

WARFARE SPIRITUALITY

Warfare with the Flesh and the World

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Warfare spirituality centers on the dynamics of the spiritual conflict on the three fronts of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Our perception of this warfare is shaped by our world view, but the Old and New Testaments reveal the existence of a highly ordered spiritual world that exists between God and us. This chapter considers spiritual warfare on the two fronts of the flesh and the world.

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

- A realization that our understanding of spiritual warfare relates to our world view A perspective on spiritual conflict that is informed by both the Old and New Testaments
- A better understanding of the nature of the warfare with the flesh and of resources for dealing with temptations
- A clearer strategy for our warfare with the world

As followers of Christ, we are engaged in a cosmic conflict, whether we know it or not. Scripture teaches and illustrates the dynamics of this warfare on the three fronts of the world, the flesh, and the devil. The worldly and demonic systems are external to believers, but they entice and provide opportunities for the flesh, which is the capacity for sin within us. This overview of warfare spirituality will outline a biblical strategy for dealing with each of these barriers to spiritual growth.

WORLD VIEWS AND WARFARE

Our world view consists of our basic assumptions about reality. Almost all primordial cultures recognize a reality that has been overlooked by those whose thinking has been shaped by the modern Western world view. This world view developed a

logical and coherent way of approaching aspects of reality, but it rules out spirit aspects as imaginary or unscientific. As a result, Western Christians often accept a two-tiered view of reality in which there is an excluded middle realm between those of religion and science. They answer ultimate questions in theistic terms and relate to world in empirical and naturalistic terms, but they typically exclude the middle territory between these two realms that consists of angelic and demonic spiritual powers. By contrast, many people in the two-thirds world cultures (Africans, Asians, Latin America and the inhabitants of Oceania) know intuitively the reality of the spirit world but have not contextualized this reality within a theistic framework. The extremes of animism and spiritism on one pole and rationalism and materialism on the opposite pole overlook aspects of reality that are affirmed by the world view of Scripture.

More often than we think, our unconscious presuppositions and unquestioned axioms influence our theology. Each of us has a set of theological, cultural, and emotional filters that affect our perception and interpretation of the things we see and experience. We seem to be caught in a vicious circle: our experience influences our theology, and our theology influences our experience. Furthermore, our theology affects the way we interpret the Bible, and the way we interpret the Bible affects our theology. Because of this, it is necessary to reassess both our experience and theology on an ongoing basis; if we fail to do this, we get locked into a system that is impervious to new insights. Those who use Scripture to defend rather than challenge their cultural presuppositions ignore or resist the biblical affirmation of the reality of the spirit world.

THE REALITY OF THE WARFARE

From the beginning of the Old Testament to the end of the New Testament Bible reveals the existence of a vast, highly ordered, and complex spiritual world exists between God and us. Instead of a rigid dichotomy between the natural and supernatural, the Scriptures disclose the direct involvement of the supernatural in natural realm. A careful analysis of the Bible reveals a pervasive "supernatural" dimension that involves a present cosmic-earthly conflict. Those who ignore or reject this reality are ill equipped to deal with spiritual powers of evil in the world.

Spiritual Conflict in the Old Testament

- The Old Testament affirms the existence of invisible spirit beings who were corrupted into malevolent agents and became enemies of the person and purposes of God. The serpent (Genesis 3; Psalm 74:14; Isaiah 27:1), evil spirits (1 Samuel 16:14-23; 18:10; 19:9), deceiving spirits (1 Kings 22:21-23), demons (Leviticus 17:7; Deuteronomy 32:17; Psalm 106:37), and powerful territorial beings who are opposed to God's angels (Daniel 10:13, 20-21) are all spiritual forces of evil.

