

Spiritual Warfare Sermon 4: Ephesians 6:12-13: Wrestling against the spiritual forces of evil

OUTLINE

What we are up against

How we are to react

INTRODUCTION

What are the real problems in the world, who are the real enemies, and how are we to respond? If we ask this question in the world today we will get answers very different to what the bible says. Having listened to many Atheist versus Christian debates recently many atheists would say that religion is the cause of most of our wars, fundamentalist ideology is the enemy and a war on faith and the secularizing of society is the necessary preventative. Others who have a more compassionate outlook would say that main problem is injustice, apathetic or corrupt governments are the problem and a universal human rights activism is the cure. The bible places before us a very different perspective. The main problem is that mankind has rebelled against its Creator, man is now under a curse with the prospect of judgement, and the interim period is marked by life in a fallen world where a devil and his demons are active to destroy mankind and the church. If this is the real state of affairs, then our analysis of what our real problems are, and what our solutions should be will be very different. The remedies suggested by the world become a case of treating the symptoms and not the cause. Paul in the verses before us analyses the true state of affairs the action that is to be taken on our part. Ephesians 6:12-13, 'For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. 13 Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.'

So far Paul has called us to war, he has called us to throw off lethargy and be alert for battle. He has pointed us to God's provisions, the strength that He provides through the armour; strength that we need to stand against the devil and his schemes. We continue with Paul's train of thought looking more deeply into what we are up against and how we are to react.

What we are up against

V12, 'For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.' You will notice that v12 begins with the word 'for.' This is a connecting word implying that this verse stands in relation to what comes before it. Paul has called us to be strong in the strength God provides, and to put on the full armour of God 'FOR'... The reason we are to avail ourselves of the greatest power available to man, and to diligently put on the whole armour is because of the enemy we face. Paul has

explained that we are being attacked by the devil, but here he adds more detail to who we are facing.

Paul tells us that our engagement is not casual but rigorous and intimate, we wrestle. This would have conjured in the minds of Paul's hearers pictures of wrestlers in the games. But Paul tells the Ephesians that their main enemy is not the city authorities, nor is it the silversmith's guild who started a riot in Ephesus in Acts 19:23-24, nor is it the Roman Emperor, or the unbelieving Jews who persecuted him from town to town. Paul tells the Ephesians, that they do not wrestle against flesh and blood but against spiritual enemies. He describes the enemies we face in four ways, 'but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.' The real enemies are not the human puppets that they work through to tempt, deceive and oppress the church but the demonic forces behind the scenes who pull the strings.

There are many misunderstandings that we have to guard against as we read this verse. Some have suggested that these four descriptions indicate an ascending order of importance with rulers at the bottom and spiritual forces of evil at the top, but I think it is clear that these are four ways of saying the same thing. We are not given insight into the authority structure of the evil forces and to say more would be speculation.

Liberal Christians demythologize the spiritual language of principalities and powers and claim that Paul was talking about political, social and economic powers. This change from the spiritual to the material, from church affairs to political ones, suit their humanistic project of changing the preaching of salvation from sin to the social gospel of salvation from suffering. To come to this text with such a naturalistic bias is totally unfair to the text and not what Paul is saying at all. Instead we understand that Paul is reflecting the teaching of the OT as it describes the activity of the demonic in the world.

In Daniel 10 we see Daniel in prayer when he is visited by a messenger. He is told that God has heard his prayer since the first day he prayed it, v12, and that this messenger was sent but was resisted by 'the prince of the kingdom of Persia.' Notice the language used to describe the demonic agent; it is the language of rulers and authorities. The Archangel Michael, a good angel is called 'one of the chief of the princes,' indicating that this is a common way of describing the angels good and fallen. V20 refers to another fallen angel as the prince of Greece, the next empire to arise after Persia. We derive from these observations that demons are not omnipresent but are restricted to a certain locality, and that they are influential in the rise and fall of governments in the world.

Another issue arises because today we hear talk of territorial spirits. The claim is that these demons have power over specific localities and that we need to engage in a confrontational intercessory warfare before evangelizing in order to have success. In response we need to say that the fact that fallen angels in the OT are identified as being over certain areas does not affirm all that goes with the belief in warring territorial spirits. There are no biblical examples of engaging the angelic realm directly, and it seems by what Daniel reveals that God has strategies and activities going on that we are not a part of.

