

FIGHT THE GOOD FIGHT

Lesson 3 | The Forces of Evil

“This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish.” – James 3:15

When you announce a topic like spiritual warfare, one question that might come up is, “What exactly do you mean?” Some hear “spiritual warfare” and immediately think of the battle with the devil; others assume you are talking about the war between the flesh and the Spirit; and still others think of the need to face the hostile world in which we live. In truth, all of these are part of the larger war we are fighting. In our last lesson studied the illustration of Satan as the great enemy of our souls. But Satan is like a general, a general in command of a large army. Christians have classically seen three great enemies for the soul of the believer: the world, the flesh, and the devil.

How are these three enemies related? In what ways are they different?

While this catchy way of summing up the battle we fight came about after the NT, James 3:15 seems to allude to this three-fold battle more clearly than other NT passage. Here James describes the wisdom from below as earthly (of the world), sensual (connected with our flesh and its desires), and devilish (inspired by Satan and his fallen angels).

What does it mean to have the wisdom of the world, the flesh, and the devil?

There is a way of looking at life and thinking about reality that is being supercharged by the enemies of God. It fits in with the broader culture’s way of thinking (it is earthly). It is being driven by the natural, sensual desires of humanity (it is sensual).¹ Finally, this way of thinking is being driven and motivated by Satan himself. We will look at each of these enemies individually to see how they work together in their attempt to destroy the faith of the Christian.

¹ Modern translations will frequently translate this as “unspiritual.” The Greek word is *psuchikos*, and it is the same word that Paul uses to contrast the “natural body” to the “spiritual body” in 1 Corinthians 15:44 as well as the “natural man” that doesn’t receive the things of the Spirit of God in 1 Corinthians 2:14. In these instances, there is a contrast between the “natural” or “unspiritual” person with the Spirit of God. One Greek dictionary defines it this way “*an unspiritual pers., one who merely functions bodily, without being touched by the Spirit of God*” (BDAG). In other words, this is a person ruled by the flesh rather than the Spirit; they are “sensual” and “unspiritual.”

The Flesh

Sometimes when an invading enemy comes to a city, some of the citizens of that city defect and join the invaders. This has come to be called “the fifth column,” an expression that alludes to a battle where four columns of troops attack a city, only to find a fifth column already there, ready to help them. When Satan and his army attacks us, they find a fifth column, a traitor within us that defects to the enemy. They find the flesh, that unredeemable part of human nature that wants only to satisfy its own cravings and rebels against God (Romans 7:18). So what is the flesh and how do we fight it?

Desires that Lead to Death (James 1:13-15)

“If it feels good, do it” is the motto by which many people live. Most people see human desires as neutral, if not downright good. After all, they reason, how could something be bad if it feels good? But the Bible paints a very different picture. According to Scripture, our natural desires are not good, in fact they often lead to sin. And that sin will always lead to death in the end. These sinful desires are elsewhere called the flesh (cf Galatians 5:16-17), and those who succumb to whatever feels good will find themselves destroyed (Galatians 6:8).

Why are so many of our desires twisted away from the good that God desires for us?

How does sin lead to death?

Killing the Desires that Kill Us (Rom 8:12-14; Gal 5:16-18, 24; James 1:16-25)

Those who do not know Christ as Savior will live in the flesh, they have no other choice. But for those who have accepted Christ, something has changed. Those who are in Christ have been given the Spirit of Christ. Now it would be nice if the Spirit came in and just wiped out the flesh and that was the end of temptation and sin, but that’s not how it works. Instead, the flesh sticks around (for now), and there is an ongoing war in our hearts between the flesh and the Spirit. Now we will either walk (i.e., live) in the flesh or we will walk (i.e., live) in the Spirit. Paul uses pretty striking language, he says that we must kill the wrong desires in our heart (Romans 8:12-14; Gal 5:24; cf Col 3:5-11).

What does it look like to walk in the Spirit?

How do we kill wrong desires?

James contrasts his warning about the danger of sin in 1:13-15 with a warning not to be deceived (James 1:16) and a meditation on the goodness of God (James 1:17). The contrast is clear: sin leads to death, but God gives good gifts. When we sin, we are in that moment forgetting this simple formula or at least not believing it. James will go on to exhort his readers to be willing to hear God’s Word and do it, especially because that Word gave us our initial spiritual life (James 1:18-25). Fighting the flesh means believing God’s goodness by carefully studying and obeying His Word. It will mean removing the wickedness of our lives and receiving God’s Word with meekness so that we can obey it. By doing this, we are walking in the Spirit and will see spiritual growth and greater obedience to God.

When is it hardest to believe that God is good? How do we believe this truth even when it’s hard?