- The account of the temptation and Fall (Genesis 3) reveals that human rebellion against the rule of God was prompted by a powerful evil being who had previously turned against God. As a result, cosmic rebellion extended to the earth, and the tragedy of the curse can be overcome only by God's redemption of nature (Romans 8:19-23). Using the tactics of doubt and deception, the serpent (later identified in Revelation 12:9 as the dragon, the devil, and Satan) instigated the downfall of the human race.
- The fall of those who had been created in the image and likeness of God led to an ongoing enmity between humanity and Satan along with the prophecy that the seed of the woman would crush the serpent (Genesis 3:15). This is fulfilled in the redemptive work of Christ and his defeat of the Evil One on our behalf.
- The warfare between the two seeds is illustrated in the story of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4) and in the account of the increase in human wickedness (Genesis 6). The sin of Babel (Genesis 11) illustrates a recurring pattern of human autonomy and defiance of God. The nations devise idolatrous religions that serve their own interests rather than the true Creator, and this is evident in the story of the plagues and the Exodus of Israel from Egypt. In the ten plagues, God demonstrated his person and power in refutation of all the gods of Egypt (Exodus 7:4-5; 9:14-16; 12:12; 15:11).
- Near the end of his life, Joshua had to exhort the people to fear the Lord and put away the foreign gods of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Canaan (Joshua 24:14-24). The people of Israel often succumbed to the idolatrous practices of the surrounding nations during the years of the judges and kings. These pagan rituals included child sacrifice to demons (2 Kings 3:27; 16:3; Psalm 106:37-38; Ezekiel 16:20-21; 23:37).
- The stories of Saul's progressive demonization (1 Samuel 16:14-23; 18:10-11; 19:9-10; 20:33; 28:7-19), Ahab's worship of Baal (1 Kings 16:30-33), and Elijah's challenge to the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:20-40) illustrate an ongoing spiritual conflict.
- This conflict is also evident in the denunciations of idolatry, pagan ceremonies on high places, images of Baal and Astarte, and cult prostitution in the prophetic oracles of Isaiah (e.g., 57), Ezekiel (e.g., 8; 14), Hosea (e.g., 2:13; 4:12-14), and other prophets to Israel and Judah.

Spiritual Conflict in the New Testament

- The New Testament paints a far clearer picture of the spiritual warfare that exists in heaven and on earth. Jesus identifies Satan as the origin of evil (John 8:44) and directly confronts him during the forty days of temptation in the wilderness (Luke 4:1-13).

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- Jesus' ministry was opposed by demonic spirits (Mark 1:23-27), and he demonstrated his authority over them by casting them out on numerous occasions (Mark 1:34, 39). When Jesus cast out demons by the Spirit of God, he liberated people who were in spiritual bondage and displayed the power of God's kingdom (Matthew 12:22-29; Luke 13:10-16).
- The story of Jesus' deliverance of the Gerasene demoniac. (Mark 5:1-20) graphically portrays the reality and potential extent of demonic control. A quick survey of the Gospels reveals that a significant part of Jesus' recorded ministry consisted of freeing people from evil spirits. It is easy to overlook this aspect of our Lord's ministry through "text management," but the Gospels frequently attribute human misery to demonic activity.
- When Jesus appointed the Twelve, they were given authority to cast out demons (Mark 3:14-15; 6:7, 13; Matthew 10:7-8), and when he commissioned the seventy, they also received authority to engage in a deliverance ministry (Luke 10:17-20).
- Some writers claim that after the Lord's resurrection and ascension, his disciples gave less attention to the spirit world. Indeed, Christ's ministry was the decisive invasion of the kingdom of darkness by the kingdom of God, and it is not surprising that Jesus' confrontation with demonic opposition was so intense. In addition, he defeated Satan and his demons, and while the warfare has continued, Jesus' followers engage a vanquished foe. But it is significant that there are more references to the spirit world in Acts, the Epistles, and Revelation (about 178) than in the four Gospels (about 150). There are also more references to evil spirits in the New Testament (208) than there are to Satan (120).
- Acts records a number of demonic encounters in the ministry of the disciples (Acts 5; 8; 16; 19). Spiritual warfare is also a repeated theme in the Epistles and Revelation (e.g., Romans 16:17-20; 1 Corinthians 5:5; 7:5; 2 Corinthians 2:11; 10:3-5; 11:13-15; 12:7-10; Ephesians 2:2; 6:10-20; 1 Thessalonians 2:18; 3:5; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12; 1 Timothy 1:18-20; 4:1; 5:15; 2 Timothy 2:26; 2 Peter 2:4; 1 John 4:1-6; 5:19; Jude 6; Revelation 2:9, 13, 24; 9:11, 20; 12-13; 16:13-14; 20:1-3, 7-10).
- Just as God has his holy angels, the devil has his own hierarchy of evil rulers and authorities (Ephesians 3:10; Revelation 12:3-4, 7-9), but Satan and his angels are destined for eternal fire (Matthew 25:41).
- The New Testament portrays unregenerate humanity as being in bondage to the world system, to the desires of the flesh, and to Satan, "the prince of the power of the air" (Ephesians 2:1-3). Without Christ, people are spiritually