A more fruitful way of thinking of demonic activity in the world is not to think in terms of geographic localities but rather seeing the demonic behind false religions and ideas. In OT and NT times nations would have been mono-cultural and followed the same religions, however as time has moved on and national identities have given way to sub-cultures, and each single nation can now be a diverse group of beliefs and false religions, neat territorial domains are probably not the present structure. Paul tells us that demons reside behind idols 1 Cor. 10:19-21, and that God unleashes demons in the last days, Rev. 9, and that God uses demonic deception to enact his judgement upon those who will not believe the truth, 2 Thess. 2:10-12. Given the multiplicity of religions and false ideas, multiple demons likely have influence in an area. Their influence would be based primarily on the fact that they deceive through false religions, not through some territory jurisdiction principle. In the first century we see the synagogue of satan, Emperor worship, pagan prostitution and many other manifestations of their influence, today we have thousands more manifestations that we have to contend with.

Although they are called rulers we need to remember that they are defeated. Christ triumphed over them in His resurrection Col. 2:15, and has authority over them, Eph. 1:20-22. Although they are called authorities, it is a delegated authority that exists as defeated foes, and whose activities are allowed only so far as they agree with God's purposes to refine the church and judge unbelief. Interesting to note is that Paul uses the words 'cosmic powers' to describe this demonic activity. The words 'cosmic powers' would be used by the pagans of the time to talk about the power that the planets exert, or the various gods that are associated with the planets and who were thought to determine man's fate. Paul is pulling back the curtain on ancient astrology and religions and showing how it is the demonic that lies behind it. This would have been a much appreciated point because Ephesus was a hub for the occult and many had converted from these false religions to the truth, Acts 19:19. And when Paul says that these spiritual forces of evil dwell in the heavenly places, he is not talking about God's presence, the third heavens, but rather the skies and place of the planets, otherwise known as the second heavens.

The demons are as restricted as the devil, they are not omnipresent, they are not all powerful, there is not even an indication in scripture that they can read our minds. They are more powerful than us, and by virtue of their age and study of the human race they will be master manipulators. They have a different area of authority over the unbelievers who are still under condemnation compared to the authority they have over believers. Like the devil they are allowed to harass the church by God's will for the purpose of our purification, but it is by permission and under God's sovereign guiding hand to bring about His good purposes.

They are able to possess unbelievers, we see examples of this in the gospel. I do still believe that this activity goes on today, I know there is a view amongst some conservative Christians that demonic possession was satan's mimicking of the incarnation and restrict demonic possession to the time of Christ and the apostles. I do not see any evidence in Scripture for restricting the activity of possession to the first century alone. I do however take real issue with the late belief in Christianity that Christians can be demon possessed. When Jesus was accused of performing miracles by satan's power Jesus gave us

some teaching about demonic possession, 'Or how can someone enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house,' Matt. 12:29. If the Christian is demon possessed has the Holy Spirit been bound? The bible teaches that greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world, and that we have been removed from the devil's domain to Christ's. To claim that a Christian can be demon possessed is to claim something scripture does not teach, and seems to go contrary to many truths that are taught. You will often find that the evidence for demon possession of Christians is primarily anecdotal, that is rests on stories and reports not biblical teaching. We are under no obligation to accept these testimonies but are bound to believe God's word. I agree with John Macarthur who says that the anecdotal evidence is based on people who have been 'born again' by an easy believism gospel which calls many people Christians who are in fact not.

That said the bible does teach that sin can give the devil a foothold, and if a Christian refuses to put away a sin this is opening a door for the devil. We would make a distinction here between oppression and possession, oppression being outward attack, possession being inward habitation. Oppression due to sin can result in the believer undergoing extreme depression, guilt trips, lack of joy in spiritual things, a greater susceptibility to sin because the Spirit is grieved and many other things. This particular form of activity in the life of the believer will be reversed when the believer repents and resists the devil. The devil and his demons cannot control us as they used to, the power of God in our lives changes things, 1 John 5:18-19, 'We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him. We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.'

The main power of the demonic is of course through the power of suggestion, temptation. Their job is made so much easier by the fact that we have a nature that already agrees with the design of their purposes, to disobey God. Ephesians 2:1-3 paints the picture of us as donkeys being drawn along to do the devil's bidding by being strung along by the carrots of our desires. In temptation the devil's tendency to lie and to tempt always work together. Think of any sin, any temptation, there is always a lie attending it that makes an argument for you to indulge that you must refute. When the devil tempted Adam and Eve the lies were, God is withholding something good from you; it is good for wisdom, food and aesthetically pleasing; there will be no consequences if you do it, etc. We are also tempted with lies greasing the way for sin. We think things like, I have already thought it, I might as well do it; or, I am going to give in some time I might as well give in now; or, everybody else does it; or, I can do it and still be forgiven; where in the Bible does it say I can't ..., etc. It is no wonder to me that the belt of truth is first mentioned as the first piece of armour.

