

Spiritual Warfare

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[0 : 00] Spiritual warfare is not something most people talk about, at least people I hang around with, which may surprise you, given my vocation.

But it's not something that you hear people talk about a whole lot, at least in the D.C. area. And honestly, we don't really talk about it that much in our church, though, as I've been reflecting, we probably should.

We should probably talk a lot more about it. Because it's something that I think we contend with every single day. You know, this is one of those passages where, as I looked at the timing and the lectionary, and I realized that this weekend, some of you may not know, there's a big Advent camping trip that happens this weekend, Labor Day weekend.

And so a good chunk of our church is camping through, many of them through tomorrow. And I'm very excited, and I'm hoping they had a wonderful weekend. But this is one of those passages that I wish every single person in our church that we could all sit down and look at together.

Because I think it's extremely important. All Scripture is important. But in terms of where we are as a church, I've seen the reality of spiritual warfare over this past year.

[1 : 12] I've seen it wreak havoc. And so this is one of those passages that I wish every single person in our church that we could all sit down together and study it and ask God what he's trying to tell us through it. We're looking at Ephesians chapter 6, verses 10 through 20.

And we're going to see three things about spiritual warfare. We're going to see our true enemy, his means of attack, and then how to fight back. Our true enemy, his means of attack, how to fight back.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you that it is empowered by your presence and by your spirit. That we're not here to consider human philosophy or wisdom or tactics or strategies.

We're not here to simply consider the latest approach to self-growth, Lord. We're not here even just for a bit of inspiration. We are here to hear from the God of the universe.

We are here to be ministered to by the one who made us. Lord, and so we come into your presence with humility, with fear and trembling. And yet at the same time, in the name of Christ, we boldly ask that you would speak to us.

[2 : 21] Tell us what we need to hear. Give us the power and the grace to respond to your word this morning. Help us to contend with all of the things that stand against you and your kingdom, Lord, for your glory.

We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. So let's look at this passage together and see what it has for us this morning. First of all, we consider who is our true enemy.

In these final verses of his letter to the Ephesians, chapter 6, verses 10 through 20, Paul essentially pulls back the veil. And he tells us the true nature of the Christian life.

And he says this, that we wrestle not against flesh and blood. And what he's really saying there is we wrestle not only against flesh and blood, but against the devil. And what he's saying, let's just not be ambiguous about this, that there is a conscious, personal, spiritual evil that relentlessly aims to destroy God's people and God's creation.

And we have to fight every single day against that evil. That's what he's saying. You know, C.S. Lewis in the preface to the Screwtape Letters says, there are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils.

[3 : 39] One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. And the devils are equally pleased by both errors.

And I think he's spot on. You know, there are some people, and maybe we know some people, who tend to over-focus on the demonic. They see the demons and the demonic everywhere. You stub your toe, it's Satan.

You get stuck in traffic, it's Satan. Now, sometimes DC traffic does feel satanic. And maybe they got a point there. But I'm assuming that most of us fall into the opposite category, that most of us are the kind of people who tend to underestimate the influence of the demonic in our lives.

Because many of us are educated DC professionals, and talking about the devil is cringy. It feels so unsophisticated. I sort of did an inventory of all of sort of my great heroes and pastors, preachers who have had an influence over me, and I realized how overly intellectualized the version of Christianity is that I've grown up with.

My greatest influences. When they talk about things like idolatry, there's a tendency to turn what are fundamentally spiritual realities into kind of an intellectual thought exercise.

[4 : 57] As though, if I can just get my thinking right, if I can just realize how important this thing has become, and then replace that with the gospel, then I'll be on solid footing. We don't often hear people, at least in our circles, at least in some circles, or at least in my circles, talk about the fact that behind these human creations, which are themselves empty, there are demonic forces that empower these things.

That we are dealing with spiritual evil that is consciously trying to destroy us. And I realized how absent that has been in a lot of the influences that have really shaped me.

Because people in our culture simply don't like to talk about that kind of thing. We don't like to talk about the word evil. Because terms like good and evil are just moral judgments.

And so we prefer to talk about what's wrong with the world using psychological or sociological or political terminology. Now there are things that we can describe that way, don't get me wrong.

But I think there's a comfort in talking about evil in terms that we can understand. In talking about evil on terms that we can address. It's comforting to think that if we can just get the right therapist, or the right dosage of medication, or more education, or better social reform, that we actually have control and the ability to address all of the evils of the world.

