

Fighting the Darkness is Dangerous

If you really watch the news there will be no doubt in your mind that evil is a real thing. You can't miss the fact that evil exists and is loose in the world.

Last week we talked about life as an adventure; how when you say yes to God, God takes you on the adventure of your life and through that, the miraculous can happen. And that's very exciting, but it's not all of the story. Your life is more than just an adventure. The Bible uses many metaphors to express what life is about. It says life is a journey, a school, a race we run. But a major Biblical metaphor is that life is a battle.

I think we'd all agree life can be tough. This ain't heaven. You're in a battle each day that's part of a continuing war between good and evil in your life and in the world. In fact, the second most used Biblical analogy for being a follower of Christ is being a soldier. The Bible uses words like fight, conquer, overcome, warfare, victory. It's clear life is a battle. The problem is, some of us have been AWOL – absent without leave – and many people don't understand it clearly.

In Ephesians 6:12 Paul says, *"...we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places."* This isn't some insignificant thing. This battle isn't some pick-up game of basketball where you say, "It doesn't matter who wins, we're just playing for fun." It's serious. What you do has major consequences for you and for the world. Your life matters. It has significance and eternal implications. This is a dangerous and momentous fight. We're in a battle between good and evil every day and the fight has consequences. Many people desert in the face of the enemy. In Matthew 24:12 Jesus said, *"Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold."* So what does God want us to do about evil? Today we're going to look at three things God wants us to do.

The first thing is **1. Face Up to Evil in Your Life.** The most common reaction to evil in our world is to just deny it exists - to chalk up oppression, torment and injustice to bad luck, bad timing or bad karma. Some think evil doesn't exist, others try to blame it on some other force. Most of us just try to close our eyes or change the channel, because we feel like we've got enough trouble, challenges and struggles, on our plate without worrying about people we don't even know.

A second reason I think we ignore it is that if we acknowledge it then we may feel we have to do something about it. But it's with all the information available to us it's hard to claim ignorance and, anyway, the Bible tells us that apathy, ignorance or inaction are never appropriate responses to evil. James 4:17 says, *"Anyone who knows the right thing to do, but does not do it, is sinning."* So here's the hard, Biblical reality: If you know there's evil in the world – and face it... you do – and you choose to do nothing about it, you **are** sinning. It's as bad as doing the evil yourself.

This is nothing new for believers. In the Old Testament Molech was the Ammonite god of fire. Part of worshipping him was to take children and burn them as a sacrifice. God said in Leviticus 20:4-5 NIV: *"If the members of the community close their eyes when that man sacrifices one of his children to Molek... I myself will set my face against him and his family and will cut them off from their people together with all who follow him in prostituting themselves to Molek."* If they would ignore the evil they would suffer the same consequences as the ones who did the evil.

In our world evil happens twenty-four/seven. There's not a moment when evil isn't happening in profound, perverse, painful ways. Every day there is human trafficking - People being sold and bought as slaves. Human trafficking is the third largest international crime industry (behind illegal drugs and arms trafficking). It reportedly generates a profit of \$32 billion every year and there are twenty-seven million men, women, boys and girls who are slaves - more than at any other time in history. It's not a thing of the past. People are bought and sold today with no rights, future, dignity or hope.

Each year more than two million children are exploited in the global sex trade. Two million! Maybe you think it doesn't happen here. Well, this minute, there are seventeen thousand children in the U.S. being exploited through sex trafficking. The average age a person enters the sex trade in the U.S. is 12 to 14-year-old. That's the average!

One in five women in our world is a victim of rape in her lifetime. Women in India are sold by their husbands, families or villages into prostitution. In Cambodia on the Street of the Little Flowers young girls are held behind padlocked doors until dark, then western tourists buy little girls for three hundred dollars a week. They take them to their hotel rooms, do whatever they want and bring them back at the end of the week. *Dateline* did an expose of this a few years ago.

You may be wishing you hadn't come today because this is so painful to hear. We don't want to face it, but we have to. And it's not just in other countries. *Reader's Digest* had a story of Shyima, who was born in Alexandria, Egypt and was sold at ten by her poor family to a couple who moved her to California where she lived as a slave, working night and day; living in a closet. It was five years before someone figured out something wasn't right in that family.

