

## Spiritual Warfare

[Donald Duck clip]

There you have it. The picture of spiritual warfare. You have to watch out because the devil is trying to tempt you to sleep in and skip school and smoke a pipe! But your better angels will save you and make you go to school. By the way, that clip was from 1938! Apparently, those are the things kids were tempted with back then. Oh, how times have changed.

When I watch clips like that, I wonder what message they're actually trying to convey. Are they actually a silly illustration of the temptations we face or is someone trying to the idea of spiritual beings seem silly and antiquated. I don't know what motivated Walt Disney to make a cartoon like that, but it certainly has some similarities to many people's conception of temptation and spiritual warfare.

First of all, let me say that I believe there are spirits—angels and demons, who do battle in the spiritual realm. I don't think anyone knows exactly how it works. One author I read said that we live in the “fog of war” so we can't see clearly. There are some things we just don't understand about the spiritual world because we don't see it directly.

But the whole idea of angels and demons and spiritual war is controversial for modern, western people today. Even theologians have joined the skepticism. Rudolf Bultmann, wrote, *“It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail*

*ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles.*" That's a common sentiment, but I hardly see why that's the case. I'm a big believer in science and the good things it allows us to do and I don't see any conflict between that and belief in a spiritual realm.

The sociologist Peter Berger wrote, *"We may agree...that contemporary consciousness is incapable of conceiving of either angels or demons. We are still left with the question of whether...angels and demons go on existing despite this incapacity of our contemporaries to conceive of them."*

The fact is that it's only our corner of the world, at this point in history, that doesn't believe there's a spiritual battle going on. Go to almost any other culture at any time in history—including today—and people know and experience, spiritual forces. Do we think that just because we do science really well that makes us so much more attuned to all of reality? Could it be that our unexamined confidence that science can explain everything simply blinds us to realities science can't explain? Could it be that we're technologically advanced, but spiritually stunted?

C.S. Lewis writes this in the introduction to his book, *The Screwtape Letters*, *"There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or magician with the same delight."*

I think Lewis is right about this because I've seen both extremes, people who don't really believe in the power of evil, let alone an evil being on the one hand and people who spend their lives obsessing about the spiritual realm as if everything bad that happens is directly caused by a demon.

It's clear from Scripture that Jesus believed in Satan and evil spirits. Now, some people will say, "Yeah, but Jesus only believed that because he was a product of his society." Well, it's true enough that Jesus lived in a society that was more inclined to believe in spirits ours. But if you're a Christian, then you also believe that Jesus was fully God and because of that, we need to accept what he taught about the spiritual world.

Jesus drove out demons and gave his disciples the authority to do it, too. He taught his followers to watch out for "the enemy" who can derail our growth. He told Peter that Satan wanted to sift him and the other disciples like wheat. If we follow Jesus, we have to believe Jesus knew what he was talking about.

Over the last four weeks, we've been making our way through what we call "The Lord's Prayer" which was Jesus response to his disciples when they asked him how to pray. Most of us today make prayer about ourselves. In other words, the bulk of our prayers—if not all of our prayers—are simply us asking God for things. "God, I have a test today and I forgot to study. Please help me pass the test." "God please heal my aunt who has cancer." And those prayers are good. Jesus tells us to ask for what we want.

But the first couple of weeks we learned that while God told us to ask for things, the primary benefit of prayer is that it reorients us to God’s perspective—that rather than always asking God to see things our way, prayer is how we learn to adjust our vision to see the world the way God sees it. So, we pray, **“Our father in heaven, holy is your name.”** And prayer is where we learn to want the things God wants, so we pray, **“Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”** Prayer is also how we learn to live the way God wants us to live, so we pray, **“Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”**

Today, we’re focusing on the last two lines Jesus taught us to pray, **“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.”** This is the part of the Lord’s Prayer that deals with spiritual war. So, let’s dive deeper.

When we look at the first part of this verse, it’s kind of puzzling on the surface. Jesus tells us we should ask God not to lead us into temptation. The question is, “Why would we need to ask God not to lead us into temptation?” After all, the book of James tells us, **“<sup>13</sup>When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone...”** So, why would Jesus ask us to pray that God wouldn’t do something he would never do?