dead, blinded by "the god of this world" to the truth of the gospel (2 Corinthians 4:3-4), and held captive by the devil to do his will (2 Timothy 2:26).

- The unredeemed are called "the sons of the evil one" (Matthew 13:37-39) and "the children of the devil" (1 John 3:8-10; John 8:44). They are under the dominion of Satan (Acts 26:18) and subject to the domain of darkness (Colossians 1:13). The "whole world lies in the power of the evil one" (1 John 5:19), whom Jesus called "the ruler of this world" (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11).

WARFARE ON THREE FRONTS

"The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name.' And He said to them, 'I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning'" (Luke 10:17-18). "The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8b).

Christ has already won the victory, but until he returns, the battle still rages, on three fronts: the world, the flesh, and the devil (Ephesians 2:2-3).

The world. "In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33b). "For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world-our faith" (1 John 5:4).

The flesh. "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please" (Galatians 5:16-17).

The devil. "The ruler of this world has been judged" (John 16:11b). "The word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.... Greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world" (1 John 2:14b; 4:4b).

The Scriptures abound with military images of conflict, warfare, and adversaries in a believer's life. It is not a question of whether we are engaged in a spiritual warfare; a question is how effectively we are fighting. The moment we put our trust in Jesus Christ we were enlisted as soldiers in his army. This is why Paul tells Timothy, "Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier" (2 Timothy 2:3-4). As new creatures in Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 17), we face a daily battle against the opposing forces of the world system, fleshly desires, and "spiritual forces of wickedness" (Ephesians 6:12b). For us to be over-comers, we need discipline, resistance, the skillful use of spiritual weapons, and dependence upon the power of God.

It is important that we maintain a biblical balance as we consider the warfare "There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors" (C. S. Lewis, preface to *The Screwtape Letters*). Those who ignore the biblical teaching about the reality of the enemy and the weapons of the warfare put themselves in a dangerous position of vulnerability.

The other extreme of excessive preoccupation with demonic forces is just as hazardous. It is easy to look for demons behind every compulsion, craving, and curse. The fact is that the flesh is fully capable of these activities; no one needs to be forced into selfishness, pride, gluttony, self-pity, lust, or a bad temper. "The devil made me do it can become an excuse that keeps us from accepting responsibility for our attitudes and actions. There is a problem when a Christian becomes more conscious of the satanic kingdom than of the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

WARFARE WITH THE FLESH

Warfare with the flesh is directly related to the section on exchanged life spirituality, so the following thoughts concerning this front will be brief.

The word *flesh* is used in more than one way in Scripture. Sometimes it refers to the physical body, as in Galatians 2:20 and Colossians 2:24. In other passages it refers to what Paul calls "the law of sin which is in my members." "For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members" (Romans 7:22-23).

In Victor Hugo's story "Ninety-Three," the crew members of a ship tossed in a violent storm are more terrified by a crashing sound below than by the storm itself. They know that it is the sound of a cannon that has torn loose and that it is crashing into the sides of the ship with each brutal wave. Two of the men risk their lives to go below and fasten the cannon before it breaks through and sends the ship to the bottom of the sea.

We are like that ship: our souls are more imperiled by the inward power of sin than by the outer storms of the world and the devil. Because of the biblical stress on personal accountability, this indwelling "law of sin" is the primary locus of the spiritual warfare.

