

What is Spiritual Warfare?

Study Questions

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood,
but against the rulers, against the powers,
against the world forces of this darkness,
against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.
Ephesians 6:12

Note: This lesson will proceed on the assumption that you believe in the existence of Satan as taught in the Holy Scriptures.

1. A. W. Pink says that Satan's chief aim is to estrange man's heart from God, and his work consists of substituting his own lies in the place of divine truth. Read the following scriptures (in context). In what way did Satan substitute his lie for God's truth? What took place within the individuals before they chose Satan's lie over God's truth?

- Genesis 3:6
- Numbers 13:25-33
- Joshua 7:21
- Acts 5:1-4

What do you conclude about spiritual warfare from these verses?

2. Read Mark 15:1-15. What was Satan's foremost attempt to substitute his lie for God's truth?

3. Can you think of examples of how Satan is substituting his lie for God's truth in our society today?

4. According to 2 Corinthians 4:4, what has happened to people who have believed Satan's lie over God's truth?

5. Read Paul's testimony of his conversion to Christianity contained in Acts 26:9-18. What insights do you glean concerning how to pray for unbelievers whose minds have been darkened by Satan?

6. Even if we accept Christ as our Savior, we may still maintain certain "pockets of resistance" to God's Word. The New Testament refers to these as "strongholds." The word "stronghold" is a military term for a fortified place. The strongholds or fortified places in our lives would be thought patterns or opinions which we will not relinquish even though they are contrary to God's revealed will for us. Can you think of examples of strongholds that might exist in the life of a believer? (I'll start the list to give you some examples.)

anger, pornography,

7. Read 2 Corinthians 10:3-6 carefully. Then answer the questions that follow.

³For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, ⁴for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. ⁵We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive in the obedience of Christ, ⁶and we are ready to punish all disobedience, whenever your obedience is complete.

a. What have we been given for the destruction of the strongholds in our lives?

b. What does it imply when it says they are "divinely powerful?"

c. Circle the three main verbs (action words) that describe what we are doing (or what we are ready to do) with these weapons found in verses 5 and 6.

(1) What two things are we to destroy? What effect do they have?

(2) What are we to take captive? For what purpose?

(3) What are we to punish?

d. If you have the resources available:

(1) Read this passage in several translations.

(2) Look up the meaning of any words you don't completely understand in a Bible dictionary.

(3) Look up several commentaries that explain this passage.

(4) Write the passage in your own words reflecting your understanding of this passage.

8. Read Ephesians 6:10-17. What is the only *offensive* weapon listed? How does this relate to what you learned in question #7?

9. What has God impressed you to do, or to allow the Holy Spirit to do, concerning spiritual warfare or strongholds? (This can be for yourself or for others.)

10. What questions do you have about spiritual warfare?

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WORK CITED

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Leader's Notes

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Ephesians 6:12*

Note: This lesson will proceed on the assumption that you believe in the existence of Satan as taught in the Holy Scriptures.

Several years ago I was teaching at a parent's conference and the last session dealt with spiritual warfare for our children. At the end of the session I asked if there were any question. One woman raised her hand and asked, "What *is* spiritual warfare?" I must confess I was taken off guard. I had been engaged in spiritual warfare for so long with my children that it never occurred to me that I should have started that session with a definition of the topic. It was an excellent question. Her honest inquiry led me to realize that this very basic question needs an adequate response.

Spiritual Warfare, Defined

Spiritual warfare began on earth in the Garden of Eden when Satan entered the scene as the serpent. A. W. Pink states that Satan's chief aim is to estrange man's heart from God and his work consists of substituting his own lies in the place of divine truth. When approached by the serpent, Eve had the choice to believe God's Word or Satan's lie. Notice her thought process expressed in Genesis 3:6: "the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom." This thought process, or reasoning, that was carried out in Eve's mind resulted in her disobedient action. By the time the action was begun, the battle was already lost. The spiritual warfare had been waged in Eve's mind. I find this to be consistent throughout Scripture. When Cain invited Abel out into the field to kill him, he had already decided on the action of murder in his mind (Genesis 4). When confronted with the choice between the discouraging report of the ten spies, or the encouraging report of Joshua and Caleb, the Israelites first decided in their minds that they would not enter the promised land before they vocally decided to choose another leader and return to Egypt (Numbers 13). Achan's sin of covetousness took place in his mind before he ever picked up the treasures to bring home (Joshua 7). Ananias and Sapphira had agreed to test the Spirit of the Lord in their minds before they every entered Peter's presence to lie (Acts 5). Each of these people had a war going on in his or her mind between God's Word and Satan's lie. In each case Satan used one or more of their senses to offer them the choice. Each of them chose Satan's lie. Each lost their spiritual battle.

While the angels wage war in the spiritual realm on our behalf, we wage war in our minds. I conclude that spiritual warfare occurs in the mind, and it is the mental reckoning or reasoning that results in a choice between God's Word and Satan's lie, although at the time we may not recognize the alternative offered to be a lie or from Satan.

