

Preparing for Spiritual Battle: Part 1

1 John 2.12-17

John has ‘laid his cards on the table’: All Christians can have fellowship with God – know Him *intimately*. It isn’t automatic: It will be a spiritual battle, but it’s one every believer can win. John begins by reminding us of two things: Our assets, and our enemy – the world.

- Know Your Assets: Children, Fathers, and Young Men (12-14)

- Children: Our *relationship* to God
- Fathers: Our *familiarity* with God
- Young Men: Our *strength* from God

- Don’t Love the World: It’s Passing Away (15-17)

- Lust of the flesh: *What I want to do*
- Lust of the eyes: *What I want to have*
- Pride of life: *What I want to be*

Bottom line: *Where is your heart?*

1 John 2.12-17 (combined translation)

I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for His name’s sake. I am writing to you, fathers, because you have come to know the One who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I have written to you, children, because you have come to know the Father. I have written to you, fathers, because you have come to know the One who is from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, God’s word remains in you, and you have overcome the evil one. Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life – is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever.

In his book *Ride the Thunder*, NBBCer Richard Botkin tells a story of valor and bravery during the Vietnam War. He begins by reminding the reader of what was happening in the world at that time. In the years following the defeat of Germany and Japan in the Second World War, a new scourge was spreading misery and death around the world. Botkin writes:

The map was turning Red. From Fortress America in late 1954, the world view was not encouraging. The cancer of Communism seemed inexcisable, popping up and spreading with creeping momentum. . . The growing population of enslaved peoples dimmed the brilliance of total victory from World War II.

In passing, it's worth noting that in American today, cultural and political events are once again exhibiting a "creeping momentum" in the direction of the "cancer of Communism." Many who have been deceived are blindly welcoming the slavery of socialism and communism that has destroyed the lives of tens of millions in the last century.

What Richard Botkin was alluding to is the incessant attempt of evil rulers to defeat other nations, and enslave those who have been enjoying freedom. As President Reagan famously said, "Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction. It has to be fought for and defended by each generation."

Just as this is true in the physical realm, so too it is true in the spiritual realm, except that instead of facing physical enemies who seek to bring down our country, Christians are facing what the Apostle Paul called "spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6.12), which are seeking, in the words of Jesus, to "steal, kill, and destroy" (John 10.10a).

If a nation ceases to recognize the enemies of freedom, they will eventually lose their freedom and be enslaved by others. As believers in Jesus Christ, Christians have been set free from slavery to sin and death, and are children of God. As Galatians 5.1 declares, "It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject to a yoke of slavery." If we do not recognize the enemies of our freedom in Christ, we can be easily deceived into wandering away from God, and embracing sin once again. The key is for us to be prepared for the spiritual battles that will come. That is what we are going to be doing today and next Sunday.

Let me restate this: Up until now in John's first epistle, he has been exhorting us to live in fellowship with God – to 'walk in the light'. He has instructed us to recognize and confess our sin, and always obey Christ's commandments. But John knew that "spiritual forces of wickedness" would never stop trying to steal the freedom and joy of our fellowship with God. So in I Jn. 2.12-27, he prepares us for the coming battle.

- Know Your Assets: Children, Fathers, Young Men (12-14)

If you enlist in the Army, before you ever get into combat you will be well-prepared. You'll know proper procedures, how to use your weapons, and strategies for defeating an enemy. In verses 12-14 John wants us to know our spiritual assets before we go into spiritual battle – assets that are all sourced in God. He does this by figuratively referring to us three ways...

- Children: Our *relationship* to God

In v12, he says, "I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for His name's sake." The most fundamental asset every Christian has in spiritual battle is *knowing* that my sins are forgiven. John is here pointing back to what he talked about in 1.5-2.2 – because we have come into a relationship with God, we can have fellowship with Him. We don't have to hide when we sin: We can come to Him boldly, confessing our sin, knowing that He will never forsake us. As Romans 8.37-39, in the spiritual battle of life, we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us! Why? Because *nothing* can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord!

