

THE LESSON OF THE WATER CUP

38th in a Series on Ephesians called, “Message to the Misfits”

Ephesians 6:10-20 – Final Sermon on Spiritual Warfare

Pastor John Yates of Virginia shared an excerpt of a letter from a missionary friend who was serving in the jungles of New Guinea. He wrote, “Man, it’s great to be in the thick of the fight, to draw the...Devil’s heaviest guns, to have him at you with depression and discouragement, slander, disease! He doesn’t waste time. He hits good and hard when a (person) is hitting him...All of heaven is watching... ‘Will he stick it out?’ And as they see who is with us, as they see around us the unlimited reserves, the boundless resources, as they see the impossibility of failure with God, how disgusted and sad they must be when we run away. Glory to God. We’re not going to run away. We’re going to stand.”

Those are stirring words. “It’s great to be in the thick of the fight.” Except many, if not most of us, would say, “Uh, what are you talking about? No it’s not.” Many of us would much prefer to be back in some nice safe rear area far from the front lines, in a place of safety and comfort. But if you follow Jesus Christ, you don’t have that option. When you choose to live as he commands, you will be attacked. We’ve been looking at the reality of spiritual war over the past couple of months. Today I want to summarize and apply what we’ve been learning. Hopefully it will create in us the kind of attitude that says, “It’s great to be in the thick of the fight...We’re going to stand.”

PREMISE: THERE’S A SPIRITUAL WAR ON

We have seen that Paul states in these verses that we are under attack from a spiritual enemy. That enemy is not human, but twisted, hateful beings in the spiritual realm. Paul refers to the enemy as the devil in verse 11, then says there are rulers, powers in the spiritual realm. We are up against “the spiritual forces of evil.” We have seen that this war is very real, and that at times it breaks out in the physical world in physical, deadly ways.

Today I want to draw your attention back to the reality of this battle because it touches on, and at times has enormous impact on, everything we do. Everything that happens in our lives is in some way affected by the spiritual battle. Despite this, unfortunately, we tend to forget that the

war is even happening. We can be blinded by the world that we see and experience with our physical senses. An invisible war in an invisible realm just doesn't seem very real to us.

Many years ago when I was a young man I sustained a huge blow to the side of my head that blew out my ear drum, caused some damage to my inner ear and gave me a severe concussion. I immediately was unable to find the vertical hold, meaning I couldn't stand up. I was in pretty bad shape. I stabilized some after a few minutes. But soon my family became concerned that something was really wrong with me so they took me to the health center at the university where we were staying. The staff there took one look at me and said, "Get him to the hospital right now." What I recall from that was they had me in a wheel chair and were wheeling me out to the car, but as they were doing that things were fading out. I was losing consciousness. One of the staff there, I have no idea who he or she was, saw this and acted. They put a stick of smelling salts under my nose. Smelling salt is basically ammonia. One whiff of that up my nose instantly jolted me back to full consciousness. I just remember feeling like I was drifting off to sleep, then suddenly it felt like someone jabbed a knife up into my brain. I woke up real fast.

We need a dose of ammonia like that, something to jerk us into full consciousness of what is happening around us. We need to wake up, because this battle is raging and it is violent. If we are not aware of it we are going to become casualties of the battle. We need our spiritual senses on full alert, completely engaged so that we see what is going on.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE DON'T WAKE UP TO THE WAR?

We can become victims of the hardships in the world

The book of Job gives us a brief glimpse into the spiritual realm and what is happening there. It shows us that the manifold tragedies that blew Job's life apart were a direct result of the spiritual war. Why is that book in the Bible? It is there to teach us. It teaches us that bad things happen to good people in this world because of the spiritual war. God described Job as the most upright, godly man on the planet. Job's life turned into such a horror that his best friends could make no sense of it, so they jumped to the horribly wrong conclusion that somehow Job deserved it. He must be a secretly awful person who hid his evil very well, because otherwise his life simply did not compute. They were totally wrong. What happened to Job was a result of battles they could not see.