One example from our society today is divorce. God has clearly stated that He hates divorce (but loves the divorced). Satan's lie, which is embraced by our society, is that divorce is an acceptable alternative to what appears to be a hopeless situation. If we enter into considering whether or not divorce might be an option for us, then we are engaged in spiritual warfare.

Another example comes from the entertainment media. God has said that to walk with a blameless heart we must put "no vile thing" before our eyes (Psalm 101:2-3). Satan's lie is that watching sex and violence is harmless -- after all, we're not actually participating in it. When we enter into considering whether we should watch a particular movie, knowing that it will contain sexually explicit material, we are engaged in spiritual warfare. By the time we turn it on to watch it, the battle has been lost.

Jesus or Barabbas?

The ultimate example of the choice between God's Word and Satan's lie is seen in the choice offered by Pilot between Barabbas and Jesus. Jesus is identified in John as The Word. The name "Jesus" means "salvation." It was a common name among the Jewish people. What demonstrated Jesus' uniqueness was not his name, but His Title which was "The Christ." "Christ" in Greek is the same as "Messiah" in Hebrew. It means "anointed." The concept of anointing in the Old Testament meant a special setting apart by God and for God. To claim the title "Christ" was to identify oneself as the One anointed by God to bring His salvation to the world. Many claimed to be the Christ, but only One received the witness of the Father (Matthew 3:17; 17:5; John 8:18; 1 John 5:9). The name "Barabbas" means "son of a father." Because we are familiar with Jesus calling God "Abba" we must remember that the term just meant "father" -- it carried no special connection to God until Jesus made that connection. Therefore, Barabbas' very name verified that he was just a son of a human father. It is only in one of the most ancient Greek texts that we find that Barabbas' first name was also Jesus! (Because this is found in only one ancient text most scholars agree that we cannot insist that this was Barabbas' name. However, the Holy Spirit would not let me rest until I had done much research to find this out. Therefore, I think it to be accurate.) Alfred Edersheim, a 19th century Jewish scholar who converted to Christianity, concludes from the Gospel record in its historical context that Barabbas claimed to be the Messiah and led a pseudo-Messianic movement against the Roman Empire. That Pilot offered Barabbas instead of one of the two criminals who were crucified with Jesus implies that there had been some similarity between their charges. This makes Pilot's choice to the

crowd not a choice between two men, but a choice between True Salvation (Jesus who is called The Christ) and false salvation (Jesus who is Barabbas). I believe Satan thought this to be his highest moment, for the crowd chose the way of false salvation. They chose Satan's lie over God's truth. "As the 'god of this world' Satan's weapon is false religions and the deceitful promises they present, which turn aside those who believe them from knowing God's truth" (Dave Hunt 43).

This is, of course, our most crucial spiritual battle, too. We must all make a personal choice between Jesus who is the Christ, and the lie that Satan holds out as an alternative. Even those who say they haven't made up their minds yet have actually chosen -- they are believing Satan's lie that they have plenty of time. In Hebrews, we find that to reject the law of Moses was a terrible thing and was punished without mercy. "How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him and who has insulted the Spirit of grace" (Hebrews 10:29).

Satan has blurred this choice considerably in our time. We are hearing everywhere that we need to be more inclusive and less "narrow-minded." We hear about "universal love" and the "brotherhood of man." Yet God's Word says that there is no other way to be saved apart from Jesus Christ. Satan's lie looms before us, and to choose that lie will lead to a darkened mind that cannot discern spiritual truth (2 Corinthians 4:4).

How are we to pray for those unbelievers whose minds have been darkened by Satan? I believe the key is found in Jesus words to Saul on the Damascus road (Acts 26:15-18). I believe that we can pray that Jesus will send someone "to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith" in Christ. And I believe that as we pray, we must be willing to be Jesus' vessel who is sent, if God should open the way for us.

Strongholds

Even if we accept Christ as our Savior, we may still maintain certain "pockets of resistance" to God's Word. The New Testament refers to these as "strongholds." The word "stronghold" is a military term for a fortified place. The strongholds or fortified places in our lives are thought patterns or opinions which we will not relinquish even though they are contrary to God's revealed will for us. Some examples of strongholds would be anger, worry, pornography, addictive behavior, a rebellious spirit, covetousness, prejudice. We know that Christians can still struggle with these behaviors.

In 2 Corinthians 10:4-6 we are told that we should destroy these thinking patterns. We are also told we cannot do this in our own power, but that we are given the divine power to demolish them. In other words, self-help programs will not be effective. The change must come from an internal change of heart which will result in changed behavior.

How are we to destroy these strongholds? There are three important verbs in this passage that clarify the action we are to take: demolish, take captive and punish.

Demolish Arguments and Pretensions

What are we to demolish? First, *arguments*. The Greek means a reflection preceding and determining conduct. Secondly, *pretensions*. The Greek means a barrier or an elevated thing or place.

