

Three Evil Influences

By Leo Chan

Both Christians and non-Christians alike often attribute the devil for the evil in their lives and in the world around them. The phrase, “the devil made me do it” is very common. While this mentality is partially true, it is missing other factors. Solely putting the blame on the devil lessens individual responsibility. It makes the individual into a helpless victim that is attacked by the devil. Clinton Arnold, (2005) author of *3 Crucial Questions About Spiritual Warfare*, writes “the Bible teaches that there are three forms of evil influence that exert their power over the lives of people to lead them into transgression and away from God. These three enemies are ... the world, the flesh, and the devil” (p. 32). These three influences are mentioned in Ephesians 2:1-3 [NIV]:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.

This Bible study will focus on those three enemies, looking at each one in more detail and providing suggestions in how we can safeguard ourselves against each one. Some of this study will be based on Clinton Arnold’s book, as referenced above.

The Reality

The reality is that on our own, we are in a hopeless battle. The odds are stacked up high against us and we will most definitely lose. It is not a matter of if we will lose, it’s a matter of when. These influences work together to bring us down, though sometimes it may be more apparent to us which influence is most prominent (Arnold, 2005). We can think of these influences like a rope with “three distinct strands ... braided together to make a strong rope” (Arnold, 2005, p. 35). It is these influences that hold us in bondage if we do not know Christ. Furthermore, let us not forget that one of these evil influences is the devil, an intelligent being with a free will of his own and is bent on destruction and death into our lives. Before proceeding into discussing each of these evil influences, it

is important to point out that “these three influences are not equal in what they are and in how they operate” (Arnold, 2005, p. 34).

The flesh

Arnold (2005) describes the flesh as “the inner propensity or inclination to do evil. It is the part of our creatureliness tainted by the fall that remains with us until the day we die. It is our continuing connection to this present evil age, which is destined to perish but against which we must struggle now” (p. 34). The flesh impacts both our desires and our thoughts on a regular basis. If we are not living in the Spirit, we will succumb to our flesh. However, if we are living by the Spirit, we will not gratify our sinful nature. (cf. Galatians 5:16).

The world

Arnold (2005) describes the world as:

the unhealthy social environment in which we live. This includes the ungodly aspects of culture, peer pressure, values, traditions, ... customs, philosophies, and attitudes. The world represents the prevailing worldview assumptions of the day that stand contrary to the biblical understanding of reality and biblical values. Our culture has an incredibly profound influence on the way we think and act. It provides us with a complete script for how we conduct our lives. (p. 34)

We are regularly impacted by the world through the media (this is a major way by which we are exposed to the values of the world, seen in advertisements, television, movies, music, to list a few), through people (co-workers, friends, family, classmates) and through our culture (politics, laws, other religions). The impact of the world on our values, perceptions, traditions, philosophies and attitudes is subtle and occurs slowly over time. Little by little, what we see and hear gets engrained into our minds and hearts without us even knowing it.

The devil

Arnold (2005) describes the devil as “an intelligent, powerful spirit-being that is thoroughly evil and is directly involved in perpetrating evil in the lives of individuals as well as on a much larger scale” (p. 35). According to Arnold, the apostle Paul views the devil as “somehow powerfully at work in their lives [non-Christians], presumably not only inciting sin, but keeping them from responding to the mercy and grace in Christ” (p. 35). In addition, the devil is also the ruler of the kingdom of the air (cf.

Ephesians 2:2). Arnold suggests that this implies the devil's role "as leader of a host of other powerful spirits who assist him in carrying out his designs" (p. 35). Furthermore, the devil frequently attacks both the heart and the mind of believers. These are two key areas of attack, for the heart and the mind affect what we think, feel, see, understand, perceive and do. If the devil can get a foothold into our hearts and/or our minds, he can do significant damage. Often, the enemy gets a foothold through deception and falsehood.

Fighting back

While our situation may seem bleak, we do have hope. If we have accepted Christ as our Lord and Saviour, He has given us the provisions to stand firm in this battle. Arnold (2005) writes, "only through union with Jesus and experiencing his empowering presence do people have hope for escaping the compelling power of these influences" (p. 35). It is only through Christ that we have a chance to stand against these influences and live the Christian life, "we need Christ not only to free us from the irresistible pull of these forces, but then to help us on our Christian journey. We simply cannot live the Christian life by exerting more effort" (p. 36). Now that we've discussed the roles of each evil influence, we will look at how we can combat them.