[6 : 21] And as C.S. Lewis said, when we make that mistake, it delights the devil. If we reject the idea that there is a spiritual being who represents the source of evil, what happens then?

We end up, if we reject spiritual evil as the source of evil, then we end up singling out something or someone else in the material world and saying that's the source of evil.

Right? We end up seeing some person, some idea, some group as being the source of evil. You begin to see the world in terms of good versus evil. You begin to divide people into good people and evil people.

It lays the foundation for us to begin to justify seeing certain groups or ethnicities or nationalities or political parties as being inherently evil and others as being inherently good.

And when we start thinking like that, the devil is winning. Because instead of fighting him, we start fighting one another. We start thinking that we are good guys and bad guys.

[7 : 34] I imagine the devil probably loves a good election year in our country for this reason. So this is the first point and it's extremely important. While we do contend with human evil, absolutely, psychological, moral, sociological, our true adversary behind all of that is the devil.

And if we feel like the concept of the devil is too unsophisticated for people like me, with all of my credentials, the majority of Christians around the world, including, by the way, the majority of our Anglican brothers and sisters in the global south, simply assume, they simply assume the influence of the demonic.

It's not even a question. They think that we are unsophisticated for not recognizing what seems so painfully obvious to them. And with all due respect, aren't we being a bit arrogant and closed-minded by not taking it seriously the way they do?

So that's our true enemy. That's the first point. Now, how does the devil operate? How does the attack come? What's the means of attack? Most of us have seen enough scary movies that when we think about demonic activity, we imagine glowing red eyes and people levitating and heads spinning around.

But that's not typically how the devil operates. He's far more subtle. Paul talks about, he uses this phrase, the schemes of the devil. See, the word devil means slanderer, deceiver, accuser.

[9 : 10] Jesus refers to him as the father of lies. He's a scam artist. So the devil cannot create. The devil's not generative. Only God can do that. The devil can only scheme.

He's a scam artist. He can only lie. He can deceive. He can confuse. He can twist. He can pervert. He can distort what God has made. So think about the way that the devil attacked Adam and Eve in the garden.

He wasn't some monster out of a horror movie who flaps down on leathery bat wings. He comes to them as a friend who only has their best interest in mind.

It wasn't a scene out of *The Exorcist*. It was a friendly theological discussion. Hey, did God really say?

He took God's truth and he bent it ever so much. Just the slightest twist. Almost imperceptible. And that led to the fall of the entire human race.

[10:17] See, even in cases of demonic possession, and some of us have seen that firsthand, that demonic influence probably began a long time ago in that person's life through lies and through deception.

The devil took greater and greater hold over that person. You know, 1 Peter 5 verse 8 says, your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour.

And usually the devil devours people slowly, beginning with little lies that gradually take hold. You know, I once heard a pastor put it this way.

Satan doesn't control us with fang marks on the flesh, but with lies in the heart. He doesn't control us with fang marks on the flesh, but with lies in the heart.

So let's take some examples into consideration. Not an exhaustive list by any stretch, but this gives us an idea of how this actually works. Three ways we experience spiritual attack.

[11:20] Temptation, accusation, inflammation. Let's look at this in more detail. Temptation. One of the ways that we experience spiritual attack is through temptation.

The temptation to not do something that God has called us to do or to do something that God has forbidden. To disobey God's will. What we need to recognize is at the heart of every temptation you will find lies.

You will find distortions of the truth. So for instance, you'll find a distorted view of God's holiness. Surely God doesn't care that much about whether or not I do this.

Surely God has more important things to do than worry about whether or not I do this little thing. I mean, it's not like I'm hurting anybody. Or you'll find a distorted view of God's mercy. You know, God loves me.

God will forgive me. That's his job. That's what God does. Or you'll find a distorted view of yourself. You know, I work so hard. I do so much for God.

[12:17] All I want is this one little thing. God owes me. Satan is continually whispering lies like this into our hearts. Whose voice do you think that is? Or we have accusation.

Also driven by lies. Do you ever lay awake at night? You wake up in the middle of the night. You can't sleep. And you find yourself just ruminating. About people or situations, relationships, conflict in your life.

And you're ruminating. And you're wondering what they think of you. You're wondering what God thinks of you. And there's this little voice in your head. And you're laying there and you're half awake. And you can't sleep.

