

We live in a world full of warfare. That fact was made abundantly clear to us this past week after 13 U.S. military personnel and nearly 200 Afghans lost their lives in an attack on Kabul's airport. There is war to be found all over the world. Violence to be found in every nation on the planet.

But as Christians, we know that this physical violence is just the tip of the iceberg. Paul spells that out for us in our Epistle lesson for today: *“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”*

The violence that you see on the news is not the only form of violence that we wrestle with. The evil you see from terrorists is not the only form of evil in this world. The darkness that often feels like it is surrounding us, suffocating us, is not just a physical darkness. It is spiritual darkness.

And, in fact, this spiritual darkness is where the real battle is being waged. I don't mean to diminish the service of our armed forces or police or any other civil authority. But the reality spelled out for us in scripture is that the Taliban, ISIS, and every other physical power in this world isn't really our primary concern. Not as Christians.

Because the spiritual work of Satan and his demons is a far greater threat. It's a threat not just to our mortal lives, but to our immortal souls. And that is something that is easy for us to forget about.

The phrase “spiritual warfare” makes a lot of Lutherans pretty uncomfortable. And, perhaps, rightly so. Luther and many Reformers of his day were adamant that Christians need not fear spiritual oppression. Continually searching for the presence of demons behind every misfortune that occurs to a person is likely only to draw them away from the comfort of God's Word. Better to focus on the love of Christ, which we know with certainty, rather than speculate about the influence of demons.

If that were as far as our attitudes went, I think we'd be in pretty good shape. Unfortunately, I'm afraid we often go one step further. Instead of disarming the power of Satan with the Word of God, we end up denying it altogether. “Oh, all that demon stuff is charismatic nonsense. There are no invisible little creatures with horns and pitchforks running around making me do bad things.” And even worse, we become so rationalistic about it all that even God starts to lose his power too. “God just wants me to be a good person. There's nothing all that spiritual about it.”

Make no mistake, my friends, if you deny the work of Satan and his minions, then logically you also deny the fall of man, you deny countless stories of the Old Testament, you deny the veracity of the Gospels, and you deny the inspiration of St Paul. In short, you cannot accept the Bible without accepting that Satan is real and is active in our world. Christians have a powerful enemy, a ruler of darkness and a spiritual force of evil. But we also have a God of even greater might, who does work in very spiritual ways for the protection of his people.

Spiritual warfare is a real thing. Because there really is a spiritual war being waged all around us. So the real question is, “How do we fight in this war? Do we fight in this war? What does this war look like?”

I remember years ago reading the book *This Present Darkness* by Frank Peretti. The title itself is a reference to our Epistle lesson and it was about his idea of spiritual warfare. And it was a grand epic, depicting angelic battles, dramatic exorcisms, and physical demonic oppression. A battle in which humanity took an active part in fighting off demons on a regular basis.

And Peretti certainly isn't alone in his depiction of a battle between God and Satan in which humanity stands on the front lines. A quick Internet search will dig up hundreds – thousands – of stories from missionaries, pastors, and laymen telling of their encounters with the supernatural, many of them no doubt truthful and real. Perhaps you've heard similar fantastic tales. Is this what our lives as Christians should look like?

I'm not so sure. It's not that I want to completely refute all these stories and accounts of spiritual warfare as entirely off base. Some are, some aren't. But mostly, I'm afraid that they often send us diving headfirst into the problem I mentioned earlier.

All of this talk of battling the forces of evil with physical strength, or incantations, or religious ritual, or even extra-fervent prayers ignores the fact that Christ has already defeated all these powers. We are children of God, heirs to His kingdom. Satan has no more power over us than he had to keep Christ in the tomb. And if there is any small victory that Satan might win over us, it's to get us so distracted with fear and misplaced confidence in our own strength that we forget that we are baptized with the blood of Christ and a part of his eternal family.

