

(Devotional #43) **Spiritual Conflict in Heavenly Places**
(and down here on the earth also)

See to it that no one takes you captive through **philosophy and empty deception**, according to **the tradition of men**, according to **the elementary principles of the world**, rather than according to Christ. For in Him all the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and **He is the head over all rule and authority**. In Him you also were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised up with Him through **faith in the working of God**, who raised Him from the dead. When you were dead in your transgressions and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. **When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him (Christ) – Colossians 2:8-15.**

At the end of the Apostle Paul's life, he made an interesting statement: **"I have fought the good fight."** This comment is recorded in 2 Timothy 4:7. Why would Paul say this? Isn't the Christian life supposed to be filled with good feelings and happiness? Well, yes – and no! Paul did not see the Christian life as a rosy walk down the yellow brick road to good feelings. It is quite the opposite actually. Paul saw the Christian life as a war. When you align yourself with Jesus Christ by faith and He redeems your soul and welcomes you into the family of God, you will find very quickly that you have stepped into a war zone.

In Ephesians 6:12, Paul describes this war for us: **"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places."**

This little word, **'for'** is **'a term of explanation.'** It occurs over 700-times in the Bible. Notice, Paul has just told us in verse 10, **"be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might."** He does not encourage us to *develop a better strategy*. He does not tell us to *'man up'* and *'try harder.'* In fact, he does not mention human effort at all; instead, Paul tells us to **"be strong in the Lord and the strength of HIS MIGHT"** ... and this is where that little word **'for'** comes into play. Paul says, **'do not try to live the Christian life by your own power, on your own terms, on the basis of your own intellect.'** Why not? **'FOR THIS REASON,'** because we are not fighting against human beings! This is not a conventional war! Other human beings may be the instruments Satan uses against us, *but the real enemy is not 'flesh and blood.'* Our enemy is Satan himself. This is why a better way of doing things, a better strategy, a better program, or a better *'approach'* to ministry will not affect the outcome of this battle. Fighting Satan with human intellect and with what we may believe are *'better tactics'* is more absurd and more certain to fail, than fighting against a nuclear power with sticks and stones. For you see, on a human level, we are out-manned and out-gunned.

In the Colossians passage cited above, we see some of the methods our enemy will use to defeat us – **"philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition(s) of men"** – head the list. **Satan's modus operandi is to attack the way Christians think.** When Paul outlines the divine provisions provided to us by God as a means of survival in this battle, he begins by saying in verse 14: **"Gird your loins with TRUTH."** Truth here means propositional truth ... those things God has revealed to us in His Word – the Scriptures. In a sense, the spiritual provisions listed in

Ephesians 6:14-17 are a review ... a summary of what Paul explained in his letter to the Church at Ephesus. In Ephesians Chapters 1-3, Paul describes what theologians call '**POSITIONAL TRUTH,**' *i.e.*, the benefits given to us by God *in Christ*. In Christ we are *adopted* into the family of God. We have been *predestined* to eternal life, our sins have been *forgiven*, and by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, our human spirits have been *made alive*, our minds are *enlightened* as we study God's Word and the Spirit gives us understanding, and we have been *moved miraculously out of the dominion of Satan into the blessed light of union with Christ*, and as a result, *union with other believers*. So, God has not left us to fight this battle alone. He is with us, and He is fighting for us.

In Ephesians Chapters 4-6, Paul describes for us how we are to live in light of our position in Christ ... and it is dramatically different from how we lived as part of the '*world-system.*' We are to walk (or live) '**worthy of our calling**' (Ephesians 4:1). We are to live our lives in unity ... in unity with Christ and in unity with like-minded believers. Our relationships are different, our marriages are different, our desires change, and in a way that is hard to describe, our view of the world and our place in it, also change.

Looking back for a moment to the Colossians passage, Paul tells us how these changes are possible. They do not happen in full over the course of a night, and they are not the result of human effort, for the sanctification process is just that ... a process ... and it is a process guided, directed, and empowered by God, not by man. These things are possible ONLY because of the sufficiency of Christ-alone, the One with whom we are united.