The World

Satan is not only preying on my sinful desires, but he is also doing the same thing to people all over the world. As he does this, he leads the nations of the world in their rebellion against the Creator and incites a hostility against those who remain faithful to God. This mass of humanity who is at least passively rebellious against God is what the Bible calls the world. The Bible has much to say about how we as Christians must respond to the world.

Defining the World (Rom 12:1-2; 1 John 2:15-17; 2 Cor 4:4; Eph 2:2)

This raises the interesting question, what is the world? Obviously, at this point we aren't talking about the globe (i.e., planet earth). So what does it mean when the Bible warns believers about the dangers of the world?

How would you define the world?

The NT conceives of the world as a way of thinking that is against what God wants (Rom 12:1-2; 2 Cor 4:4). Sometimes this outright rebellion against what God has said, sometimes it is simply ignoring what God has said. All of it is motivated by that same spirit of pride in Satan that says, "I know what is best." As we look at the culture around us we see people who all agree with each other, but they all agree against God's Word (and to a disastrous result). Christians are warned that they not let the world push them into this wrong way of thinking, but instead they should be renewed by God's Word.

What are some of the ways the world tries to get us to think like they think? What is the result of thinking like the world?

But this world is not just rebelling against God in their thinking, they are also completely driven by the wrong desires of their flesh. 1 John 2:15-17 warns against loving the things the world loves – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. When we love the things the world loves and think the way the world thinks, we are following the same pattern that Satan has laid out for those in rebellion against our Commander (2 Cor 4:4; Eph 2:2). This whole system of thinking and loving and rebelling that is ultimately inspired by Satan is a real threat to believers, and we must do battle against it.

What are some of the more subtle ways the world can influence believers, even those who are trying hard to follow God?

What does it look like to do battle with the world?

Defeating the World (1 John 5:4; 4:4)

So what does battling the world look like? How do we win? Our victory over the world doesn't come through political power, although it's good for Christians to be good citizens as they are able. Our victory over the world isn't the result of superior intellectual arguments or our incredible wisdom, although careful apologists throughout the centuries have responded to the wrong thinking of the world. Instead, our victory over the world comes through our faith in God. Satan and the world "win" when we follow them instead of what God says. Our victory comes as we consistently believe what God says and live by His Word. Or, as John puts it, "this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith" (1 John 5:4).

Ultimately, God can overcome even the wickedness of the world (1 John 4:4), and our job is to believe Him and cling to His truth even when everyone else around us tells us we are wrong.

What are some ways that Christians end up believing the world instead of God?

Can you think of biblical or modern examples of times when God's people accepted the thinking of the world rather than sticking to God's Word?

The Demons

As with Satan himself, there is much Scripture does not tell us about the forces of evil at Satan's command. But there is enough instruction to alert us to the dangers that exist and to help us know how to respond biblically. We need to be careful here. An unhealthy obsession with demons is not going to be helpful in our spiritual walk. But Scripture talks about these dark forces, and if it talks about them it wants us to take them seriously.

The Reality of Demonic Powers (Daniel 10:12-13, 20-21; Ephesians 6:12)

Every once in a while, the Bible pulls back the curtain and gives us just a glimpse into the reality of the spiritual realm. For example, in Daniel we read about an angel that comes to Daniel with a message. He tells Daniel that he would have come earlier, but he was engaged in warfare with the "Prince of Persia" and at the end he says he must go face "the Prince of Greece." Here we see that there are supernatural forces at work behind the governmental powers of the world. In Ephesians 6 Paul tells believers that they are not fighting against flesh and blood (physical enemies), but against spiritual wickedness in high places.

What kind of influence are such beings given? What does our actual warfare against these foes look like?

The Resistance against Demonic Powers (Ephesians 6:10-18)

In the NT we see something miraculous: Jesus comes and has the power to command demons to leave people whom they are possessing. He will later give this same authority to his apostles who go out in his name. But that raises a question, do believers today still have the power to cast out demons today? And how do we know if someone is demon possessed? And what about situations where people aren't demon possessed? Is the only time we wrestle against the forces of darkness when we perform an exorcism?

Do you think believers still have the authority to cast out demons? What Scripture could you turn to in order to support this?

Many Christian groups try too hard to figure out how to handle these forces by giving a lot of instructions that don't come from Scripture. Yet if we just read the verses around Ephesians 6:12, we can see what Paul's solution was. Here he describes putting on the gospel armor – faith, righteousness, salvation, the gospel (Ephesians 6:13-17). Basically, we fight back by engaging in the "ordinary" work of discipleship. As for the grand finale of this passage, Paul calls for prayer (Ephesians 6:18). Putting on the gospel armor and being faithful in prayer is the method Paul gave us to resist the attacks of Satan and his hordes. Our next lesson will dive into this passage more fully and help us know how we are supposed to fight in this battle.