But let’s make a mental picture of God leading us. We’re all walking through a minefield. The sense of this petition is asking God to point out the individual mines that we don’t see because we don’t have the same vision God does.

You see, Jesus assumes that the world is a minefield of temptation and we don't have the ability to navigate it on our own, so we need God to guide us through it. This is pretty much the same as the prayer Jesus prayed for his disciples in John 17, right before he was about to be crucified, <sup>15</sup>**“My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.”** Jesus is teaching us to pray that prayer.

Now, when you learned the Lord's Prayer you probably learned to pray, “deliver us from evil.” But Jesus actually said, **“Deliver us from the evil one.”** In other words, don't ask to be rescued from some abstract concept of evil, but from the “evil one.” And everyone agrees, Jesus is talking here about Satan.

In the Bible, Satan is viewed as God's adversary. In fact, the word “satan” means adversary. But he's not equal in power to God. He's also referred to as the devil, which means “*accuser*” or “*slanderer*.” Satan is the chief evil spirit, but not the only one. He's God's adversary, but not his equal. The Bible says that Satan is a created being who, because of free will, rebelled against God and when he did, brought a third of the angels with him and they're known as *demons*. Together, the Bible often refers to them as the *principalities and powers*.

Now, you might be disappointed that I'm not going to be talking about demon possession and exorcisms or any of that today. Those are all worth talking about at some point, but not today, because when it comes to Satan and demons, there's something more critical to focus on. Manifestations might harm a person's body, but Satan does

something far worse. He wants to do harm to people's soul. *We like to focus on the sensational, but it's the subtle things that make Satan so dangerous.*

You see, Satan doesn't have any real power over us because in Colossians 2, it says the Jesus <sup>“15</sup> **...disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”** The power Satan has is the power of the lie.

Every temptation to sin is a lie based in the truth. Temptation isn't always so obvious like EVIL Donald Duck giving REGULAR Donald a pipe to smoke. There's always enough truth to make it believable, but that truth is always distorted. It promises some pleasure or benefit that might happen initially, but in the end is destructive. That's how it works—and it's critical to know how the spiritual battle is fought.

The Book of Common prayer encourages us to pray that God would deliver us from “the deceits of the world, the flesh and the devil.” Now, it's hard to create precise lines between the deceits of the world, the flesh and the devil because the Bible says that Satan is behind all these lies. In John, chapter 8, Jesus is talking to his opponents and this is what he says to them, <sup>“44</sup> **...there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”**

But even though there are overlap among these areas, we can at least define each one. For instance, the deceit of the world are those structures and attitudes that are prevalent in society that pull people away from Christ and cause suffering in the world.

Ephesians 6:12 from the passage we read today, the Apostle Paul writes, <sup>“12</sup> **For our**

**struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”**

Regardless of your political persuasion, Paul tells us that the politicians themselves are not our enemies, it's the principalities and powers behind unjust, immoral and destructive ideas that compete against God's Kingdom values.

In Jesus' day, those powers conspired against Jesus himself. That's why Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 2:7-8, **“<sup>7</sup>No, we declare God's wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. <sup>8</sup>None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.”**

But the lies go way deeper than politics. The lies of materialism that tell us that money and possessions will make us happy. It could be the lies of racism and sexism, injustice in many varieties. It includes the occult or false religions, white supremacy, sexual license. All of them have their foundation in lies about God or who we are. And we have to be vigilant about what we're feeding our mind because the lies are all around us.

We give in to *deceits of the flesh* when the evil one convinces us to put our desires for pleasure, importance and comfort above everything else. You've probably noticed the inconsistency that virtually nobody *wants* to do evil and yet we do anyway.

A woman cheats on her husband, not because she always wanted to be an adulteress, but because her desire to be noticed by a man is secretly greater than her

desire to be faithful. A man doesn't cheat on his taxes because he sees himself as a criminal, but because his desire for financial security is greater than his desire for honesty and integrity. Disordered desires come from subtle lies of the flesh.

