

Beginning the Battle

by Ray C. Stedman

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. {Eph 6:10-13 RSV}

In our introductory message we saw that this passage is the answer of Scripture to the cry of leaders in our day who, in utter bafflement and bewilderment, are asking questions such as this:

- “Why can we not solve the basic problems of human life?”
- “Why can we not understand ourselves?”
- “Why is it that we are so ultimately helpless and powerless in the matter of changing human nature?”
- “Why is it that each generation has to fight the same battles fought by the previous ones?”

Paul’s answer to these questions is to go behind the merely human antagonists, visible to the world and reported in our newspapers, to what he calls “the principalities and powers, the world rulers of this present darkness, the spiritual hosts of wickedness in high places,” i.e., the kingdom of evil.

In the last message, we looked briefly at some of the reactions to this view of life. We saw there are some who are ready to reject this, who refuse to believe in any unseen powers, whether good or bad. They reject the whole idea of any kind of spiritual kingdom at all and say there is neither God nor devil. Of course anyone who wishes to do so is free to make that decision, but when they do they reject the testimony of Jesus Christ as an authority in these areas, and the testimony of millions of Christians through the centuries, as well as the intelligent and thoughtful conclusions of many men who are not Christians, all of whom recognize the existence of a spiritual kingdom such as this. Anyone who chooses to take that purely voluntary position does so as a matter of his will, for there is no evidence that would support him in this. He must ultimately face the fact that he has no answer to the problems and conundrums of life. He has nothing with which to explain the questions which constantly come before man in his daily living.

To pin our hope only on man himself is to be continually disappointed in this constant struggle of man to improve himself. This is why those who subscribe to such a position ultimately assume a spirit of stark pessimism as they look out upon life. You can see this reflected in many of their writings. H. G. Wells, who in the last decade or so was an outstanding proponent of this theory that man was able to improve himself, sank deeper and deeper into a morass of pessimism as he watched the world scene until his last book, finished just before his death, revealed his utter despair by its title: *Mind At The End Of Its Tether*.

Then we saw that there are others who believe in a kingdom of good, i.e., they believe in God and perhaps the angels, but they refuse to accept this

proposition of the existence of the devil. They say they can accept the existence of God and of heaven and the things that make for good, but they utterly reject the idea of a devil. This is a completely irrational position. Anyone who subscribes to that position has no logical basis for doing so, for the same revelation which tells us about God tells us about the devil. The same authorities (Christ and his apostles) who speak clearly about God, speak as clearly about the existence of the devil. Even the very language that we employ to describe the kingdom of God and its makeup reveals the existence also of another kingdom. Why do we say, for instance, “the Holy Spirit”? We are thereby recognizing there are unholy spirits as well. We cannot make that distinction unless we recognize the existence of unholy spirits. Such a position really reveals a desire to throw out of the Bible that which does not appeal. If we go through our Bibles in that way, throwing out everything we do not like, we finally come down to a residue that is left, and what is left is simply what we happen to prefer. On the basis of that approach to the Scriptures, the only authority, really, is myself, what I think is right, what I choose to accept. Revelation is narrowed down to a tiny, circumscribed area which we personally, for some reason or another (mostly emotional) choose to accept. And then, of course, we are no longer discussing the question of whether or not there is a devil. We are discussing the authority of the Scriptures. We have moved over to a quite different proposition.

Now I say all this because I realize there are many who are ready to reject this teaching without even giving it an intelligent consideration. Our whole approach to this will find value only as men and women take seriously the presentation of Scripture in this respect. No other explanation comes to grips with the problems of life as this one does. No other explanation of the evil of the world takes in all the aspects of human life. I do not hesitate to make a statement as strong as that. Anything else is superficial, if not artificial. Anything less is shallow and inadequate, if it is not inherently wrong and unreal.

In looking at this passage, therefore, we must expect to learn much about this kingdom of evil, these wicked spirits in high places whom Paul says lie behind this insoluble problem of human evil. Notice that the apostle implies that the only ones who can successfully battle against these dark

forces are Christians. “For we are not contending against flesh and blood...” Who are the “we”? Surely this is not man in general, but these are Christians who are indicated in the word “we.” It is we Christians who are not contending against flesh and blood. The world struggles on this level, but the Christian wrestles against principalities and powers. Now this is not a position that is peculiar to Paul. This is a consistent teaching all through the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. The Bible indicates that all men are victims of these invisible forces. All men everywhere, without exception, are victims; but only believers can be victors.