And these thoughts are going through your head. You don't know what you're doing. You have no idea what you're doing. You're letting everyone down. You're such a disappointment.

You're such a failure in your job. You're such a failure as a friend. You're such a failure as a parent. You're such a failure as a spouse.

[13:23] Everybody's disappointed in you. They just don't want to tell you. No one could ever love a person like you. God could never love a person like you. Now, therapists refer to this kind of thing as negative self-talk.

That's certainly a very good description. But Paul says when those things are happening, when those kinds of thoughts are cycling through our minds and hearts, we're not merely wrestling against flesh and blood.

That is the voice of the devil masquerading as your own voice. Speaking to you in a voice that you think is your own. Then we have inflammation, a third kind of spiritual attack.

You know, it talks about in this passage the flaming darts of the enemy. What does that actually mean? Well, earlier in Ephesians, Paul warns against giving the devil a foothold.

And this is also what he's talking about there. So, in this case, the devil enters into a situation where there's the potential for evil, and he makes things much, much, much worse.

[14 : 28] Right? Imagine a little, there's a little fire in one of the rooms of your house, and then the devil comes in and pours gasoline on it, and it turns a little fire into a house fire.

That's often, and he can do this with a full range of human emotions. Anger, sadness, envy, frustration, anxiety, desire, pleasure, the pursuit of happiness, any of these things that make up our lives and our experiences as human beings, the devil can come in and inflame toward evil ends. So, just take, for example, this kind of situation. Imagine somebody does something to you that hurts your feelings. Friend, spouse, co-worker, boss, somebody does something, they say something, and it really hurts your feelings.

And you get angry. And your anger at that point may not necessarily be sinful. You know, the Bible says you can be angry, just don't sin in your anger. So, you're angry, and maybe it's legitimate. Maybe it's kind of a righteous anger.

Now, biblically, what should you do? Biblically, we should go to that person. We should have a calm, honest conversation. We should share the hurt, the offense. We should be willing to take responsibility for any role we might have been playing in the conflict.

[15 : 42] We should be eager to forgive that person because we know that God has forgiven us. And if and where possible, we should seek to move forward and to reconcile and to rebuild the relationship.

Now, that's what we know we should do. But let's just say for the sake of argument, instead, you choose to hold on to that anger. Paul says you're giving the devil a foothold. What does he mean? Well, that voice starts up in your head.

That voice starts talking to you. And your focus starts to move away from the immediate conflict, the thing that was said last night, or the thing that that person forgot to do, whatever it was.

And your focus shifts, and it starts to get bigger and bigger. And you start to globalize. And it's no longer just about this little conflict. It starts to be about all of these things, both past that have happened and future that you imagine might happen.

And the voice starts up, and you start saying things like, this is so typical. This is just like the time they did this. This is just like the time they did that. They're so selfish.

[16 : 43] They never care about anyone but themselves. In fact, they probably did it to me on purpose. And the voice starts up. And the more you ruminate, the angrier you get. And then that anger starts to turn to a kind of bitterness, and it's tapping in to all of these other things that you're holding on to.

And then that bitterness starts to turn to resentment. And then that voice, it starts to amplify the self-pity. It starts to convince you how wrongly you've been treated.

How you deserve so much better. How nobody really understands how hard it is to be you. How hard it is to be in this relationship with this selfish person.

Nobody appreciates you. And you become more and more self-focused. And the more the devil takes hold, the more you begin to dehumanize that other person, as well as yourself.

You turn that other person into a kind of one-dimensional cardboard cutout of a monster. And you reduce yourself into this powerless victim.

[17 : 47] Where you're completely defined by your hurt and completely defined by your pain. Your hurt becomes the only unassailable truth. It's the only thing that matters.

And God help anyone who questions the legitimacy of your hurt. In C.S. Lewis' quote about hell, he says this, Hell begins with a grumbling mood.

Always complaining. Always blaming others. Now, he could say that about any of the things that the devil might inflame in our lives. Hell begins with a grumbling mood. But you're still distinct from it.

You may even criticize it in yourself and wish you could stop it. But there may come a day when you can no longer. Then there will be no you left to criticize the mood or even to enjoy it.

But just the grumble itself. Going on forever like a machine. That's his image of people in hell. Somebody who complained their whole life.

[18 : 47] And then at some point, all that's left for eternity is this subhuman complaint. Just complaining on like a machine. Resenting. Right?