As your pastor, I am acutely aware that I am a target of Satan's attacks. Each week he especially tries to attack me before I preach. If he can distract me, or get me to fall into some sin, he knows my message will be weakened.

I often prepare for our services by playing some hymns on the piano. If you grew up singing hymns, the lyrics never leave you. As I play hymns, the words of faith and grace wash over me. But you may notice that I often play the same hymn last. It was written by Norman Clayton, and it goes like this:

*Jesus, my Lord, will love me forever,
From Him no pow'r of evil can sever;
He gave His life to ransom my soul,
Now I belong to Him.
Now I belong to Jesus,
Jesus belongs to me,
Not for the years of time alone,
But for eternity.*

Our first asset as in spiritual battle is knowing that we have an unbreakable relationship with God. I belong to Jesus, and Jesus belongs to me – not just for time, but for eternity!

- Fathers: Our *familiarity* with God

John's second designation for Christians is as *fathers*. Twice he writes to them as 'fathers' "because you have come to know the One who is from the beginning." By using the perfect tense in Greek, John means that we have come to know God *intimately*. Our second asset in spiritual battle is this intimate relationship – our familiarity with God. This is what John wrote about in 1 Jn. 2.3-11. As we learned last

week, the key to knowing God *intimately*, to being *familiar* with Him, is keeping His commandments. And to keep His commandments, you need to know them.

In Phil. 3, Paul recites all the trophies in his personal spiritual trophy case: He was circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, the tribe of Benjamin, a Pharisee, and he kept the Law perfectly. He checked all the boxes! Then he met Jesus, and they were nothing to him any more; he writes, "I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil. 3.8).

Like some of you, I was raised in a Christian home. I trusted Christ as my Savior when I was five years old. I was baptized at the age of twelve. I attended youth group all through high school, and went to Bible college for three years after that. To a casual observer, it looked like I was doing well with God. I wasn't. I was running my life my way. When God got hold of my life, the first thing I did was give four years to getting to know His Word – and I haven't stopped learning ever since.

- Young Men: Our *strength* from God

Finally, our third asset is found in the description *young men*. In v13 John says, "I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one." Then he builds on this in v14: "I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, God's word remains in you, and you have overcome the evil one."

To be ready to face our spiritual enemy, we need to be strong spiritually. You become strong spiritually when God's Word *remains* or *abides* in you. The psalmist said that a 'blessed' or

happy person – *his delight is in the Law of the Lord, and in His Law he meditates day and night*. Preparation – spending time in God’s Word – is the key to spiritual victory! Someone has said, “Victorious warriors win the battle and then go out to war. Defeated warriors go out to war and then seek to win the battle.” And why is this so important??? Because of our spiritual enemy...

- Don’t Love the World: It’s Passing Away (15-17)

The key here is in v15. This is the only command in these verses: *Do not love the world or the things in the world; If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him*.

I’ve visited many different countries, and personally, I don’t know of any other country where there is a greater tendency or temptation for Christians to try to love God and love the world at the same time. John says it’s impossible. This is what Jesus was talking about when He said, “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” James writes that whoever wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God (Js. 4.4)! So what is “the world”? John distills it down to three lusts:

- Lust of the flesh: *What I want to do*
- Lust of the eyes: *What I want to have*
- Pride of life: *What I want to be*

I don’t need to explain the different ways these lusts get to us. I know how they get to me. You know how they get to you.

It’s enough to know that all these lusts are deceptive: They promise happiness, and deliver sadness. They trick us into thinking something wrong is right. If we don’t take them to the Lord, they can even control us. We’ve all seen it, and experienced it so many times, that it hurts to think about it.