So it seems like we're ending up at two extremes. Either we deny spiritual warfare and risk denying Scripture, or we embrace spiritual warfare and risk empowering Satan. But frankly, I don't agree with either one of these answers. Because I think when we accept either one, we miss the point of Paul's words for us in the Epistle lesson today. For he does not end with his description of the demonic forces at work around us, but also gives us picture of what that fight looks like. We read:

*“Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.”*

I'm sure that this is among the most commonly quoted passages of Scripture, and understandably so. Even today, the images are vivid and the analogy easy to follow. And it's easy, with all this talk of armor and weaponry, to jump to the conclusion that the battle with Satan is an epic duel in which only one will emerge victorious. But let's move past the analogy for a moment to look at what Paul is actually saying.

First we have the basic body armor: the belt of truth, breastplate of righteousness, and shoes of the Gospel. How exactly is “truth” a defense against the devil? Well, simply put, Satan is the father of lies. It was a failure of truth that proved fatal to mankind in the Garden of Eden. It is lies, deception, and backstabbing that regularly destroy churches. And it is the loss of absolute truth that is leading an entire generation away from God and His Word. Telling the truth seems so simple, but it is a powerful defense against the schemes of our adversary.

So also is righteousness. Plain righteous living. I'm not talking about perfection here. We are sinful creatures in need of God's continual mercy. But that doesn't mean we are exempt from making good, Godly choices. And those choices strengthen the church and its people. As St Paul says in Romans 12, sinful behavior like vengeance and pride will only overcome the believer's life with evil, but a life lived in love and peace will show the power of God to the world around us and *“overcome evil with good.”*

Finally, the Gospel itself is a protection for us. Or, more specifically, the readiness that comes from the Gospel. The readiness to embrace the Gospel when Satan tempts us with despair. The readiness to proclaim the Gospel to all who challenge our faith. As St Peter says, we must, *“always [be] prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.”* The Gospel is that hope. And the more we know God's great love and forgiveness, the more ready we will be to put on those shoes and run wherever the Spirit leads us.

So we are given basic armor to wear, but St Paul has tools to offer us as well. We carry three vital items in this battle against Satan. First, God has given us the shield of faith to extinguish the arrows of the evil one. The faith to endure hardship and persecution. The faith that resists doubt and temptation. The faith to withstand the worst that Satan can throw at us. The faith to endure in our spiritual warfare even in a world torn apart by physical warfare.

And, right along side that shield, close to our minds, is the helmet of salvation. The constant reminder that we are the baptized children of God. That Christ has defeated Satan and bought for us new life. That victory is not dependent upon our skill, but upon Christ's skill when he rose from the dead.

So far we've heard a list of things to defend us against Satan's attacks: truth, righteousness, the Gospel, faith, salvation. But there is only one weapon by which we can attack: the Word of God. Just as Christ used the Word of God to disarm the Pharisees, cast out demons, and turn back the temptations of the devil in the wilderness, so also it is our mightiest weapon as well. A weapon of truly divine origin because it is The Word, Jesus Christ himself.

So let's boil this down a bit. What does Paul say spiritual warfare really is? Well, it's speaking the truth. It's living righteously. It's proclaiming the Gospel. It's having faith. It's remembering our baptism. And it's knowing God's Word. In short, spiritual warfare is living as a Child of God. It's discipleship. It's living a Christian life.

And you know, as simplistic as that sounds, it's the hardest task he could possibly ask of us. Living day to day under the constant assault of a sinful world, sinful flesh, and the founder of sin himself. It requires every tool that God has given us.

But we don't do it alone. As St Paul points out at the end of our lesson, we do it with prayer to a loving God and with the companionship of the Holy Spirit. The great comforter himself. The one who picks us up off the battlefield when we fall, washes off the dirt, heals our wounds, and sends out to fight another day.

Frank Peretti was right. There is a very "present darkness" in this world. It has been oppressing mankind since the beginning of time and it still oppresses mankind today. But Satan's end is coming soon. And God has privileged His church to be a part of that victory.

Yes, it's a hard battle we fight. But we fight it with the tools God has given us. We fight it with the strength that God provides in Word and Sacrament. And we fight it with the confidence that the battle, really, is already won. Amen.