Daniel Fusco is the lead pastor of Crossroads Community Church in Vancouver, Washington. Some time back there were two workplace shootings on consecutive days in that city. Pastor Fusco relates that members of his church were there on the second day and witnessed the shooting. The first day was worse for the church, for a member of the church was killed in that

seemingly senseless shooting. This brought home vividly and painfully that there is a spiritual war raging and that people get hurt because of it. What if you witnessed something like that first hand? That could unravel your life.

Hopefully, prayerfully, none of us will ever experience anything remotely like that. But we will all experience tragedy and inexplicable difficulties and losses. Do you remember the story of Elijah? This great prophet, a heroic man of God, was used by God to win a huge victory over the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. Israel was being led by one of its worst kings ever, Ahab, and his train wreck of a queen, Jezebel, who could have been the model for Maleficent, the queen of evil. That couple promoted the worship of the false god, Baal, in place of the worship of Yahweh, the true God. But Elijah's victory demonstrated beyond doubt that Yahweh was the real God and Baal was a phony. It seemed like a turning point. But then it all came crashing down. Things didn't really change, and Jezebel threatened to kill Elijah. It was no idle threat. Elijah ran away. He was crushed. It all seemed too much for him. He went into the desert and pouted, saying he just wanted to die. This was nothing but pure whining. If he had really wanted to die all he had to do was stay in Israel and Jezebel would have made sure his wish was granted. What happened to Elijah? Hardship, disappointment and fear, became too much for him. If it happened to him, do you think it could happen to us?

The book of Hebrews was written to Jewish followers of Jesus who were struggling. The opposition, persecution and difficulty of life had become overwhelming for them, and they were thinking of "calling an audible" and giving up on Jesus. There have been many people who gave up on faith because they felt God had let them down. They suffered too many blows, and didn't see that those blows were attacks from an enemy in the spiritual war. If we do not keep that perspective that same thing can easily happen to us. In those painful times when it can feel like God has abandoned us, we need to remember that we are in a spiritual war, and these are the attacks of the enemy.

Years ago there was a guy in my church who had been through a really tough time. He had been on the staff of a large church and had been a good friend and supporter of the senior pastor. All seemed good, and then one day, out of the blue, the senior pastor, his friend, informed him that he had decided to let him go. He had no good reason for it. He just said he wanted to go in a different direction. This happened just as the big recession of about 12 years ago was hitting. He looked diligently for another ministry position, to no avail. He and his family had to sell their house and move to a different city. He felt the burden to support his family, so he looked for any job he could find in any industry, but unemployment was soaring. He finally landed a job. It wasn't what he wanted, but it provided income. Then after only a few months, the company folded. He began looking desperately for something else, but couldn't find anything. I remember talking to him as he poured out his heart. He was doing everything he could and was praying, asking God for answers. He was getting desperate. But

he told me the one thing that kept him from freaking out was knowing that he was in a spiritual battle. He knew he was under attack, and the question was, would he stand firm in all the discouragement, or would he cave in?

We can fail to understand what life is really about

Every now and then you might hear someone saying that people who line up with a particular political or social position are on “the right side of history.” This has been a phrase especially popular with those on the political left. The implication, of course, is if you do not line up with their particular position, most commonly the so-called progressive agenda, you are on the wrong side of history. This is a way of invoking history as being in favor of one’s position.

Ironically this often comes from people who have a philosophical position that there is no absolute truth, no absolute moral right or wrong, and often, there is no God. But think about the idea of being on the right side of history. What does that presuppose? It assumes there is a right and wrong. It assumes that history is actually going in a particular direction. That suggests that someone is guiding history in a given direction to its intended end.

If you don’t believe in absolutes, in right and wrong, and if you don’t believe in God guiding history, then talking about the right side of history is nonsense. There is only randomness, and there certainly is no inevitability or direction to history. Peter Wehner, a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, wrote, “God is the Author of history – there’s a beginning, a middle and an end; there are chapters that will eventually comprise a glorious book – and so in some important sense, being on the right side of history means being on the side of the Author of history...which means being on the right side of God.”

He is correct. Woven throughout the Bible is a sense that there is a direction to history. God gives prophetic statements about what is coming in the future because he is guiding it. There is an obvious beginning to history and it comes to a divinely ordained conclusion. But we must ask, where is history going? What is God’s design for history? God is aiming at history that in the end is about his kingdom and his glory.