Christians can come under severe times of temptation. Martin Luther when he was in hiding and was busy translating the bible into German for the first time has famous encounters with temptation. In the castle where he was hiding there is an ink stain on the wall where Luther threw the ink well across the room because while translating he had no rest day and night. These heavy days are not an indication that the devil has authority and power over

us but the evil days Paul warns about here, and the very times we are to employ truth, righteousness, the gospel, hope, faith, etc. This is when we resist the devil standing strong in the strength God provides by the armour.

How we are to react

How are we to react to these truths? Paul tells us in v13, 'Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.' We are facing an immense power way beyond our ability to fight, a power that is able to hold all of humanity under its sway and shape history and society. This however does not mean we are to cowardly or defeatist. Paul calls us to be properly equipped with what God provides, telling us to take up the whole armour. And he tells having made all efforts to learn the truth, be righteous, being ready, clinging to faith, having our thoughts on our hope, being saturated with Scripture and earnest in all sorts of prayer, we are to resist.

I would like to highlight that Paul expects the Christian to already be wearing the armour before the evil day arrives. He expects the Christian to already be about the truth and righteousness and faith. It is no good to try and prepare arguments for the faith and study the truth only when you are confronted by doubts and questions but to pre-emptively set yourself to pursuing the truth so that it is readily available when you need it. Righteousness is to already be the way of our life, the readiness that comes from the peace the gospel gives should already be our attitude, the faith that extinguishes doubt should already be informed and exercised, the hope of our salvation should already be in our minds, the word should already be in our memories, and we should already be in prayer. This is how you prepare for sickness, temptation, trials, financial collapse, relationships falling apart and intense attacks from the devil. The armour is not to be taken up when you have hard times but you are to be sleeping in your armour and getting up in it every morning.

But let me draw out some other implications of this text. Let me begin with a question. We have all seen the recent ISIS attacks in Paris, we have seen innocent people being slaughtered and this is merely one of many similar events, how should we react? Your view of the situation will determine your reaction. Paul reminds us that we are not wrestling against flesh and blood. That the men who made these attacks are camouflage, they are puppets, they are merely tools for a larger agenda. The issue of Islam, the issue of America's involvement in the Middle East, Israel's atrocities against Palestine and all of the other so called motivations are red herrings to the reality of the situation. Those men are not merely criminals who need justice, or militants who need a military response, they are eternal souls trapped by satan's lies. To correct this situation legislation on burkas will not change the heart, new immigration laws will not remove the problem, even the destruction of the new ISIS Caliphate will not change the reality of the situation. Now please don't misunderstand me, there must be a response at the level of justice, the army and society, but what the world thinks are solutions are merely treating the symptoms but not the cause. When Jesus was being put to death by religious extremists who were seeking to protect their national interests in the first century He saw through the exterior to the realities of the lost state of His enemies and saw their greatest need as being salvation and prayed for their forgiveness. Is this your instinctive reaction to these events and others like it?

This impacted Paul's life and determined his actions, when he speaks about reacting to these realities, he writes, 2 Cor. 10:3-6, 'For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. 4 For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. 5 We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, 6 being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete.' Paul employs words, words which the Spirit uses to destroy arguments, and turn opinions raised against the true knowledge of God. He seeks to win the minds and not merely force the actions of the unbeliever. Part of the Christian's warfare is church discipline as we seek to maintain a holy people that Satan might not have a foothold among us. Preaching the gospel, targeting the heart, changing a Godless worldview and maintaining holiness are his tactics. To remember that we are wrestling against spirits behind the unbelieving world changes who we view as the enemy, the power we rely on, the tactics we employ and the results we seek. The perspective on the world that Paul is introducing here should radically change everything you do and think. It should change the way we view the world. If the demonic world is influencing men through sinful desires to set up cultural environments that are created to entrap children from the earliest age with false ideas and false ways of living. If many aspects of our society are in fact honey meant to catch the fly how should we be engaging with them? Do you walk through this world remembering you have an enemy seeking to ensnare and distract you? If you use the armour, if you pursue the truth, live in righteousness, have a readiness based on the peace flowing from the gospel, if you apply faith to your situation, live in hope, test all things by the word and depend upon God in prayer you will be equipped to face each day. If not, then you should expect to be confused, weak in the way of holiness, fruitless, drowning in doubt, joyless, undiscerning and prayerless. If this describes you then you need to heed Paul's words.