The Colossians passage also gives us confidence in the absolute sufficiency of Christ: "**For in Him all the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form.**" If these words were the only words Paul had written, they would be enough. All of the divine attributes exist in Christ, and as believers, *we are 'positioned in Him.'*

But it gets better: "**And in Him you have been made complete.**" Sometime in the 1980's I took **the Myers-Briggs Personality Test** and discovered what I already knew: I am an introvert, or as the test put it ... an INTP. I was told the worst job I could have would be in sales (*of course, I was a salesman*). I was told I should be employed in the dark basement of a library away from other human beings (*but I had to 'cold call' in public to get sales leads*). I was told I should avoid all public speaking because it would be too stressful (*a week-to-the-day after I got the test results, I had to make a presentation on behalf of the New York ABA to 400-attorneys at the Waldorf Astoria in Manhattan*). I have spent a great deal of my life feeling like a fish out of water, and as such, completely inadequate. But the Bible says, '**in Christ, we have been made complete.**' This means you and I do not have to focus on our inadequacies; instead, we can depend on Him for empowerment. So, when I stand in front of a class to teach the Scriptures, and when that sense of inadequacy tries to overwhelm me, I know I can say to Him, "*You know me, and You know exactly how I feel at this moment in time. Yet You have put me in this situation with the full knowledge of my shortcomings. Therefore, I am going to depend on You alone to get this job done.*"

WE ARE IN A BATTLE BUT WE ARE NOT IN IT ALONE.

"**And He is the head over all rule and authority.**" God is Sovereign. That is what this phrase means. And God confirmed this to Isaiah:

For I am God and there is no other; I am God and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times, things that have not been done, saying, “My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure” – Isaiah 46:9^B-10.

Now the Sovereignty of God and its implications seem to trouble some people. It doesn't trouble me at all; rather, it encourages me. Because **God is Omnipotent**, He is able to do whatever He determines to do; because **He is Omniscient**, He always knows the best thing to do, and because **God is Just** – everything He does is right and fair. **But it is the Sovereignty of God that ties all this together.** Our Sovereign God cannot be defeated in this spiritual battle because He is head over all rule and all authority.

According to Ephesians 6:12, the Christian life is a struggle¹ – It is a life-or-death battle. I don't think we have a full grasp of how serious this is. Remember, Paul warned us about getting side-tracked with philosophy and empty deceptions that take our eyes off our mission. Our mission is to declare the gospel in the clearest of terms to a lost world that is under the influence of Satan. What is this gospel? It is expressed with clarity by Paul in his first Corinthian letter:

*For I delivered to you as of **first importance** what I also received, that **Christ died for our sins** according to the Scriptures, and that **He was buried**, and that **He was raised on the third day** according to the Scriptures – 1 Corinthians 15:3-4.*

This is the gospel: Jesus died on the cross for our sins, He was buried, and on that glorious Sunday morning, God raised Him from the dead. This is the gospel. Nothing else is the gospel. This alone is the good news. And the proclamation of this gospel is the commission God has given to the Church.

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As Alister Begg said so well, “**When what is primary becomes peripheral, what is peripheral will by necessity become primary.**” (Alister Begg means by ‘**primary**’ what Paul meant by ‘**first importance**.’) We cannot let this happen in the Church!

One of the dangers the evangelical church faces today is exactly what Paul warned us about in the verse you just read: (being carried away by) **philosophy** (human wisdom) and **empty deception** (which always contradicts the gospel). Paul wrote the Galatian letter to correct this very thing ... a heresy that added human works to the gospel of grace. This same deception is happening today under the guise of something that sounds good on the surface, but upon an analysis that is grounded in Scripture, turns out to be ‘**empty deception**.’ It goes by the moniker, ‘**Social Justice**².’ This term is not a biblical term; it is a sociological construct that divides the human race into two categories: (1) *Oppressors*, and (2) *the Oppressed*. It is a term that is built directly on the writings of Karl Marx.