On our deepest spiritual level, we are new creatures who are alive to God because of our salvation in Christ. But on our soulish and physical levels, we still await the fullness of our redemption (Romans 8:23). Until that time, the old appetites, attitude memories, and habits can surface at any time and wage war against the life of Christ in us. The conflict is inward versus outward (Romans 7:22-23), that is, between the Holy Spirit, who indwells our spirit, and our flesh. This conflict does not diminish with

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conversion but becomes more intense as we pursue the Spirit-directed and Spirit-empowered life.

Paul contrasts the deeds of the flesh with the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:19-23. The flesh manifests itself in "immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these." This list begins with moral sins (immorality, impurity, sensuality), moves to religious sins (idolatry, sorcery), and concludes with social sins (enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying) and sins of intemperance (drunkenness, carousing). By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control," and none of these are born by the flesh. Instead of love, the flesh produces unforgiveness, hate, rejection, and hostility. Instead of joy, the flesh produces bitterness, resentment, despair, depression, insecurity, and worry. Instead of peace, the flesh produces fear, discord, strife, jealousy, and nervousness. Instead of patience, the flesh produces intolerance, impatience, and restlessness. Instead of kindness, the flesh produces cruelty, harshness, and aggression. Instead of goodness, the flesh produces malice, wickedness, and depravity. Instead of faithfulness, the flesh produces disloyalty, infidelity, and dishonesty. Instead of gentleness, the flesh produces stubbornness, pride, and cursing. Instead of self-control, the flesh produces rebellion, lust, and gluttony.

No two people have an identical combination of fleshly dispositions. Some have more of a problem with temper or envy, while others may have greater difficulties with unforgiveness or lust. Before we can effectively deal with the flesh, we must be honest enough with ourselves to determine our particular form of carnality.

As an exercise, go through the lists of fleshly manifestations given above and in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, Galatians 5:19-21, Ephesians 4:25-31, and Colossians 3:5, 8-9. Use these to spot the areas in which you frequently find yourself tempted. As you make this diagnosis, ask the Holy Spirit to convict you of any unconfessed sins in your life. Unless we repent of our sins, we will not enjoy intimacy with God.

The warfare with the flesh, like the conflict with the world and the forces of darkness, will continue throughout the time of our stay on earth. The flesh can never be reformed or improved; it can only be put to death. "Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Galatians 5:24).

When we trusted in Christ, we were transferred from the domain of darkness to the kingdom of God (Colossians 1:13). God removed us from the line of Adam and placed us in Christ. Our new identity is in him: we died with him, we were buried with him, we were raised with him, and we are seated in the heavenly realms with him (Romans 6:3-11; Ephesians 2:5-6). The old self died and the new self came alive. "Knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be

done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin.... Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 6:6-7, 11).

Because of our union with Christ in his death and resurrection, we can approach the spiritual warfare from a position of victory. It is true, as Romans 7 tells us, that the flesh or power of sin is still with us, but it need no longer have dominion over our lives. Romans 6-8 tells us two things we can do to overcome the force of the flesh. The first is to reckon or consider ourselves to be dead to sin but alive to God. We must believe what God has said is true of us, regardless of how we feel. This belief should lead to action: "Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you should obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God" (Romans 6:12-13). We must obediently present ourselves to God as people who are, no longer slaves to sin but slave of righteousness (Romans 6:19).

The second thing we can do is found in Romans 8:12-13: "So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh-for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live."

Paul adds in Galatians 5:16, 25, "Walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.... If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit." By the power of the Spirit, the flesh has been crucified with its passions and desires. The flesh is overcome not by resolutions or self-effort but by walking in submission to the rule of the Holy Spirit.

If we fail to appropriate these resources, we will be under the dominion of the flesh. This in turn makes us vulnerable to the other two forces in the spiritual warfare, the world and the devil. The world and its lusts appeal to the flesh and add fuel to the fire. Demonic forces also use the flesh as the means of invasion into the believer's life. Thus willful indulgence in fleshly sins can lead to other forms of bondage. Sin begins in the thoughts (these can be prompted by the flesh, the world, or by demonic suggestions and if unchecked moves along a downward continuum to choice, to habit, to loss of control, to bondage, and finally to almost total control. As Ed Murphy notes in *The Handbook for Spiritual Warfare*, the last two stages involve evil supernaturalism.