Jesus himself makes this point absolutely clear. There is a story in Luke 11 of our Lord’s reaction to the challenge that was presented to him as he was casting out demons. This activity of our Lord is an area of his ministry which is continually questioned by those who choose to approach the Scriptures intellectually. They do not like this business of casting out demons, and explain it in various ways. We will say more about that later on in this series, but in the biblical account certain ones said of him that his casting out demons resulted from his relationship with Beelzebub, the prince of demons, another name for Satan. They said it was by Satan’s power, by Beelzebub’s power, that he was casting out demons. (Beelzebub, by the way, means “lord of the garbage.” The Jews regarded hell as a cosmic garbage dump, and in a real sense they were right, for that is exactly what hell is – a wasted life, a garbage dump.) The god who reigned over this garbage heap was the devil, and because a garbage pile always attracts flies, they called Beelzebub the lord of the flies. (There is a modern novel written on that theme.) So certain people were accusing Jesus of casting out demons by the authority of Beelzebub, the lord of the flies. Jesus said, “No, you are quite wrong, and the reason you are wrong is that if that be true, then obviously Satan’s kingdom would be divided against itself,” {cf, Luke 11:18}. His argument is simply this: Satan never does that. Satan never fights against himself. Satan is too clever, too cunning, far too astute ever to divide his forces in that way, for if he did, he knows that his kingdom would fall. Therefore, Jesus is suggesting that any man who is under the control of Satan has no possibility of deliverance apart from an outside, intervening force. Notice how he puts that in Verse 21 of Luke 11:

When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are in peace; {Luke 11:21 RSV}

Who is the strong man? Satan.

What is the palace? The world.

Who are the goods? Mankind, everywhere.

In the three verses which present this figure of the strong man there are three great principles which emerge:

1. The first, found in Verse 21, is that man, alone, against Satan, is powerless and hopeless. This is the unchanging position of Scripture. John says, "We [Christians] know we are of God, but the whole world lies in the lap of the wicked one," {cf, 1 Jn 5:19}. This is the position of the Bible, that the world has fallen under the control of Satan. Not the world of trees and mountains and lakes and seas; that is God's world. We sing, "This is my Father's world," and we are right, but the world of organized human society has fallen under the control of Satan, and there is no possibility of an escape apart from an intervention from without. For, as Jesus says, "When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are in peace;" {Luke 11:21 RSV}. There can be no threat from within to Satan's control.

That is very revealing, for there our Lord is putting his finger on the reason for the continual failure of the usual methods human beings employ to correct evils and wrongs, the usual methods of reform. They fail because they do not come to grips with the essential problem. All our methods of trying to correct the evils we see in human life are simply rearrangements of the difficulties. We succeed only in stirring them around a bit until they take a different form. But our methods never can solve the central problem of evil because they do not come to grips with the power of Satan.

Man under Satan is not a happy being. He is forever restless and peevish and discontent. That is why the world continually reflects those qualities. Man sees the problems his kind of

existence creates, and he is always trying to remedy them. He keeps busy trying to solve these problems which break out, these difficulties which are reported in our newspapers, but all his efforts achieve is merely to shift the pattern till they take a different form. Then man pats himself on the back and proudly says, "We have solved this problem!" But he has only moved to a different symptom of the same disease. As C. S. Lewis so aptly put it, "No clever arrangement of bad eggs will make a good omelet." When the full cycle of problems is run through, it begins again, and we say, "History repeats itself."

What are the usual methods of human reform? You can list them easily. Almost invariably they are legislation, education, and an improved environment. Every problem we face is usually approached by using one or a combination of these three.

- Legislation is law, it is merely the control of the outward man. It has nothing to do with and cannot do anything to the inward man. It does not change the basic nature of man, but merely restricts him so that he does not manifest certain qualities under certain conditions.
- Education is one of the worst things we can do to a deranged personality, to a twisted mind. The position of Scripture is that all of us are born with twisted mind. Some of us are more twisted than others – they are the ones that we call "twisted minds!" To educate a twisted mind is but to make it more clever in its wickedness, and this is what results. The educated criminal is a far more clever, more subtle more difficult criminal to catch. The educated mind, approaching human personality problems, only throws over them a very clever patina of knowledge which serves to cover over the real difficulties. Education does not basically change man, it makes him more clever.
- Improved environment does not change him, either. I do not know how long is going to take human society to learn that when you take a man and lift him out of

the slums and put him into a nicer environment you do absolutely nothing to the man himself. In a little while, given time, he will make that new environment a slum as well.

These are the usual approaches to reform. I do not mean to suggest we scuttle them. They all have certain values, but they do not come to grips with the basic problem. This is why, after a lifetime of trying to change man with these methods, those who are knowledgeable thinkers in this area always end up with a terrible black outlook of pessimism.

