

Our Threefold Enemy

Neil Girard

It has been rightly observed that the follower of Christ has three enemies: the flesh, the world and the devil. Well-meaning teachers, however, have taught that the only enemy we need to really be concerned with is the flesh. Their reasoning is this: If we overcome the flesh, the world and the devil will have no hold on or power over us. There is an element of truth in this but it reveals that, underneath, these teachers are holding onto a very *me-centered* gospel or, at the least, a version of following Christ that is merely individualistic.

It is true that we *first* need to individually and personally experience Christ's victory over the flesh. To do that, however, we need to know what the flesh is and how to overcome it. The flesh is the sinful nature, the capacity to do evil, to be selfish, to disobey God. It is an inherited trait we acquired from Adam's rebellion against God.

Paul wrote,

“For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find.” (Rom. 7:18)

This is knowledge which modern man has lost and cannot attain. It is a spiritual insight that in our flesh nothing truly good dwells – that God alone is good (Mt. 19:17) and from Him alone come all good things (Jas. 1:17) – and this spiritual knowledge is simply not available to the natural man. (1 Cor. 2:14) That so many self-proclaimed “Christians” still believe themselves to be “good people” is only conclusive evidence and proof that they are still living according to the flesh. Were they truly spiritual people, they would know that there is nothing good in them, that there was nothing in Judas Iscariot that is not within them as well. Then they might literally and actually and actively turn to Christ and God and be progressively healed and cleansed of all unrighteousness.

Paul also wrote,

“Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation – but it is not to the sinful nature (flesh), to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.” (Rom. 8:12-13)

Herein is the secret of Satan's strategy against the individual – to cleverly manipulate or deceive the individual into neglecting his obligation to the Spirit of God and, instead, into living according to the sinful nature so that he will remain in or return to the ways of the flesh. The institutionalized “Christian religion” has become one of the best producers of lost souls that Satan has ever concocted as self-proclaimed “Christians” do little more than attend the religious social-club that suits their tastes and status in life and try to be somewhat better moral people in whatever aspect of their life they see themselves as deficient. The New Testament calls this lawlessness, doing what is right in one's own eyes, and clearly tells us that it is in direct opposition to righteousness, what is right in *God's* eyes. (2 Cor. 6:14)

Paul also said,

“So then those who are living the life of the flesh [catering to the appetites and impulses of their carnal nature] cannot please or satisfy God or be acceptable to Him.” (Rom.

8:8)

If Satan can deceive us into living according to the flesh, causing us to neglect to put to death the misdeeds of the body but rather to practice them as if they were acceptable religion in the sight of God, we will die the second death. Do not be deceived on this matter by any popular teacher who knows how to scratch your ears in such a way that you find yourself craving more scraps from his pulpit (2 Tim. 4:3-4) nor fall for the enticing but empty, boastful words that appeal to the lustful desires of sinful human nature, promising liberty but actually bringing the listener back under bondage to corruption and death. (2 Pet. 2:18-19)

Until we truly overcome our flesh, there really is no fighting the world or the devil because we are already their victim, perhaps even a willing supporter or avid perpetuator of demonic schemes. But once we have entered into some measure of real victory over the flesh, it is time to stop looking only at *me* and *my* problems. (For some, perhaps most or even all, there is no real victory over the flesh *until* we stop looking only at *me* and *my* problems!) But with the attainment of victory over the flesh, it is then time to consider the condition of the world and how to bring the light of Christ's love, truth and power into the world's darkness so that the devil, who is a liar and a murderer (Jn. 8:44) has less power over the people of this world.

Many of those who present this limited view of our warfare as really only against the flesh (though they see at least some amount of spiritual truth accurately), remain stuck within the framework of the "church" paradigm (one of the devil's most effective deceptions). Thus, most of the people they speak to are still at the level where they yet need to overcome the flesh. Because the devil's strategy of keeping most people who claim to follow Christ safely trapped inside an institutional "church" system is so successful at keeping "Christians" in the realms of the flesh, his kingdom would seem to be safe from spiritual assault for some time to come – unless the Lord steps in with another instance of bringing large numbers of people into union with His already outpoured Spirit. (Acts 2:17)

Perhaps these teachers may be excused somewhat since the flesh is the *first* enemy we must conquer in our spiritual life in Christ. But we must see that thinking the flesh is the *only* enemy to be dealt with is an error. To believe this is really saying that *me* is the only entity I need to ever be concerned with. Perhaps these teachers can also be somewhat excused on the grounds that they believe the Lord is able to preserve the fruit of their evangelistic work in spite of the obviously woeful condition of the modern "church" that is more adept at destroying such fruits rather than preserving it. But we must come to a realization that God's blueprint for life and warfare in His Spirit requires much more than evangelization or teaching - and He certainly requires the sincere seeker of God to avoid those "churches" which pump out more error and apostasy than they do truth and light – a category which includes far more "churches" than most realize. Indeed, the average "church" stuck in its man-made traditions and religious routines is a far worse cult than any other.