The resentment. There's nothing left. And it's just resentment. And the person that you resented is long gone. And there's just the resentment churning on forever like a machine. He says, it's not a

question of God sending us to hell.

In each of us, there is something growing which will be hell unless it is nipped in the bud. This, I would suggest, is how the devil devours us.

By inflaming our grumbling. Inflaming our bitterness. Inflaming our envy. Inflaming our desire. Inflaming our pursuit of pleasure. Whatever he can use, wherever there is a foothold, until those things completely define us.

And there's nothing left but those things. The question we need to be asking is, are those things, are there things growing in our hearts?

[19 : 48] Are there lies that have been deeply embedded in our hearts? What do the voices say to us in the late watches of the night? Are there areas of spiritual inflammation that are growing stronger?

That are overtaking us? Our true enemy is the devil. And he attacks us with lies.

The schemes of the devil. He twists and distorts the truth about God and about us. About the people around us. He confuses.

So how do we fight back? Paul's writing from prison. And most likely, he's chained to a Roman soldier by the wrist while he writes.

So he's literally probably looking at a Roman soldier as he dictates this letter to the Ephesians. He's sitting there. He's chained. He's dictating the letter. And he's describing the great privileges and resources that we have because of the gospel.

[20 : 56] And so he starts to use the metaphor of armor and weapons. He's like, well, it's a lot like this guy. When it comes to Roman armor, not all pieces of armor are equal.

The belt is the core piece of armor. The belt is a lot bigger and thicker and broader than like the belt I'm wearing.

And it's the core piece of armor because it's the thing that holds everything else together. Every other piece of armor is either hanging off the belt or attached to the belt or supported by the belt. And the belt was the thing that marked you as a soldier. Right? That was the distinguishing feature. Right? And so the belt was the core, the most important piece of armor. So when it comes to our defense against the father of lies, it makes sense that the core of our defense is the truth.

So the apostle Paul refers to the belt of truth. And he talks about fastening on the belt of truth. It all begins there. This means, what does it mean to fasten on the belt of truth?

[22 : 02] It means clinging to the truth of the gospel. It means committing ourselves to living out the truth of the gospel. And it also means committing ourselves to truthfulness.

There is truth. I'm committed to being a person who lives in the light of that truth. I'm committed to honesty and transparency and walking in the light. The devil's power grows.

The devil's power lies in darkness and in deception. Light causes him to flee. It begins with the truth. And the other pieces of armor represent the facets of gospel truth that are all attached to the belt.

Right? Okay, what truth? What are the truths that we live out? And then we see these things. And we'll talk about them more in a second. Righteousness. The good news of peace.

Faith. Salvation. Right? The word of God. Prayer. Right? We'll talk about those more in just a second. But here's the point of this metaphor. Paul is saying Christians have all of these resources and privileges at our disposal.

[23 : 12] If you're a Christian, these resources are ours. There's nothing that can take them away from us. But we have to actually use them. We have to put them to use.

And so the question he's asking is, do you know how to use the gospel like armor to protect you against the schemes of the devil? That's the point here.

When the devil accuses us, do we know how to put on righteousness like a breastplate? Do we know how to point to the cross?

Do we know how to point to the fact that we have been declared righteous? And there is no longer any condemnation for those of us who are in Christ Jesus. Can we put that on in the moment at 3 a.m. when we most need it?

When the devil brings conflict and division and discord and slander? Right? When other people are saying horrible, untrue things about you. When people are doing things that hurt each other.

[24 : 19] Do we know how to put on the good news of peace? Paul spends a lot of time in Ephesians talking about that. That God has made peace. He's brought down the dividing walls of

hostility.

Between himself and humans and between humans and one another. Does that truth give us firm footing like a good pair of boots? So that we have this readiness to forgive as soon as there's an opportunity.

So that we have a readiness to seek reconciliation as soon as there's an opportunity. When the devil tries to tempt us to inflame our anger or our desire.

Do we know how to cling to the promises of God in faith? He's not talking about a little shield like a buckler. He's talking about a giant like four foot something shield.

And the soldiers would all stand shoulder to shoulder with these shields. And as the arrows came raining down they would all raise their shields together as one. And these flaming arrows would be snuffed out and shattered on the hard surface of those united shields.

[25 : 27] Do you know how to cling to the promises of God? Like a shield that makes that temptation.