Listen to these words by the late Bertrand Russell, the atheistic philosopher:

The life of man is a long march through the night, surrounded by invisible foes, tortured by weariness and pain, toward a goal that few can hope to reach and where none can tarry long. One by one as they march our comrades vanish from our sight, seized by the silent orders of omnipotent death. Brief and powerless is man's life. On him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls, pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way. For man, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gates of darkness, it remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow falls, the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day.

Those eloquent words catalog the sheer despair into which man falls when he is far from God. There is a growing sense of despair everywhere you turn today. It is the unconscious realization of man's helplessness under Satan.

2. Now look at Verse 22 of our Lord's words in Luke 11:

But when one stronger than he assails him and overtakes him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted, and divides his spoil. {Luke 11:22 RSV}

Who is this stronger one? It is Jesus.

He is speaking of himself. He says when a strong man, fully armed, guards his palace, his

goods are at peace, and nothing can be done about it, least of all by the goods themselves. But when one who is stronger comes, he breaks the power of that strong man, and frees his slaves. Here he declares a second principle – Christ's victory, made personal to an individual by faith, breaks the power of Satan. Here is the "good news" of the gospel. We sing it:

He breaks the power of canceled sin,
He sets the prisoner free;
His blood can make the foulest clean,
His blood availed for me.

In the mystery of the cross of Jesus, and in the power of his resurrection, applied by faith, we men and women who have been born into a society which is under the control of the satanic mind discover that the force which ruins us is broken, and its power to grip us is loosed, and we are set free. There is no other power which can do it. That is why this Christian gospel is such an exclusive thing. That is why Christians are perfectly justified when they say there is no other answer to the problems of man; there is no other power which can touch the basic problem of human life. There is only one "stronger one" who has come into the world and has come to grips with the power of this dark spirit and broken his power over human life.

How many there are throughout the Christian centuries, and also here this morning, who can testify to this. Not only the prostitutes and alcoholics and dope addicts, not only those who have been gripped by the power of evil habits, but also those who are held by the power of evil attitudes – temper, lust, self-righteousness, bitterness, and pride. The strongest chains are not those around the body, but around the mind. The writers of Scripture make that clear. They say, "The god of this world has blinded the minds of them who believe not," {cf, 2 Cor 4:4}. That great document on human liberty, the Epistle to the Romans, opens on that level. Paul suggests that the greatest antagonism against the gospel does not come from the uneducated but from the educated, those who, "thinking themselves to be wise, become fools" {cf, Rom 1:22}, and change the glory of God into a lie. The mind becomes

blinded and the result is darkened minds, which are outwardly cultured and respectable, but are blinded in these areas which touch the deep-seated problems of human life.

Now the gospel is that Jesus Christ has come to set men free. John says Jesus came into the world “to undo the works of the devil,” {cf, 1 Jn 3:8}. There is no adequate explanation of his coming, apart from that. Paul says he came “to deliver us from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of the Son of his love.” Paul himself was chosen as apostle to the Gentiles and, in that dramatic conversion experience on the Damascus road, he said to the Lord whom he saw in the glory, “What will you have me to do?” {cf, Acts 9:6 KJV}. Jesus replied, “Stand upon your feet, for I will send you far hence unto the Gentiles, to open their eyes and to turn men from darkness unto light and from the power of Satan unto God,” {cf, Acts 26:16-18}.

This is what the gospel is for; it has no other purpose. If we try to channel it first into smaller areas of life, such as applying it to social concerns, we only reveal how far we have mistaken its purpose. The gospel will ultimately find its way there, certainly, but it must make its first impact upon this basic problem of human life. Mankind is in the grips of a power which it is helpless to do anything about. The only one who can deliver us from it is Jesus Christ. He has already done so in the mystery of his cross and through the power and glory of his resurrection. When a man or woman believes that, and commits himself upon that basis, he discovers that the whole thing becomes practical and actual in his experience. This is what we call conversion. That is the beginning of the battle.

Do you Christians ever think of yourselves this way? You say, “My sins have been forgiven,” but do you ever go on to say, “I have been delivered from the power of darkness, brought out of the power of Satan into the kingdom of God.” Do you ever think of yourself that way? Or are we like those Peter mentions? – who “have forgotten that they were once delivered from their sins,” {cf, 2 Pet 1:9}.