Personal Affirmations for Handling Temptations

This set of affirmations is one you can use, by the grace of God, as preventive medicine for four major areas of temptation. I developed these affirmations because I sensed the need for a specific way of thinking in areas of habitual temptation and struggle. This is particularly helpful in that split second between temptation and response

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that mysteriously illuminates the whole dynamic of choosing to walk in the power of the Spirit or in the power of the flesh. It can be helpful to use spiritual exercises and tools that draw us to a biblical pattern of thought in times when the warfare becomes more intense. Just as judo leverages the force of an opponent to one's advantage, so these affirmations can convert the force of temptation into a positive spiritual reminder.

Remember that these are not automatic formulas. They must be part of a divine-human process that involves dependence on God's grace in your life.

Temptation to Anger

1. This is sin. "The anger of man does not achieve the righteousness -of God" (James 1:20). (This is not dealing with anger against sin [cf. Ezekiel 7:3; Mark 3:5] but with sinful anger [Galatians 5:20].)
2. I do not want to sin. Sin is beneath the dignity of the person I have become in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:4-7).
3. I do not have to sin. I am no longer under the power of sin, but I am' alive to God in Christ Jesus (Romans 6:11; 8:12-14).
4. Then why am I tempted to get angry? Because I have embraced wrong thinking. I have committed myself to unrealistic plans. (I am using "unrealistic plans" in the sense of plans that, for whatever reason, did not come to fruition. For example, I may be committed to the short-term plan of catching a particular flight so that I can get to a meeting on time. If a flat tire blocks this plan, it was unrealistic-it was not realized. The problem was not in desiring to get to the meeting on time but in making my sense of well-being dependent on it. Insofar as depression is anger turned inward, these affirmations are relevant for depression as well.)
5. The correct way to think is to remember that God is in control and has my best interests at heart (Romans 8:28).
6. My response to this truth is first to trust in the Lord and not lean on my own understanding (Proverbs 3:5-6). Since point 5 is true, God must have intentions in this situation that I cannot presently grasp.
7. Second, I will walk by the Spirit and not carry out the desire of the flesh (Galatians 5:16). The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

Temptation to Seek Revenge

1. This is sin. "Never pay back evil for evil to anyone.... If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge" (Romans 12:17-19).
2. I do not want to sin. Sin is beneath the dignity of the person I have become in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:4-7).

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3. I do not have to sin. I am no longer under the power of sin, but I am alive to God in Christ Jesus (Romans 6:11; 8:12-14).
4. Then why am I tempted to seek revenge? Because I want justice. (This may be as trivial as someone cutting me off in traffic or as deep-seated as harboring a resentment against another person for years.)
5. But God did not give me justice (what I deserve); he treated me with mercy (not giving me what I deserve) and grace (giving me better than I deserve)...
6. Because I have been forgiven, I will forgive others and treat them with mercy and grace (Colossians 3:12-15). (The better I understand God's mercy and grace in my life, the more I will be willing and ready to forgive others when they, sin against me.)
7. I will walk by the Spirit and not carry out the desire of the flesh (Galatians 5:16). The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

Sexual Temptation

1. There is no future in this. It would damage my relationship with God and could destroy my relationship with my spouse and children, as well as damage my reputation and discredit my ministry (1 Corinthians 6:18).
2. I will not degrade this person but will treat her or him with dignity and honor I will treat her or him as a subject, not an object; she or he has been created in the image of God.
3. I will let the attractiveness direct me to praise for the greatness of her or his Creator. (This is a kind of "spiritual judo" in which you use quick movement and leverage to throw your opponent; in this case, you redirect the incoming force from temptation to praise.)
4. I am no longer under the power of sin, but I am alive to God in Christ Jesus (Romans 6:11). I am not a skin-wrapped package of glands but a new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17).
5. I will walk by the Spirit and not carry out the desire of the flesh (Galatians 5:17; Timothy 2:22).
6. I will fix my eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of faith (Hebrews 12:2)

Temptation to Covet

1. This is sin. "You shall not covet" (Exodus 20:17).
2. I do not want to sin. Sin is beneath the dignity of the person I have become Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:4-7).
3. I do not have to sin. I am no longer under the power of sin, but I am alive to God in Christ Jesus (Romans 6:11; 8:12-14).

