and a gospel of good behaviour and social concern. People will continue to attend church when a life-changing encounter with

Christ is a real possibility, but if all that is on offer is platitudes about helping the disadvantaged, it is hardly surprising when churches empty.

May God help us to be on guard against spiritual predators!

i. Larry Osborne, *The Unity Factor*, 103, 104.

ii. Kenneth C. Haugk, *Antagonists in the Church: How to Identify and Deal with Destructive Conflict*, 25, 26.

iii. I personally wonder what drives so many churches to start a television ministry! In a few cases I think it is a genuine desire to share the truth and win lost people to Christ. But clearly many of them are accomplishing neither of these objectives. The only possible explanation seems to be that they love the publicity and power and money a TV ministry can produce.

iv. J. Philip Arthur, *Strength in Weakness*, 198.

v. Arthur, 200.