Ephesians 2 says that these disordered desires are rooted in the evil one, **"<sup>1</sup>As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, <sup>2</sup>in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. <sup>3</sup>All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts."**

*Deceits of the devil* tempt us to believe that none of this is real. There is no adversary. Religion is just about how you can learn to be a good person, be psychologically fulfilled and *"live your best life now."* If the devil can convince us to focus on our self-fulfillment, we won't think much about praying for God's Kingdom to come and his will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

I want you to notice something that Jesus assumes—not just from this last line, but from the whole prayer. I want you to see that *Jesus assumes his disciples will be active in the spiritual battle.* To pray for God's Kingdom to come and his will be done on earth as it is in heaven is an act of war. When we pray that kind of prayer, Jesus knows we'll need protection from the evil one. We *could* just pray nice prayers for peace and safety and forget all the business about God's Kingdom coming, but I don't believe this is what Jesus intended and it's certainly not the kind of prayer taught in Scripture.



It's difficult to read passages like we read earlier from Ephesians 6, and continue to be indifferent about prayer. Look at what it says. Verse 10, **“Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.”** That doesn't sound like self-fulfillment, it sounds like a battle.

When you pray for someone's salvation, you're battling for their soul. When you pray for a friend caught in the throes of addiction, you're in the battle. When you pray against injustice or violence or hatred, you're in a battle. When you're praying strength to resist temptation, you're in the fight and that makes you a target.

That's why Paul repeats, **“Put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you've done everything, to stand.”**

Now, I know there are some who would say, since this is a battle, we need to be going out and casting out demons and reclaiming territory. I think there's a place for that, but even more foundational to the battle is right here where Paul tells us how we can take our stand. In essence, Paul tells us to enter the battle by doing four things.

Number one, *join the right side*. In verses 16 and 17, Paul says to take up the shield of *faith* and the helmet of *salvation*. What does that mean? That means you have to pick a side. And how do you do that? Make the decision to *trust* and *follow* Jesus. Until you decide to do that, you're just a bystander. But, when you do, you really can pray to God, “Your Kingdom come.” And the great thing is that when you do, your victory is ensured.

Number two, *learn the truth by getting into Scripture*. Paul writes in verse 14, **“Stand firm then with the belt of truth buckled around your waist...”** Later in verse 17 he says to take the **“sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.”** These things go together. If the evil one is subtle, and his primary power is the power of the lie, it’s critical that you know the truth. At the beginning of his ministry, when Jesus was tempted in the desert, he was able to combat the lies of Satan with Scripture.

Three, *live the truth*. In verse 14, Paul tells us to put on the **“breastplate of righteousness”** and have our **“feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.”** Both of these have to do with simple obedience to what we know. It’s not enough just to know the truth, but we have to resist the temptations of the world and the flesh and align ourselves with the truth. This is where I believe the hardest battle is fought for most believers.

Living in sin and disobedience compromises us and renders us ineffective. I suspect you know this because when you’re caught in sins like bitterness, unforgiveness, lust or anger, do you feel like praying? I know I don’t. When I’m not living as Christ would have me live, my prayers feel ineffective, so I can’t really pray until I make it right. But I also know that confession and repentance can turn that around.

But for many, aligning ourselves with the truth will mean more than just changing a few surface behaviors, it means digging deep to find the lies we’ve believed that cause the sin we fall into. It means not just praying for the salvation of others, but sharing the

gospel. It means not just praying for mercy and justice in the world, it means getting involved personally and persevering.

Finally, Paul says *pray*. Verse 18, **“<sup>18</sup>And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people.”** This is how you enter the battle.

Well, I know I flew through those things very quickly, but the point wasn’t to give a detailed exposition of the Armor of God. My point is just this. Jesus was locked in on prayer because he knew he was on the front line of a spiritual battle that he could not fight without his father. And if that was the case for Jesus, it most certainly is true for us.

As long as we believe prayer—or getting into scripture or living righteous lives, for that matter—as long as we believe these are just nice things to do if we want to be happy with us, we’ll continue to be indifferent and our prayers will lack fervency and power. But when we understand prayer is battle, it will transform how we pray.

It will change our attitude and motivation for prayer. It will change how often we pray and for how long. It’ll change *what* we pray for. It’ll change the tone of our prayers. And most of all, when we realize the size and importance of the battle, we realize our utter dependence on God.