Overcoming the Devil

Paul wrote:

"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places." (Eph. 6:12)

If there were no reason for acts of warfare against the devil and the demonic, this verse would simply not exist. We simply cannot afford to turn a completely blind eye toward the devil and the demonic for that would leave us “ignorant of his devices” (2 Cor. 2:11) – a condition which describes almost the whole of the “church” world today.

Nor was it just Paul who taught this. John wrote:

“You are of God, little children, and have overcome [the spirits of antichrist], because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.” (1 Jn. 4:4)

Because He who is within us is greater, we have the opportunity to truly be of God and, being of God, we can participate in His victory over the demonic spirits. But as Jesus said, “Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven.” (Lk. 10:20) How that victory is worked out in each individual life is incredibly unique, as is befitting to life with an infinite Creator - but the one who thinks that he, in the course of his few years with Christ, especially if those years were spent in “church,” has completely conquered all three of his enemies is quite mistaken.

Herein also we see again the direction of Satan’s attacks against the individual. Because the true follower and disciple of Christ who brings the Spirit and message of the gospel of the kingdom has been given authority to overcome the demonic entities (Lk. 9:1), the devil knows that he must succeed in keeping the genuine believer from ever exercising that authority. The devil’s schemes, then, are of such a subtle nature that even the elect will be deceived into not exercising the authority already given them because they do not recognize that they are dealing with a demonic entity or that they already believe lies taught them by a demonic source! (1 Tim. 4:1)

The devil has incorporated at least three powerful lies into many “church” teachings.

- The devil doesn’t exist. Or, maybe he does exist, but he’s an ignorant, stupid fool who would not be able to damage or hurt anyone in any way even if he wanted to. (see 1 Pet. 5:8)
- The devil’s demonic assistants could not possibly have any control over a believer’s life since “a Christian cannot be demon-possessed.” (see Jn. 8:30-31, 59, also recognize that the Greek word is “demonized” – “under the influence of a demon” – and not “possessed” as so many English versions mis-render it.)
- It’s okay to be casual in one’s beliefs about Jesus. One does not need to be zealous for Christ to be a recipient of salvation and eternal life, simple, faithful “church” attendance is all that He requires of us. (see Rev. 3:15-16, 19, Heb. 5:9)

These lies are powerful enough to seduce even the elect of God. (Mt. 24:24) Most people who claim to be a follower of Christ simply don’t even know what kind of spiritual entities they are supposed to be wrestling against and overcoming. Paul lists *four* types of demonic beings:

1) principalities,

2) powers,

- 3) rulers of the darkness of this age, and
- 4) spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.

Let us briefly acquaint ourselves with the differences of each type.

1) *Principalities* are the evil spiritual beings behind the governments of nations and regions. They manipulate leaders and peoples into courses of action that further the cause of Satan.

2) *Powers* differ slightly from governmental principalities in that they are the evil spirit beings who manipulate what we would call systems or organizations (i.e., legal, medical, educational, political, etc.)

3) The *rulers of the darkness of this age* is a phrase which requires some opening up. Paul tells us that the god of this age has blinded the minds of men who are perishing so that they cannot experience the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, the personification and very likeness of God. (2 Cor. 4:3-4) The darkness of this age is the spiritual blindness of unregenerate mankind. The rulers of that blinding darkness are the spiritual beings whose job it is to construct, institute and maintain elaborate deceptions that effectively prevent the light of Christ from penetrating their darkness. In short, this is the propaganda ministry of Satan and includes such broad, deep deceptions as false religion, displacing Christ, riches, fear of man and error.

4) *Spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places* is a reference to the lesser beings who inflict their damage upon individuals and on a smaller scale. Legion (Lk. 8:30) was a group of such beings. So too the unclean being cast out by Jesus in the synagogue. (Lk. 4:33) When Jesus rebuked a fever (Lk. 4:39) and the wind (Mk. 4:39), He may have been speaking directly to the wicked spirits creating those effects.

Until we learn to wrestle and overcome each kind of demonic entity (only the last of which can be dealt with by “casting out” and “exercising authority over”) will Christ’s kingdom experience any real advance or gain in the darkness of this world.

Overcoming the World

“The world” (Greek *cosmos*) in the New Testament is not referring to the natural world created by God which demonstrates His transcendent majesty and leaves man without excuse in regards to knowing and seeking Him. (Rom. 1:20) Rather, it refers to the systems and organizational structures of men empowered by their flesh. John wrote,

“For *everything* in the world - the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does - comes not from the Father but from the world.” (1 Jn. 2:16 - emphasis added)

These systems – whether business corporations, governments, “churches,” whatever grouping

that utilizes the basic elements of the flesh to bring about some form of order apart from God's Spirit – are ruled over by the demonic and the devil. John wrote,

“The *whole* world is under the control of the evil one.” (1 Jn. 5:19 - emphasis added)

Satan offered all the kingdoms of this world to Jesus if He would simply bow to him (Lk. 4:5-6) – thankfully, He declined to take the kingdoms at that time and He will take them in purity and power in the Father's good time! (Rev. 11:15)

As is true of our warfare against the flesh and the devil, our warfare against the world truly hinges on our relationship with Jesus. Jesus said,

“These things I have spoken unto you, that in Me you might have peace. In the world you shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.” (Jn. 16:33)