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4. Then why am I tempted to covet? Because I am not content with what I have.
5. My lack of contentment stems from comparison with other people. (There will always be people who have better possessions, positions, marriages, children, or ministries than I have. The more I focus on this, the more I can be consumed by jealousy, envy, and resentment.)
6. I will take my eyes off other people's possessions and fix my eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of faith (Hebrews 12:2).
7. God is in control and has my best interests at heart (Romans' 8:28). Therefore I will be content and thankful with what he gives me.

Because each person has a unique "flesh signature" (people are tempted in differing ways and degrees), you can adapt these affirmation structures to other areas of temptation. It is wise to name honestly and specifically any besetting sins you regularly encounter so that you are better prepared to respond to temptations in these areas. The time-honored list of the seven deadly sins can be a useful diagnostic tool: pride; envy, anger, sloth, greed, gluttony, and lust. Pride, with its self-inflation, debasement of others, personal ambition, presumption, and vanity is the cardinal sin from which the other sins proceed. Thus the prayerful pursuit of humility is critical to spiritual progress and victory in the warfare with the flesh. Biblically speaking, humility relates to a growing awareness before God that apart from him, we are nothing and can accomplish nothing of lasting value; all things are "from Him and through Him and to Him" (Romans 11:36). Proverbs 3:5-7 is apropos here, particularly the exhortation in verse 7, "Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and turn away from evil."

WARFARE WITH THE WORLD

The section on paradigm spirituality relates to the warfare with the world, so the following material on this aspect of spiritual warfare will be brief.

There are three New Testament words for "world," and each is used in different ways. Notice how the major word, kosmos, is used in these three verses.

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

John 3:16

If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you.

John 15:19

Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

1 John 2:15

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In the first of these verses, "world" refers to people, the objects of God's love. But in the other two verses, the world is our enemy. In these contexts, it is the organized system of temporal values that are opposed to the life of Christ in the believer. In *The Adversary*, Mark Bubeck defines the world as "a composite expression of the depravity of man and the intrigues of Satan's rule, combining in opposition to the sovereign rule of God." As such, the world promotes an attitude of independence from God.

Ephesians 2:1-3 reveals the interrelationship of the three fronts of the world, the flesh, and the devil: "And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest."

The world system aggravates the battle with the flesh by promoting and providing opportunities for indulging the deeds of the flesh (Galatians 5:19-21). The world in which we live is shaped by the manifestations of the flesh and by the satanic warfare against the plans of God. "For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world" (1 John 2:16). Moreover, the "prince of the power of the air" (Ephesians 2:2) is the "ruler of this world" (John 12:31), and "the whole world lies in the power of the evil one" (1 John 5:19).

Of the three forces, the world may be the most neglected. Yet it is a powerful force that has programmed much of our thinking from the moment of birth. The world is an enticing magnet that constantly lures us to conform to its standards. It tempts us to seek the approval and plaudits of people rather than God. It pulls us into greater involvement with the temporal value system with its quest for wealth, power, prestige, position, and popularity and draws us away from the eternal value system revealed in Scripture. Worldliness is not merely a matter of questionable activities. It is also a heart attitude. When Christians are in bondage to "the elementary principles of the world" (Colossians 2:8), they cannot enjoy the freedom and victory that is in Christ.