Fighting the flesh

Know your areas of weakness(es)

In dealing with our flesh, awareness is crucial. This is the first and most important step in warring against our old self. Before we can deal with the flesh, we need to know what we're up against. We need to identify these area(s) of weakness. While most of us are probably aware of what we struggle with, it is a good idea to ask the Holy Spirit to shed light on our situation and make us aware.

Sometimes our areas of weakness are indicators of a deeper problem at hand. Areas of weakness could include: pride, jealousy, selfishness, lust, greed, envy, to list a few. It's important to be as specific as possible about what the area of weakness is.

Q: What are your area(s) of weakness? Where do you struggle?

Find accountability partners

It is important that we do not try to wage against our old self simply on our own efforts. We should enlist the help of others to keep us accountable and to pray for us regularly about what we struggle with. Through prayer, we are arming each other for spiritual warfare (Arnold, 2005). Arnold calls this form of prayer “as “praying for the healthy” ... this [is] praying specifically for individuals within the group to resist temptation in their personal areas of vulnerability; praying that “they might be able to stand on the evil day”” (p. 45). Many Christians struggle with their weaknesses in silence. They are too ashamed of their actions and feel that they will be condemned and not accepted by others. Thus, they live in secrecy and in turn, bondage. It is a crucial first step for Christians in these types of situations to find a person or group of people in which they can share their struggles with. This sets them on the path to restoration and life.

Q: Do you have anyone in your life in whom you can be completely vulnerable with and share your struggles? If you don't, it's important to find people that can do that for you. If you can't think of anyone, pray about it and ask God to bring you someone.

Flee from sin and temptation

After we've identified our area(s) of weakness, we must be intentional in dealing with it. This is where we exercise creativity and think of ways we can safeguard our lives. If we have trouble thinking of these things, we can enlist the help of our accountability partners for suggestions. For example, if materialism was a struggle, a safeguard could be to avoid reading flyers in newspapers and magazines and to avoid walking around malls. A more drastic measure could be to not have credit cards and/or debit cards. Matthew 5:29 [NIV] says, “if your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.” While this statement should not be taken literally, it does imply that we should to take drastic measures to safeguard our lives from sin and temptation.

Q: What kind of safeguards can you employ to protect against your weakness(es)?

Claim the promises of God

While the flesh is still part of who we are, remember that the old self is no longer who we are. When we accepted Christ, He rescued us out of the dominion of darkness into the kingdom of light (cf. Col 1:13). In that act, the very core of our identity changed. We once were mastered by our sinful nature, but now the sinful nature no longer has mastery over us. We belong to Christ. Romans 6:6-7 [NIV], says “For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.”

Rely on the Spirit

In and of ourselves, we cannot stand against our flesh. We must ask the Spirit to fill us and help us in our struggle. We must depend and rely on the Spirit of God. As we’ve discussed earlier, if we are living by the Spirit, we will not gratify our sinful nature. (cf. Galatians 5:16).

Fighting the world

Saturate yourself in the truth

We are constantly bombarded by the world and its message. Everyday, we are exposed to multitudes of messages from advertisements. Advertisements teach us at least two things: materialism and consumerism. We see and hear advertisements everywhere we go, on public transit, on billboards, on television, in newspapers, in magazines, on the radio. It is impossible to go a day without being exposed to these things. Even if we do not consciously buy into these messages, we are still being exposed to them regularly. In addition to advertisements, the values and morals of the world are seen through the arts: music, television, film, theatre, to name a few. Lastly, we are exposed to the values and morals of the world as we interact with different people.

All this is to say that we are heavily saturated in the ways of the world on a regular basis. One can’t help but be influenced by the world. It is likely that many of these values and morals are deeply ingrained in us. Yet, despite all this, we do have a way to counteract the ways of the world. Since we’ve established that we are heavily saturated in the ways of the world, the only way to combat this is to saturate ourselves regularly in the Word of God. This is the only way we can have a proper

Biblical perspective on life. The Scriptures tell us to live in the world, but be not of it. We do this by renewing our mind regularly on the ways and teachings of the Lord. Paul writes in Romans 12:2 [NIV], “do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” This is an ongoing process, “Christians then embark on a lifelong task of discerning where these unhealthy influences are still operative in their lives, rooting them out, and adopting godly attitudes and values” (Arnold, 2005, p. 35).