Unfortunately, we tend to lose sight of that big picture and get narrowly focused on our own wins and losses. We get obsessed with our own lives, our goals, our desires and our hurts. But we all know that this is a dead end street. Right now we are dealing with the imminent death of an aunt who has been very close to my mother. It is a painful thing and has caused me to reflect on my own mortality. I’m at an age where the maximum number of years left has dwindled to an uncomfortably small figure. If all we have is just this life with me at the center, then the whole thing is empty and tragic with no hope.

The spiritual war reminds us there is more going on than just what we see in this world. It reminds us that the kingdom of God is for real, and it is eternal. That means that history, including our part in it, is about much more than just how pleasant my term in this world is. It is about something far greater and more eternal. Consider the lives of some of the great heroes of faith in the Bible, people like Elijah, Elisha, Jeremiah, Peter, Paul, John, and of course, the epitome of faith himself, Jesus Christ. Their lives make no sense unless they are about something more than the amount of time they lived on this planet. Job's experience points to the same thing. So do the lives of great martyrs like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jim Eliot, and the thousands who have died in our lifetime for choosing to follow Jesus.

We can fall for the enemy's schemes

I recently read an article by a woman who said she felt she was safe from being caught in the scams so prevalent in our world. Then she got an email from a good friend who was trying to buy \$200 in Google gift cards for a present, but was having trouble with it. Her friend asked if she would be willing to buy the cards and send them to her, and she would reimburse the cost. She replied asking what the trouble was, and her friend responded, explaining in greater detail. The email address was correct, so she agreed to help her friend out. When she went to a store to buy the cards the clerk was a young girl who asked, "Are you sure you want to do this?" That surprised her, but she said, "Yes, I am helping my friend." The girl said, "Are you absolutely sure it is your friend that you're emailing with?" The girl was obviously concerned about the situation, and that gave the woman pause. She decided to call her friend to make sure she was getting what she wanted. When she called her friend, the friend told her she didn't know what she was talking about. The young girl in the store saved her from being scammed out of \$200.

As soon as you know something is a scam you are safe from falling prey to it. The first time you got that ominous, threatening phone call from the IRS it was unnerving, but as soon as you figured out that it was a scam you weren't unsettled by it at all. The same is true of the attacks by our spiritual enemy. As soon as you see them for what they are, you will be able to deal with it. But if you don't recognize it, you might well fall victim to it.

Had Eve recognized the serpent's suggestion that she eat the fruit of the forbidden tree as an attempt to destroy her, she would never have fallen for it. The same is true of us. When we don't understand what is going on, we get sucked in. We doubt God, we go our own way, and we experience the consequences.

We can rely on worldly weapons

If we don't think about spiritual warfare, about what is going on behind the scenes, then all we will think about is the people who are causing problems and the circumstances that are

troubling us. We will see just what is on the surface. Because of that our approach to the problems will be surface approaches. We will think that we need to merely try to get the circumstances to be more to our liking and we will deal with the troublesome people in whatever way seems necessary.

The problem with this is that we will inevitably use the same weapons the world around us uses. They will be the stuff of this world, which can have effects on things in this world, but can't do anything about what's really behind the circumstances or the people that seem to be causing us difficulty.

In 2 Corinthians 10:4 Paul wrote, "The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds." We don't use the weapons of this world, but spiritual weapons, God's weapons. What are the weapons of this world? They are power, force, violence, manipulation, dishonesty and anger, and others. These are the things people use to try to control other people and events in order to get what they think they want. What are the powerful weapons of God? They are prayer, truth, righteousness, grace, peace, humility and love. Satan cannot stand against these weapons.

Unfortunately throughout history Christians have tended to lose sight of the spiritual battle, focus on what's happening in their circumstances and resort to worldly weapons to try to get their way. For instance, what happens when things go against us politically in our country? Typically there are calls from many in the church to rally people to vote, to gain political power to change the laws. What kinds of weapons are those? They are power, force, manipulation, anger. They are all weapons of the world! There's a truth Christians don't often notice, and it is when the church focuses on exercising political power, it loses its credibility and its real message. It actually loses spiritual power. That's because it is relying on worldly weapons.