And John wrote,

“For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (1 Jn. 5:4-5)

Our faith in Jesus is how we start our life in Christ and God, it is how we continue in it and it is how we must finish it. (Col. 2:6, Heb. 12:2)

The world offers literally anything as a distraction, diversion or substitute away from the abundant eternal life that is found only in Christ Jesus. Thus the person of the world, never having known the joy of being loved, forgiven and cleansed by Christ and God, finds their highest joys in activities and experiences that are demeaning, degrading, deceitful, destructive and even deadly to body, mind, soul and spirit. The old man clings to nostalgic memories of “the way it was” (in reality, it never was that way) and the youth flock to loud concerts seeking excitement and escape from their regular existence. Children, often packed into ever-growing cities, rarely experience for themselves the wonders of God's creation and instead view it on television or on occasional “field trips” that allow them a brief respite from the prison men most often call “school.” And then “Christian religion” steps in with variations and distortions of “the truth,” offering them “church” (that often resembles “school”) and false religion, that only confuse and nauseate the true seekers of abundant, eternal life, light and truth.

Peter wrote,

“For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning.” (2 Pet. 2:20)

The world pollutes. The “church” has incorporated so many of the world's pollutions that it is now, particularly in this country, almost entirely only another portion of the world. It is the counterfeit replacement of real life in Christ Jesus. This does not mean there is no real life left to be found – only that the life of Christ is not very likely to be found within the walls of the buildings men have erected, supposedly to preserve and dispense the faith that was given once for all.

Contending for the Faith

Spiritual warfare is not only defensive – it must also be offensive, capable of waging a successful campaign. Paul wrote,

“For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.” (2 Cor. 10:4-5)

The weapons of the genuine follower of Christ – when they are properly utilized under the guidance and supervision of and cooperation with the Holy Spirit - are quite capable of destroying the traditions and philosophies of mere men. That elemental philosophies and man-made religions are gaining the hearts and lives of the majority of people around the world speaks loudly about the manner in which most people claiming to follow Christ practice spiritual warfare. In a word, it is non-existent – in some circles, even the idea of spiritual warfare is considered error and heresy!

Jude wrote,

“I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.” (Jude 3)

This exhortation – combined with Paul’s reminder that “we do not wrestle against flesh and blood” (Eph. 6:12) – is one that is either largely ignored or completely misapplied by the modern “church.” Certainly it has application to evangelism, teaching and “apologetics” (the scholarly presentation of the gospel, refuting those who oppose it) but it has equal application to intercessory prayer, faithful service and simple loving of one another by the Spirit of Christ. *Every* part has to do its share of whatever Christ has given to them. (Eph. 4:16) Anything less is to simply coast along for the ride and negligently “hope for the best” for one’s own life and for the lives of everyone around them. In the face of the casual attitude most people exhibit in relation to the things of Christ and God, Jesus still says, “Be zealous and repent.” (Rev. 3:19)

Paul left a resounding description of one of the unsung heroes of the faith when he wrote,

“Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ, greets you, always laboring fervently [contending, striving earnestly] for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.” (Col. 4:12)

The goal of standing perfect and complete in all the will of God is almost completely gone from “Christian” circles – and few indeed there are who know how to contend earnestly and labor fervently for it. The apostasy, the great falling away from the faith, is upon us and it is the hardest thing to fight because its members are those who claim to be our brothers in Christ. But the light is dawning slowly – there are even some teachers within the “church” system finally beginning to recognize that the institutionalized “church” that has separated itself from the Head Christ Jesus is the most dangerous cult available, more insidious than the Mormons or Jehovah’s Witnesses.

God – as He has always done – is calling His remnant to step away from all forms of false religion and once again take up the fight against all three of the enemies that have set themselves against God. As we enter the end times, we must remember the description given in the book of

Revelation:

“And they overcame the devil by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death.” (Rev. 12:11)

Overcoming the flesh, even though the *first* and even foremost part of our warfare, is only one part of what we must face. Overcoming the flesh can never be accomplished by the strength of the flesh nature – that is only false religion in one of its many guises. Overcoming the flesh will certainly be in some way intertwined in our ongoing spiritual warfare against the world and Satan but we must never turn a blind eye on any of our enemies. We must always remain vigilant, watchful, alert. Anything less is likely to have disastrous consequences in our lives and in the lives of those around us.

Today, we must choose whom we will serve, whom we will obey, whom we will follow. In that choice is the evidence of our faith and the reality of our life in Christ. Once we have made this choice, then we will have access to the plans and desires of Christ and God. But so long as we remain caught up in what makes *me* feel good or feel better about *myself*, we have succumbed to, at best, an incomplete “gospel” or, at worst, a false “gospel.” If we are not, like Epaphras, earnestly and often engaged in some avenue of warfare in obedience to the leading of God’s Spirit in our own lives, we have failed to overcome our flesh and are instead using our flesh as our means of “worshiping” and “serving” “God” (that is, our own imaginative re-creation of Him). Someday we will know what an abomination to God that is.

Let he who has ears hear.

Paidion Books
P.O. Box 327
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