



Now to live the life - Spiritual Warfare Ephesians 6:10-24 Sunday 19th November 2017:

T.Yacomeni

Ephesians 6v10-24

10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. 11 Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. 12 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. 13 Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. 14 Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled round your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, 15 and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. 16 In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. 17 Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. 18 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. 19 Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, 20 for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should. 21 Tychicus, the dear brother and faithful servant in the Lord, will tell you everything, so that you also may know how I am and what I am doing. 22 I am sending him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage you. 23 Peace to the brothers and sisters, and love with faith from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 24 Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love.

This morning we are concluding our series called Now to Live the life and I want to pick up the verse we read from Ephesians 6 that says '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.' The letter to the Ephesians was written by the Apostle Paul when he was in prison, kept under lock and key by the Romans. As a Roman citizen and former Pharisee, Paul would have had every right to be angry at his treatment and to speak bitterly against his captors. But instead he writes that his struggle is not against human beings, but rather against the spiritual powers of evil in the heavenlies. We are a people at war. But we do not plot against people or malign those who oppose us. On the contrary we live in this in between state where we honour and respect others and love our enemies, yet at the same time as Paul says we must be prepared to square up to the Spiritual powers and principalities which oppose us.

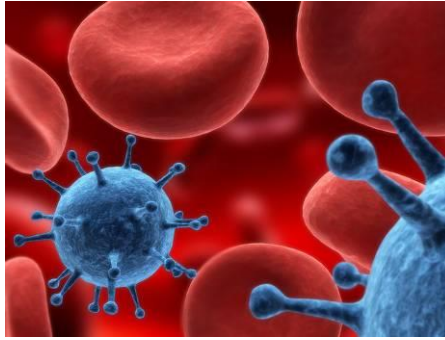
I don't know if you recall this picture that was taken when the twin towers were destroyed in 2001.



It was aired on CNN and they reported what appears to be a demonic face in the smoke of the burning building. Regardless of whether or not you believe this was any sort of manifestation or not, the fact remains that many people recognise that spiritual forces are at work when horrific events like this happen.

What most people don't recognise however is when their ordinary human choices in the material world have consequences in the unseen realm.

Ephesians 4:26 says 'Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.' Unchecked anger is just one example the bible gives of behaviour that leaves us vulnerable to enemy attack. I picture it rather like the human immune system.



If we are not living healthily we are much more likely to get infections and pick up viruses. The first thing a virus tries to do is to find a cell with a suitable landing place for it to attach to, so that it can inject its load of counterfeit DNA for the cell to reproduce. Many antiviral drugs work on the principle of not letting the virus 'get a foothold' so-to-speak. But prevention is better than cure. It is better to wash your hands, to be on your guard when other infected people are around and not let your immune system be compromised in the first place. Yet for many years people did not understand the unseen forces of bacterial and viral infection, and even today many villages I saw when I went to visit Zambia still have their water wells dug right next to their latrines.

People in the West are largely ignorant of the spiritual forces of evil in the unseen realms. Bad choices in the natural can allow the devil to get a foothold in an individual's life. Chapters 4 and 5 of Ephesians are all about making careful life choices (he literally says 'be very careful how you walk') taking care over our relationships and submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. James gives similar advice in chapter 4 verse 7: 'Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.' Perhaps you know in your heart when you have not been submissive to God and knowingly went your own way. Well perhaps now is the time to submit to God and start resisting the devil by taking a stand.

In my experience spiritual attack often comes in the form of the fiery darts of offence. The devil, says Jesus, is a thief; he comes to steal, kill and destroy. Especially in the area of our spiritual life and relationships. John Bevere wrote a book called 'The Bait of Satan' which is all about the lure of offence – perhaps through a thoughtless word or angry comment in the heat of the moment. To allow ourselves to get offended and avoiding restoring a damaged relationship is to lose a spiritual battle. One way to resist the devil is to submit ourselves to God and perhaps be the one to apologise first or avoid engaging in gossip that could be destroying another person's character. It's not easy and it takes prayer, but these fiery darts of the enemy need extracting. Offending words need to be cut off in Jesus name.

At other times spiritual attack might be more circumstantial. My brother-in-law is a vicar in Newent in the forest of Dean. It is quite uncanny how many practical things go wrong for them just as they are trying to get away for rest and recuperation. Yesterday they were just about to come to our house on their way to Devon when the boiler suddenly blew up and started gushing water out. It's becoming a bit of a cruel pattern – whether it's plumbing or mechanical breakdowns or things simply crises presenting themselves, it always seems to happen to them at the wrong moment. Maybe you find things go wrong for you at just the most irritating moment. Well the devil knows what buttons to press and he hates the saints – particularly where the Kingdom of God is advancing and Jesus is being honoured. Peter says the answer is to stay humble before God and be alert to the fight:

6 Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. 7 Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

8 Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. 9 Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

Paul suggests we need to keep praying for each other in the battle, so we pray for Newent that the Kingdom of God will advance there!

Spiritual attack can affect us individually but equally it can come through human institutions. Even whole nations can open themselves up on a larger scale to malignant spiritual forces if they turn away from Godly decision making.

Isaiah 1v16 says

*16 Wash and make yourselves clean.
Take your evil deeds out of my sight;
stop doing wrong.*

*17 Learn to do right; seek justice.
Defend the oppressed.*

*Take up the cause of the fatherless;
plead the case of the widow.*

When we allow the vulnerable are exploited, or there is injustice or systemic wrongdoing, evil principalities are given the right to take root and propagate evil.