In his play, *Henry V*, Shakespeare has King Henry deliver a rousing speech to his troops during the siege of Harfleur. He says, "Once more into the breach, dear friends, once more. In peace there's nothing so becomes a man as modest stillness and humility; but when the blast of war blows in our ears, then imitate the action of the tiger. Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood, disguise fair nature with hard favored rage." That, unfortunately, is just what happens to us. When the battle hits we react. We summon up the blood and respond with hard favored rage.

A few weeks ago Laurie and I had a super busy weekend that culminated in us baby sitting on Sunday evening for our granddaughters up in San Clemente. As that evening was drawing to a close we were running on fumes. We were both exhausted. To make matters worse, I had been hit with a sinus infection that made me feel miserable. So I was literally sick and tired. Toby

and Anna got home, we turned over their daughters to them and headed back to our house at about 10 PM. Laurie has this water cup she likes to take everywhere she goes that makes a 7-Eleven Big Gulp look like a Little Sip. It also has a broken lid. She had that cup in the cup holder in our car. At one point she decided she needed some water so she reached over to get her cup, but somehow, in the dark she fumbled. Instead of picking it up she just knocked it over, dumping all that ice water on my seat and me. It wasn't Noah's flood, but it was a first cousin of it, I believe. We were 10 minutes into a 45 minute drive home, and now I'm soaked and there's ice water everywhere.

It was spiritual warfare time. This wasn't necessarily some direct attack by a demon. It was just an accident. But what we need to be aware of is that Satan and his evil colleagues can and will *use* everything that happens to us, big and small, good and bad. They are looking for a way to bring about some evil for us in everything, whether the thing itself be good, bad or indifferent. Romans 8:28 reminds us that God works good for us in every circumstance in life. But remember Satan continually opposes everything God is and does. He is the exact opposite. He seeks to bring about evil for us in everything that happens to us. In this case, he wanted me to resort to a worldly weapon. He wanted me to use anger at Laurie, because by using that weapon he would manipulate me into creating hurt and division between us, and Satan is always trying to create hurt, selfishness and division. I think I initially responded with a surprised, "What are you doing?" I believe I also added an expression of some annoyance at her water cup, which has been involved in some other unfortunate spills. I suspect my comment did not endear her to me. Fortunately she was so mortified and occupied with flood damage control I don't think she tuned in much to it. Fortunately before I started seriously wielding that weapon of the world, I was able to see what was going on. I could see what Satan wanted me to do and what the effects would be. So mostly I just shut my mouth.

Do you want to be powerful? Be powerful the way Jesus was powerful. Use the unstoppable weapons God has given you. Use prayer, love, peace, grace. Jesus used those weapons to change the entire destiny of the human race!

APPLICATION

SEE THE WORLD THROUGH THE LENS OF SPIRITUAL WAR

Recently Toby and I were talking about how cold it has been this winter. He recalled going to the beach or going surfing often during Christmas vacations in the past. That hasn't been happening the past couple of years. It makes you wonder where this global warming is. In our family we all pretty much across the board like being warm and hate cold. We only start getting comfortable when it hits 75 degrees. I found myself thinking, "I wish global warming would get on with it." It seems to me it would be a good thing if our climate turned a little toastier. I'd be thrilled if we could get a bit more like Hawaii's climate. That would be stupid,

wouldn't it? I'd be evaluating what's going on in the world through a myopic grid of my personal likes and dislikes. And that would be foolish, for if there truly is climate change it holds the potential for great harm, even cataclysmic disaster.

My point is we tend to be very narrowly focused on our personal likes and dislikes, and fail to see the larger movements that are going on in the spiritual world. We need to start looking for that so we don't experience the negatives I just described.

Remember that the enemy will try to use everything in your life to discourage you, defeat you, distract you, get you to doubt God, and to walk away from him. One of the most effective things we can do is ask, "what does the enemy want to do in this situation?" We know what the enemy is up to. He wants to disconnect us from God, to get us to doubt God, to focus on ourselves, to use worldly weapons. We need to look for his motives in everything that happens to us, even the good things.