What arguments and pretensions are to be destroyed? Those that set themselves up against the knowledge (to know experientially) of God. I believe the arguments are the human reasonings that we go through as we choose between God's Word and Satan's alternative (i.e. everybody else is doing it, it won't hurt just this once, it's really not as bad as what some other Christians do, etc.) and the pretensions are thought systems (i.e. the New Age philosophy, habits, thinking patterns and beliefs we learned from our home environment, etc.) which form a barrier to God's Word when we embrace them. These pretensions or thought systems are so subtle and pervasive that, even as Christians, we may embrace them and have our thinking controlled by them.

The only offensive spiritual weapon that can be used to destroy these arguments and pretensions in our minds is the Sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God. We must go to the Scriptures daily asking the Spirit to reveal to us what needs to be changed in our thinking patterns, and submit in willing obedience when something is revealed. Otherwise, we will continue to be conformed to this world, rather than transformed by the renewing of our minds. The renewing of the mind can only come about through reading, hearing, studying, memorizing and meditating upon the Word of God. Research by the Christian psychiatrists Frank Minireth and Paul Meyer has shown that changes can be documented on personality profiles after a person has spent three years in daily reading and meditation upon the Bible. Why? Because the mind -- where belief systems are held -- is transformed.

Take Captive Every Thought

After these belief systems are demolished, what are we to take captive? *Every* thought. For what purpose? To make it obedient to Christ. How do we know what is obedient to Christ? By reading God's Word. As thoughts are processed through the belief system, they result in either obedience or disobedience.

The word "obedient" is interesting -- especially when contrasted with the word "disobedient" which follows in the next verse. To obey means to listen to something, to hearken. To obey is to willingly submit. It is used in Romans 6:16 where we are told that we are slaves to the one whom we obey -- the one to whom we listen, hearken and willingly submit.

Here's an example of how this would apply in our lives. Let's say that as I have read the scriptures and spent time with God I have been convicted of a materialistic, covetous mindset. I have asked God's forgiveness for this sin and asked for His power to overcome it in my life. Knowing that Satan must work from outside in, my first line of defense would be to stay away from places that would awaken this covetousness within me. So, I first protect my bodily senses as much as possible. Knowing that we cannot completely cut ourselves off from the things which tempt us, my second line of defense would be to not allow myself to think about whatever I had seen that was tempting me to covetousness. The best way to do this would be to memorize a scripture that would strengthen me in this situation. We cannot just empty our minds, we must replace the wrong thoughts with God's Word. This would be taking my thoughts captive so that they would be obedient rather than disobedient. With God's help, I would not then follow through by pulling out the checkbook or credit card and purchasing something that was not needed or that we could not afford just because I had coveted it.

Punish Every Act of Disobedience

What are we to punish? Every act of disobedience. The word "disobedience" means, in its strictest sense, a failing to hear or a hearing amiss with the notion of active disobedience which follows this inattentive or careless hearing. It is found in Romans 5:19 which speaks of the disobedience of one (Adam) in contrast to the obedience of Christ.

What exactly does this mean? We must remember that Paul is writing to the church rather than to an individual. There were some in the church who were being obedient and some who were not. Most, apparently, were not. Paul is urging them to straighten out their thinking and return to the truth. When enough of the church members had done that, Paul was not hesitant to come back to them and censure those who were still being disobedient. He was in the position of authority to do this in the Corinthian church. I think today in the United Methodist Church this is taking place in the actions of the Confessional Movement*. Leaders and lay people have come together to stand against the disobedience that is prevailing in the denomination. At first, it was a call to return to God's Word and obedience to it. Some have refused to hearken to the call. More than that, some have flagrantly disobeyed God's Word. Therefore, the Confessional Movement is now calling for those church leaders who are refusing to acknowledge God's Word as authoritative to be disciplined. I would say they are on very solid scriptural ground in their demand. It is a decisive step in

spiritual warfare to protect the purity of the Word within the church so Christians will be adequately equipped with the Sword of the Spirit.

Our Struggle is Not against Flesh and Blood

In verse 7 of our scripture passage (2 Corinthians 10), Paul warns the Corinthians, "You are looking at things as they are outwardly." This is a very important point that is too often overlooked. One of the keys to victory in spiritual warfare lies in recognizing it when it comes. I'm afraid that we so often overlook the spiritual nature of many of our conflicts. *Anything* that attacks our mind and our thinking and tempts us to respond in a manner disobedient to God's Word is ultimately spiritual in nature and must be fought on that level. To try to fight a spiritual war with human weapons is useless. For example, if someone at work continually attacks us verbally, we must recognize that as spiritual and respond on that level. To try to deal with that person on a human level, for example by reasoning with them or threatening them, will lead to defeat. But divine weapons are powerful.

I pray that this has been a good starting point for those who are new to the idea of spiritual warfare.

*For more information on the Confessing Movement visit their web site at <http://www.confessingumc.org>

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