As citizens of heaven and pilgrims on this planet, we experience a constant tension between the temporal and the eternal arenas. We are called to be in the world but not of it; we must walk in the world without being molded by it. The key to overcoming the values of the world is renewing the mind with the truths of Scripture. "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2). We need to internalize biblical values through a daily program of reading, memorizing, meditating on and personalizing Scripture. This has a price: it takes time and discipline. But it is more than worth the cost, because nothing is more life-changing. There is no greater step we can take in becoming overcomers in the spiritual warfare ("I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word

of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one" [1 John 2:14b]). Only in this way will the Word become the basis for our thinking. The mind is a battlefield on which two opposing world views, the material versus the spiritual, contend for our allegiance. John tells us that faith is "the victory that has overcome the world" (1 John 5:4), and our faith is proportionate to the degree to which we have assimilated God's truth. We must renew our minds with the reality of our union with Christ (Galatians 2:20; 6:14). Jesus has overcome the world (John 16:33) and its ruler (John 16:11; Colossians 2:15). His life secures our victory, and he is able to deliver us out of this present evil age (Galatians 1:4; Hebrews 2:14-15; 1 John 4:4).

Not all aspects of human cultures are opposed to the gospel; some are compatible (e.g., marital fidelity, love and care of children), some are neutral (e.g., food, dress, housing), and others are incompatible (e.g., religion and spiritualism). The gospel transcends temporal and cultural boundaries, so only the incompatible components of a culture need to be rejected and replaced. The problem is that many believers in different cultures have failed to make a clean break with cultural practices that are opposed to the lordship of Christ. The lure of syncretism causes believers in some parts of the world to hold on to their pre-Christian fear and obedience to the spirits ("those which by nature are no gods" [Galatians 4:8]). In the West, there is a growing movement among cultural Christians who have a low view of biblical authority to combine the gospel with beliefs from traditional religions or spirit magic. The powerful forces of cultural relativism, pluralism, secularization, pragmatism, naturalism, pantheism, and New Age syncretism are utterly incompatible with the biblical vision of truth and life in Christ. In addition, materialism is a growing entry point of demonic influence in the West.

It requires discipline and discernment to resist the temptation to conform to what others think and do (Romans 12:1-2). The pervasive influence of education, media, and entertainment seduces us to trivialize and condone many cultural expressions of sin. In the past, Christians had a way of externalizing worldliness by avoiding certain places, things, and activities. More recently, the tendency has been to go too far in the opposite direction because of a profound loss of discernment that embraces a mentality of consumerism and accumulation.

Since worldliness is both external and internal, we must cultivate a greater sense of detachment. We would do well to return to the ancient practice of meditating on the vanity of the world, the brevity of life, and the eternity of the life to come. It can be a painful process of surrender and renewal for us to wrench our hope and identity from that which is passing away and to transfer our hope and identity to the enduring promises of God. If we do not serve the Lord with a whole heart, we will serve the gods of this world; "choose for yourselves today whom you will serve" (Joshua 24:14-23). Scripture reminds us that the world with its threefold lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and pride of life is passing away (1 John 2:15-17; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31) and that

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friendship with the world is hostility toward God (James 4:4). There is no mid ground, no neutral territory. We must choose our master (Luke 16:13), and if it is Lord Christ, it will require the great cost of denying ourselves, taking up our cross and following our Master wherever he commands us to go (Matthew 16:24-26). Part of this cost is that the world will hate Christ's close followers just as it hated him (John 15:18-21; 16:20; 17:14; 1 John 3:13). As we "keep seeking the things above, where Christ is" (Colossians 3:1), we will be able to use the world without being used by it.

As an exercise, meditate on the following passages to see how they relate to conflict with the world system: Luke 9:23-25; John 15:18-19; 17:14-17; 2 Corinthians 4:17-18; 5:7; 10:3-5; Philippians 4:8; Colossians 2:8; 3:1-4.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL APPLICATION

- How has your culture and world view influenced your understanding of the middle realm of angelic and demonic spiritual powers?
- What is your understanding of the present cosmic-earthly conflict?
- How would you describe your own warfare on the three fronts of the world, the flesh, and the devil?
- What resources do you use in the warfare with the flesh? Can you identify your unique flesh signature? Try adapting the affirmation structures that were presented in this chapter to your own areas of temptation.
- What resources do you use in the warfare with the world? In what ways have your mind, emotions, and will been influenced by the lures of wealth, power, prestige, position, popularity, and pleasure?