3. Our Lord reveals one other principle in this passage in Luke, Verse 23:

He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters. {Luke 11:23 RSV}

He is saying here that no neutral ground is possible, and no mere profession is sufficient. There is no third group possible. Jesus said, “He who is not with me is against me.” There are always those who say,

“I understand something of the gospel, and I must confess that I believe there is much of value in the Christian faith. I am a friend of Christianity. I believe that it has a great moral impact to bring into our world, but I do not care to go so far as personally ‘receiving Christ.’ I think I will remain neutral.”

Jesus says this is impossible. There is no neutrality. “He who is not with me is against me.” He who has not received the deliverance wrought is still under the bondage and control of the dark powers of Satan. There are no exceptions.

This is why Christ is the crisis of history. He spoke of himself that way – as the divider of men. He is here, dividing this congregation. In this audience, as he looks at it, there are only two groups. There are those who are with him, wholly with him because they are of him – they have received him, they know him, they love him, they have partaken of his life – and there are those who are against him. “He who is not with me is against me.”

But neither can one say, as some are tempted to say, “Well, if this is the case, then I want to be a Christian, but I do not know about all this inward control. I am willing to go along with the outward forms. I’m willing to join the church. I’m willing to give my name to this, to join the Christian crowd, and to do all the right things, but inwardly I still believe in directing my own life and running my own affairs.” Jesus says you cannot do that, either. “He who does not gather with me scatters.” There is one thing which will reveal whether you are with him or against him, and that is the influence of your life.

What is it?

Jesus Christ has come into the world to gather together the children of God. His force, his influence in the world, is a gathering influence, breaking down divisions, binding hearts together, reuniting families, making people to live together in harmony, breaking down the barriers of race, healing wounds, bringing nations together. But there is also a force which scatters, which divides.

What is it?

It is self-centeredness. This is the most divisive force known in human life. When men come together, the thing that splits them up into smaller groups is their vested concern in their own affairs. They are self-centered.

Therefore the great question of life is: What is basically the character of your life? Is it self-centeredness, or is it self-givingness? Are you with him or against him? Are you gathering with him in a healing, wholesome ministry or, when you join a group, a family, an organization, a company, or a nation, are you a divisive factor? Do you split people up? Do you make them quarrel with one another, come to odds with one another?

What about your own family? You say you are a Christian. All right. Are your children drawn closer to the faith because of you? Or are they breaking away from it because of you?

Our Lord here cuts right to the core of life. Man's life is absolutely laid bare and is judged finally on the basis of its relationship to him. The evidence of that relationship is the influence that we exercise.

I am going to leave it there... The question each must ask himself is, "Am I a victor, or a victim?" We are helpless to do anything about this ourselves. Nothing we can do in ourselves can change this situation. Man is not free. He is not able to carry out his own decisions except in a limited area, and it is his illusion of freedom which makes him imagine that he is a free, unrestrained individual. According to the Bible, man is under the unbroken, absolute control of an evil force which, quite apart from his knowledge, is controlling his thoughts and his reactions. We are absolutely helpless to do anything about this until that power is broken by the acceptance of the One who has come to destroy the works of the devil.

That is what communion is all about. To eat the bread and to drink the wine, which are symbols of the body and the blood of Jesus Christ, and not to be delivered by the Son of God is to perform a blasphemous act. But if Christ has set you free, then to partake of communion is a heartwarming experience. It is to remember anew that deliverance which has come and has broken the chains of Satan, destroyed the binding power, torn away the darkness and let in the light, thus making it possible for us to be men and women as God intended men and women to be.

If you have not known that deliverance you can know it now. Perhaps you have had to say, "If what you have said be true, then I am still an unbeliever. I am still under the power of Satan." Then the gospel comes to you now, and this is its message:

- In one moment of time you can pass from death into life.
- In one moment of commitment, trusting Christ and his work, no longer reckoning upon anything you are trying to do to make you good enough, you can say, "Lord, here am I. Save me."
- You pass in that moment from death into life. That is what conversion is.

In the quietness of this moment there may be many who will want to make that decision, who will say, "Lord, if this be true, if this is the reason why human life can never progress beyond what it has in these centuries of struggle and darkness, then I no longer want to be a part of that. I want to pass from death into life. Lord Jesus, save me."

In those words you will open the door which permits him to do his saving work.

Prayer:

Our Father, we pray that many who have been seeking for answers will, in this present moment, pass from darkness into light, from the power of Satan into the kingdom of God, and be delivered, set free. For us, Lord, who have already experienced this,

Beginning the Battle

and know something of the reality of this delivering power in our life, we pray that we may come to this Table with deeply grateful hearts. We ask that we may never forget that we have been set free, that Jesus

did this for us when we could do nothing for ourselves. May we celebrate this feast of love with a heart filled with love for him who loved us and gave himself for us. We pray in his name, Amen.

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