¹ The English word ‘struggle’ translates the Greek term πάλη (pronounced pa-le). It means ‘hand-to-hand battle.’

² The meaning of ‘Social Justice’ is not up for debate. Hundreds of books, thousands of articles, and tens-of-thousands of pages have been written about this subject such that the definition is not malleable. We do not get to redefine the term to meet our preferences and still use it in a sentence ... This is no less true for Social Justice than it would be if I decided to redefine ‘gravity’ but still use the term in a sentence. The point is, we know what the term ‘Social Justice’ means, and it is NOT what most people think it means.

The problem with Social Justice is it has nothing to do with actual justice – and it is contrary to Scripture. The Bible teaches that justice is not optional ... it is a divine mandate. But we must be clear about what the justice taught in the Bible is and how it differs from the sociological construct that is being sold under the social justice moniker to a naïve church that more and more is being swayed away from the true gospel and toward a non-biblical, human solution to difficult problems.

Here is but one of many examples: (1) **Biblical Justice** can be understood as *‘living within the context of God’s Moral Law.’* **Biblical Injustice**, as Scripture uses the term, is *‘living in conflict with God’s Moral Law.’* (2) **Social Justice**, in contrast, means *‘achieving social equity through political means,’* i.e., *‘ensuring that all men, genders, and races achieve equal results.’* If one group of students tests lower on an achievement test than another group, then the school is *‘unjust,’* and accommodations must be made to equalize the test results³. (*This principle can be expanded into just about every avenue of society.*) If you think this sounds political, it is! That’s my point! THE GOSPEL IS NOT POLITICAL; THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH IS NOT POLITICAL. SOCIAL JUSTICE IS POLITICAL and that is one reason it has no place being taught in the Church.

Why am I mentioning this here? Because how the church deals with subtle deception is related to the spiritual battle we are fighting. I am not going to write a treatise on Biblical versus Social Justice beyond what I have said already because the subject is complex, but I am attaching two links ***I think every member of every evangelical church should watch (perhaps twice) in order to be informed about this subtle Satanic attack on the gospel.*** These are not short videos; they are not necessarily easy; they will require time and effort on your part to grasp the nature of the issue ... but being informed about how Satan is fighting his side of this spiritual battle cannot be over-emphasized. Here are the links:

- (1) Voddie Baucham: Biblical Justice vs. Social Justice:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i60eQZPG5XM>
- (2) Jon Harris: The Social Justice Gospel:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_QShqQqLu6o

Despite how it may seem at this moment in history, victory is certain. In the Colossians passage we are told, ***“He disarmed the rulers and authorities.”*** This act of disarmament occurred at the cross. It is pertinent that the Greek terms⁴ for ***‘rulers’*** and ***‘authorities,’*** are the same words used in Paul’s description of the battle we are fighting when he declares our enemies to be ***the ‘rulers’*** and ***the ‘powers.’*** The evil forces we are fighting against are the same ones Jesus disarmed at the cross.

Never has there been a time when clarity of thought and expression are more important than today. We are in a spiritual war. We cannot afford to be confused about who our enemy is and how he is prosecuting his strategy. We are his targets. Gird up your loins with scriptural truth, lest you be deceived by the wiles of this enemy.

³ Harvard University is fighting a civil lawsuit right now for discriminating against Asian students for excelling on their SAT scores and other requirements for admission to the school.

⁴ The English word ***‘ruler’*** is the Greek term ἀρχή (pronounced arche) and the English words ***‘authorities’*** and ***‘powers’*** both translate the Greek term ἐξουσία (pronounced exousia). These are our enemies, and they are the same ones Christ defeated at the cross. So, what does this tell us about the outcome of this spiritual battle? It tells us the victory is already won. And it warns us with respect to where our allegiance must lie.