There are powers and principalities at work in our town and we have to take our stand against them.

The book of Revelation uses picture language to depict evil powers at work in the unfolding drama of history. For example there is the dragon, which Revelation 20:2 says is 'the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan'. We read in Revelation 13 that he presides over 2 fearsome beasts, one that comes out of the sea, and the other over land. The first beast has ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on its horns, and on each head a blasphemous name. People worshiped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast and asked, "Who is like the beast? Who can wage war against it?"

Scholars are divided about the interpretation of these passages, and particularly whether they refer to past, the present, or future events. But it seems clear to me that they can be representative of all three. When John wrote Revelation he was in exile on Patmos because the Romans were systematically persecuting Christians. He draws heavily on the similar images of beasts in Daniel 7 which are there interpreted as political kingdoms. The beasts in Revelation in the past tense refers to the corrupt and pagan political system of the Roman empire, with its crowned emperors and seven centres of power in the ancient world. But even though the beastly Roman empire was defeated in the past, you don't have to think too hard to recognise other evil systems have arisen in our own day that draw their power and authority from spiritually evil forces. The tragedy occurs when the church doesn't open its eyes to what is going on and thereby becomes complicit in giving authority to the dark power. You only have to look at the church in Germany during the Nazi regime to see how easy it is to not take a stand, as Ephesians urges.

So the question for us today is this: are we taking a stand against the powers and principalities at work in our town and in our nation?

I read an article in the Times newspaper this week which very eloquently described the slow series of creeping secularist compromises that are threatening to undermine the Church of England. As I prayed about the situation I was reminded of the Nicolaitians described in Revelation 2, who encouraged the church to compromise over sexual immorality and religious pluralism. And I wonder if we are in danger of becoming like the three monkeys, ignoring the evil around them.



Perhaps we should start by prayerfully looking to see the things our culture worships. Anything we start to trust more than God is an idol that can become the seat of a principality. An obvious example struck me forcefully when I asked a local student whether they had a faith and she replied 'nope – I believe in science.' Which was sad because I don't think science and faith are mutually exclusive – after all God is the ultimate scientist! But do we limit ourselves to logic and look to Google for answers before asking God's Holy Spirit? I have been trying hard to maintain my New Year's resolution: Bible before phone – and I think it has really helped me recognise the struggle, because sometimes I have to fight for bible time! Science and technology can sometimes become an idol when it turns into naturalism – the belief that there are nothing more than natural processes at work.

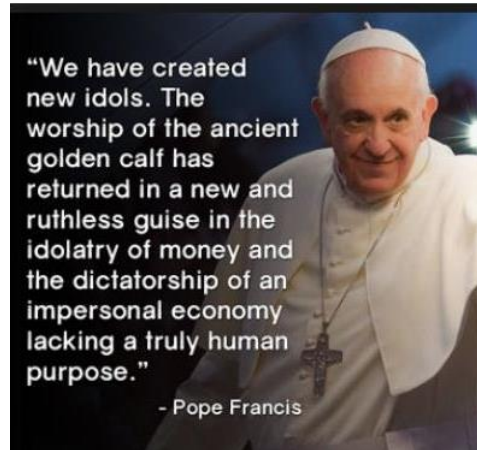


Here's another thing that seems to be gaining popularity in our society. Have you ever stopped to consider why Buddha statues are becoming so popular and sold lots in different garden centres? Well the original Buddha avoided sensuality and was determined to achieve his aim of reaching personal enlightenment. But that quest meant he rejected the shackles of family and community. (He said 'attachment is the root of suffering' and even named his son Rāhula which means impediment or shackle). So Buddha is all

about personal spiritual fulfilment; in other words the epitome of individualism. I don't need you – it's all about self-fulfilment. Totally opposite to Christianity which is about relational spirituality and fulfilment in community together.

Then here's one you encounter everywhere: Hypersexualism which is what seems to be the idol of our times where sexual identity is gaining pre-eminence over religious convictions. Then there is Consumerism – personified by Santa Claus at Christmas – his sack is always full of presents. An undemanding character who simply gives us what we want as long as you are a little bit good.

Pope Francis said this:



So how do we take a stand against the devil and his schemes – whether that is resisting personal attack or living counter culturally? Well Paul tells us to stand firm and put on the armour of God. He picks up on imagery from Isaiah 59 – where the Lord himself puts on armour to go into battle against injustice. The Lord calls us to battle with him. Jesus won the victory over Satan on the cross, gaining the authority and mandate to drive out the kingdom of darkness from the world, but he calls us to fight with him, and to stand when the day of evil comes. Note that in verse 13 Paul promises that the day of evil will come, so we need to be ready.

He tells us to take a stand firm with the belt of truth buckled around our waist. I find it fascinating that Paul starts with something that doesn't seem all that protective. Yet for the Roman soldier the belt was vital – it was the thing that protected his private parts, held his breastplate in place and provided a place to hang his sword. A deep knowledge of the absolute truth of the God of the bible will help us understand the ways in which our view of truth and our worldview is distorted by the culture around us.



The last piece of armour is also interesting – the sword of the Spirit – which is the word of God. God's spoken words are powerful – by them the world was created – and in the same way our declarative words of prayer unleash the creative forces of heaven. Prayer, both individually and corporately will help us fight the good fight of faith and win the battle.

A little later on we will be declaring again the goodness of God as we remember through communion the victory Jesus won on the cross for us. Jesus is the victor, Satan is just a loser. As we declare that truth over our town and over our lives, the spiritual forces of evil will be driven back. Let's pray together now.