The Heat: Steelworker Lives and Legends is a collection of stories written by steelworkers about what it was like to work in a steel mill in the last half of the 20th century. Joe Gutierrez was a steelworker for 42 years, and authored a story entitled “Snow Danced in August.” For years in the mills, when strips of red-hot steel rolled over pads in a cooling tower, silvery dust flakes floated in the air. It was so beautiful, especially at night, that workers and visitors flocked to the magical sight. Then, they discovered that the dust was asbestos. “Everybody breathed it,” Gutierrez wrote. As a result, Gutierrez and many other plant workers eventually suffered the slow, choking grip of asbestos poisoning. In retrospect, Gutierrez wrote this:

“Who am I? I’m everybody. Can’t walk too far now. I get tired real fast and it hurts when I breathe, sometimes. And to think we used to fight over that job.”

Isn’t that just like the world? How many things in this world have the allure of silver flakes in a steel mill? The things of this world may be enchanting, but they are deadly.

Do you ever long to be in heaven? I don’t mean that you have a death wish – I mean that your redeemed heart has a moment where you long to be with the Lord? I don’t know about you, but when I do, one thing that I long for most is to be free from the world and all its lusts. You see, there isn’t any more lust in heaven because there isn’t any more sin.

That's why John adds this in v17: *The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever.*

What does it mean to do the will of God? The clearest answer to that is to do what John has been writing about – keeping His commandments. When I keep His commandments, I prove that I love Him. When I love the world, and the things in the world, the love of the Father is not in me. When I love God, I joyfully keep His commandments, and the lusts of this world lose their hold on me.

Bottom line: *Where is your heart?*

John has laid out for us our spiritual assets: Our sins are forgiven, we have intimacy with God, and we have His word. Just reflecting on that is more than enough to make us want to give Christ our hearts.

John has also laid out our spiritual options: On one side is the world and its lusts. On the other is the will of God. There is no middle ground. There is no compromise. You either love the world, or you love God. *Where is your heart?*

Digging Deeper

1. In 1 John 1.1-2.11, the apostle exhorts his readers (and us) to have fellowship with God – to “walk in the light, as He is in the light” (1.7a). This fellowship is open to all believers when we confess our sin (1.9) – agree with God about our sin. Jesus is our Advocate with God the Father (2.1), and His blood cleanses us from all sin (1.7b)! We maintain fellowship with God by obeying His commandments. John describes this as knowing God intimately (2.3-4) and abiding in Him (2.6). He points specifically to Jesus’ command to “love one another” (John 13.34) as being a key to having fellowship with God. Assuming you sincerely desire to live in fellowship with God, what deceptions or distortions do you think Satan would use in an attempt to derail your spiritual growth? To prepare for spiritual battle, what truths about who we are in Christ would be good to review?
2. In 1 Jn. 2.12-14, John designates his readers three ways. If John was distinguishing different levels of spiritual maturity in his audience, the order in which he lists them – *little children*, *fathers*, and *young men*, makes no sense (we’d expect little children, then young men, then fathers). Instead, John uses these designations (twice) to point to their ‘spiritual assets’ as they face the inevitable attacks of Satan. What does John say is true of believers as *little children* (12, 13c)? How does this correspond with what John wrote in 1.5-2.2? What is true of believers as *fathers* (13a, 14a)? How does this correspond to what John wrote in 2.3-11? What is true of believers as *young men* (13b, 14b)? How does this correspond to what follows in 2.15-27? Bonus: John uses two different Greek words for *little children* here: τεκνίον (*teknion*) in v12, and παιδίον (*paidion*) in v13c. Why?
3. In v15, John makes another of his blunt statements: *If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him*. He’s not alone! Read Rom. 8.7; 12.2; James 1.27; 4.4. What are the consuming drives of the world (v16)? How did these ‘lusts’ lead to the Fall in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3.6)? How were they used by Satan in his temptation of Jesus (Matt. 4.1-11)? What’s the lasting significance of a life tied to the world (17a)? A life tied to God’s will (17b)? *Only one life, ‘twill soon be past; Only what’s done for Christ will last!*