Q: How often do you engage in the media (i.e. watching television, listening to music)?

Q: How can you saturate yourself in God’s Word?

Be careful of what you watch, what you listen to and what you do

1 Corinthians 10:23 [NIV] says ““Everything is permissible”—but not everything is beneficial.” Since we are constantly exposed to the arts and media, it’s important we be mindful of them. As Christians, we don’t have to isolate ourselves from every single potential worldly influence. We don’t have to segregate ourselves from listening to secular music or watching secular television programming or reading secular books. But, we shouldn’t be naïve either. It’s important to ask ourselves the following question: “Is what I’m watching, listening to, doing, beneficial? Does it please the Spirit of God?” Why fill our heart and minds with garbage if instead, we can fill it with life, the Word of God?

Also, it’s important that we are mindful of the types of people we hang around with. Not every person we interact with is a positive influence on us. Our friends have a bigger impact on us than most of us know or care to admit. Again, this is not to say that we are to isolate ourselves from others, but rather, we should be intentional in the types of people we choose to associate with regularly (our closest friends).

Q: Do you regularly watch/listen to things that contain unbiblical values and morals? Is it really worth it to watch/listen to it regularly?

Q: What types of friends do you have? Are they the types of friends that encourage, support, love you? Or do they constantly pressure you into doing things against your will? Do they constantly discourage and hurt you?

Fighting the devil

Saturate yourself in the truth

The devil is an intelligent being. He knows how to entice us into sin. He knows our weaknesses. He knows that the hearts and minds of believers are two crucial areas of attack and he is bent on bringing destruction. As discussed, the devil does this through deception and falsehood. If we succumb to his lies, he has gotten a foothold into our hearts and/or our minds. Deception and falsehood, by nature, are not easily detected. We need wisdom and discernment to recognize it for what it truly is: lies. In Matthew 4, when Jesus was being tempted in the desert, Satan tried to use deception and falsehood to trick Jesus. Yet, we see that Jesus knew Satan was twisting the words of Scripture and taking them out of context. Jesus exposed Satan's tactics with the truth, the Word of God. We also expose deception and falsehood through the truth. We must know what the Word says. In Ephesians 6, the first piece of spiritual armour that Paul tells us to put on is the belt of truth. The belt of truth is foundational. It must be worn before every other piece of armour. If we do not have the truth, we have no basis on which to stand and we will be tossed too and fro like the waves of the ocean. Even if we do know the truth, our emotions and feelings can easily overcome us and cloud our judgment. Thus, we must actively guard both our hearts and our minds. We cannot allow our hearts and our minds dictate our response. We must hold every thought, and may I suggest every feeling captive to Christ (cf. 2 Corinthians 10:5).

Fight against the flesh and the world

We've discussed the fact that the flesh, the world and the devil work together to bring us down. Because the devil is an intelligent being, he knows how to entice us into sin through our flesh and the world. Thus, if we become serious against fighting the flesh and the world by actively and

intentionally safeguarding our lives and saturating ourselves constantly in the Word of God (as previously suggested), we are also fighting against the devil.

Closing Words

The battle ahead is long and gruesome. We've seen that there are three evil influences that are bent on our destruction. We have seen that on our own, we are helpless. We simply cannot stand against these influences on our own accord. But there is hope! If we have believed in Christ Jesus as our Lord and Saviour, He has given us the resources we need to stand firm. We have the victory in Him, but "our victory through Him is not automatic. He wants to give us help and lead us into the joy of overcoming our flesh [and the world and the enemy], but it all rests on a close, continuous fellowship with Him ... we all have this inner battle ready to flare up ... at any time, and this potential conflict will be with us until the Lord takes us to heaven" (Webster, 1993, p. 78-79). With the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, intentional living and the truth of the Word, we will have the ability to stand victorious against these influences. Amen!

Bibliography

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