BE STRONG IN THE LORD

Paul said right up front that we need to be strong in the Lord. That means we need to have faith in him and his weapons. We need to believe using his weapons is the best. We need to choose his weapons instead of the weapons of the world. We need to ask God to give us both the wisdom and strength to resist the enemy. We need to stand firm when the enemy is telling us God can't be trusted.

James 4:7 says, "Submit yourself, then, to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you." Resisting the enemy begins with submitting to God. Remember the submission Job displayed. The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord. Job was firm in choosing to trust God in both the good and the bad of life.

It's hard when we can't see the Lord or hear him physically, but in fact he is always there with us. If we trust him he will aid us in ways we may not even notice. Elmer Bendiner was in the Air Force in World War II. He flew on the crew of a B-17 bomber called the Tondelayo. He wrote a book titled *The Fall of Fortresses* about his experiences. In it he tells of one mission over the German city of Kassel when they were hit by a massive barrage of flak from Nazi anti-aircraft artillery. That wasn't unusual. What was unusual was they were hit in the fuel tank, but the tank didn't explode. He thought it was nearly miraculous that they could be hit with a 20 millimeter shell in the fuel tank with no explosion or fire. Later, his pilot, Bohn Fawkes, told him it was a bigger deal than that. After the mission Fawkes asked their crew

chief for the shell as a souvenir. The Chief told him they hadn't been hit by one shell. They found 11 shells in the fuel tank. Only one would have been enough to blow them out of the sky, but they had been hit in the fuel tank with 11 unexploded shells. The shells had been taken by Intelligence, though they did not know why. Much later Fawkes found out the whole story. When the armorers had opened the shells they found there were no explosive charges in any of them. They were all just empty shells, except for one. Inside one was a note scrawled in Czech, "This is all we can do for you now." Just because we can't see what is being done to help us, doesn't mean it's not happening. We can trust God to work even when we cannot see what he is doing.

One of the most important ways we can do that is to do exactly what Job said. Blessed be the name of the Lord. The best thing we can do in every situation, good and bad, is bless his name. Major in worshiping and praising God regardless of what happens to us.

God is Almighty. Nothing is too hard for him. No one and nothing can defeat him. He has infinitely more strength than we will ever need to enable us to stand in any and every situation. On Interstate 5 if you are driving south in the San Joaquin Valley you will come to the southern end of the valley at a place known as the Grapevine. That is where the freeway begins its climb into the mountain pass that leads to Los Angeles. That ascent is rather steep and long. I recall a time when I was in college when a friend gave me a ride from my home in Bakersfield back to college in the L A area. He had a somewhat old, suspect and underpowered VW bug. It was at night and I remember thinking there was a good chance the car wouldn't have the power to make it up that steep grade. We made it that night, but I had good reason for concern. On another occasion when I wasn't with him what I feared proved true. The engine blew out while straining up that ascent. We are at times like me at the bottom of that grade, thinking, "I don't know if God has the power to get me over this." It's like we think God is like a sketchy, old, underpowered VW Bug. He is not. He's closer to a Ferrari sports car that eats steep grades like that for breakfast, that can zip over those mountains at high speed without taxing its real power even a little. So what we need to do is see the battle for what it is, know God has all the power we need and more, then ask him to strengthen us and enable us to stand. Then we need to remember that the victory is not in us getting the outcome or the circumstance we want, but in us standing, whatever the circumstance may be.

LIVE IN THE MOMENT

Satan loves to use fear and regret against us. He wants you to panic about what might happen, or to wallow in regret over the past. Jesus said in Matthew 6:34, "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

That was in a context where he promised that God will give us what we need. Satan doesn't want you living fully today, so he tries to get you to live in the past or the future. Jesus said live fully today, focused on this day.

J. J. Watt is one of the best players in the National Football League. He is a defensive end who wreaks havoc on opponents' offenses. But he has also had a history of injuries. In an interview in *Men's Health* magazine he was asked about whether he worries about possible injury in the future and how that might impact his career, his reputation and his earnings. He said, "All I care about is having a good practice tomorrow. That's it. I've learned that the best way to attack things is one day at a time. When you start thinking too far ahead or behind, that's when you hit trouble." He's right. Focus your thoughts and your energies today on what you can do and what you can control today, and let God sort out the rest.