

Spiritual Warfare – What Should I Make of It?

1. Warm up: Temptation is all around us, including on the table or at our favorite fast-food restaurant. What's the unhealthy food that most tempts you?
2. Whether we're talking about something small like junk food or something far graver, we humans, from time immemorial, have found ourselves in the middle of what feels like an epic battle between good and evil. So, on Sunday we talked about the concept of "Spiritual Warfare." Let read together Ephesians 6:10-18, as printed on p. 3.
 - a. Paul warns us that our struggle is not primarily against enemies of flesh and blood, but against "the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places." The idea is that we're surrounded by hostile spirits who actively, intelligently, and strategically target us, preying on our weaknesses, trying to draw us into destructive patterns of behavior. As you go about your life from day-to-day, do you live with a keen awareness of the presence of these cosmic forces of evil? If so, how does that affect you? What are its benefits? Drawbacks? Is this a healthy and helpful way to see reality?
 - b. Jeff shared a story from Carline, a pseudonym for someone in our congregation who welcomed an evil spirit into her life. At the time, Caroline didn't believe the spirit was evil. She simply hoped his power would cause her business to thrive again. She even got to the point of hearing that spirit's voice telling her things that came true in advance and experiencing a miraculous upswing in her business, but then everything in her life began to fall apart. Have you ever known someone who had direct encounters with malevolent spirits? If so, tell us about it.
 - c. Most of us have never had a direct encounter with evil spirits (and never want to), but all of us have had times when we experienced the power of evil in deep personal ways. When in your life have you most felt the power of the cosmic forces of evil? What happened?
 - d. All of us have areas of weakness that the cosmic forces of evil seek to exploit. For Caroline it was financial despair. For others it could be anger, addictions, impulse spending, adultery, fear, insecurity, greed, codependency, etc. Everyone has weaknesses. What's an area of weakness in your life that requires vigilance?
 - e. In Luke 22:31, Jesus warned Simon Peter that Satan desired "to sift [him] like wheat." From Satan's perspective, what do think it means to "sift someone like wheat?"
 - f. Do you think Satan wants to "sift you like wheat?" How does that make you feel?
3. If we're surrounded by powerful cosmic forces of evil who are actively, intelligently, and strategically trying to sift us, how can we equip ourselves to prevail against them? In verse 10 of our passage, the Apostle Paul tells us that we have to tap into the strength of

God's power. The only way we can prevail against supernatural evil is with the help of supernatural good, *i.e.*, the power of God. Then Paul gives us a list of ways we can clad ourselves in that power. Paul calls this "the armor of God." On Sunday we dug deeper into three armor pieces, starting with the Gospel of Peace.

- a. One of the chief weapons the forces of evil try to wield against us is conflict, because conflict becomes a breeding ground for all kinds of chaos and evil. When we get into conflict with someone and get angry, we say (and do) things that escalate the situation and make matters worse. Tell us about a time when conflict has provoked you to respond in destructive ways.
 - b. Our Prince of Peace, Jesus, said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God." Matthew 5:9. Jeff told us the origin of the Irish phrase "chancing your arm," which means taking a risk to be a peacemaker. Where in your life right now is God calling you to dare to "chance your arm" for the sake of peace?
4. Paul also challenges us to "put on the breastplate of righteousness," which simply means doing the right thing in situations large and small, even when we're tempted not to.
- a. Jeff told how he recently was tempted to purchase his dog's over-the-counter allergy meds for free by charging it to his monthly allowance on his personal health insurance spending card. Tell us about a time recently when you've been tempted to do the wrong thing for short-term gain.
 - b. Jeff said, "Every act of righteousness, no matter how small, is a chance to practice resisting temptation and opens us further to the power of God inside us, making it more likely we'll do the right thing the next time, and the next, and eventually in really big things. But the converse is also true when we do something wrong." Do you agree with that? If so, how does that work? Why does doing something right make it more likely we'll do the next thing right?
5. Paul also exhorts us to "take up the shield of faith."
- a. Jeff shared an old story about "the devil's yard sale" that suggests that discouragement is Satan's most effective tool. Do you buy that? If so, why is discouragement such an effective weapon?
 - b. Faith is God's antidote for discouragement. Faith is an attitude that says, "I don't know how I'm going to get through this, but I *choose* to believe I will. My God is a Waymaker who *will* make a way for me." When we say that, spiritual power wells up inside and evil loses its grip on us. Where in your life right now are you being tempted to feel discouraged and need a conscious infusion of faith?
 - c. Take look at the list of "armor pieces" laid out on p. 3. There are six different pieces. Which one of the six most needs greater focus in your life?

Ephesians 6:10-18

10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹²For our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

¹³Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

18 Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.

Our Spiritual Armor

The Belt of Truth

The Breastplate of Righteousness

The Shield of Faith.

The Helmet of Salvation

The Sword of the Spirit (*i.e.*, the Word of God)

The Gospel of Peace as our Shoes

Praying in the Spirit