How are we supposed to respond? What should we do about evil in our world? We expose it and face up to it. Ephesians 5:11 says, *"Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them."* We have to expose evil so we can face up to it and do something.

But the problem isn't just that there's evil out there – there's also evil within ourselves. It's not just them, it's us too. **We** do evil. Now, we prefer to deny that. We say things like, "I just had a bad day.... I have some trouble with this... I struggle with that..." We don't want to call what we do evil. We don't want to call what we think evil. We want to rationalize it.

Some folk like to think people are basically good but sometimes do evil. That's not true. We're basically evil and only have any capacity to do good with God's help. Romans 7:18 says, *"I know that good does not live in me—that is, in my human nature. For even though the desire to do good is in me, I am not able to do it."* Romans 7:25 says, *"In my mind I really want to obey God's law, but because of my sinful nature I am a slave to sin."* The truth is, given the right circumstances, every one of us is capable of *any* sin. If you don't know that, you're in denial about the depths and capacity for evil in your own soul.

The "Phantom of the Opera" was my mother's favorite play. She would listen to the music from it over and over. It's the story of a man who was deformed, scarred and broken. He was rejected by society, so he lived in the dark caves underneath the Paris Opera House. His face was horrible to look at so he covered it with a mask.

You and I are scarred, wounded and broken too. Maybe not physically, but in our hearts and souls. We hide it, hoping no one will ever know things we've thought, said or done.

But as we face up to evil in our world we have to face up to the evil in ourselves. If we look at it as "I'm one of the good guys. They're the bad guys." We're fooling ourselves and will never be able to help anyone. All we'll be is judgmental. But if we face the evil in our own hearts, the brokenness in our souls; if we're willing to deal with the discomfort, we can receive God's mercy and forgiveness and then help others who are broken, acknowledging we too are broken souls saved only by the mercy of God. Proverbs 28:13 says, *"People who conceal their sins will not prosper, but if they confess and turn from them, they will receive mercy."* You need God's mercy for the evil in you. Take an honest look in the mirror. Stop pretending you're the good guy and admit you're broken and in need of God.

Then, the next step after you face up to evil is to **2. Resist Evil in Every Form**. Stop ignoring or denying it, but you also have to move against it. There's got to be something in you that can't live with it any more. Psalm 97:10 says, *"You who love the Lord, hate evil!"* You might be surprised to hear that believers should hate something, but we're to hate evil.

What sorts of things have disturbed you recently? Was your favorite contestant voted off your favorite show? Maybe you're disturbed there's nothing you think is good on TV anymore. Maybe your weight disturbed you or achiness or a neighbor that's annoying or the traffic on Route 23.

My point is most things we're bothered by are really only inconveniences. Yet the things that should disturb us, we don't pay real attention to. We tsk, tsk, tsk then just let it go. But God was so disturbed by evil that God left heaven and came to earth as a human being. Jesus lived here, suffered and died because he was so disturbed by evil and how that evil separated us from God and one another. If it's that important to God, shouldn't it be important to us?

Let me give you at least four ways to resist evil: First, **Don't Compromise With Evil**. We have become so fearful of being called small-minded that we've let evil be called good. Once you start allowing small evils to be normal, it gets harder and harder to distinguish between good and evil. Proverbs 25:26 says, *"If the godly give in to the wicked, it's like polluting a fountain or muddying a spring."* When you start compromising you begin to lose the ability to tell the difference between good and bad.

Now I'm not talking about differences in taste or preference. That's when we SHOULD compromise. In politics and in relational matters, compromising with one another is the right way to go. Being hard-headed is just stupid.

But when you encounter evil, you can't cooperate with it. Martin Luther King Junior said, "He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it." Accepting evil without protesting against it,

is cooperating with it. If we don't say and do something, we're collaborators who allowed it to happen. Compromise with evil eventually leads to becoming part of it.

That brings us to the second way to resist evil: **Don't Participate In Evil**. Exodus 23:2 says "*You must not follow the crowd in doing wrong... do not be swayed by the crowd to twist justice.*" History is full of mob mentality. It happened in 1930s Germany. Most Germans didn't start off wanting to be part of something evil, they just went along, not doing anything themselves at first, but soon they were part of it.

One part of the membership vows of the United Methodist Church is to "...resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves." This isn't the time to be fearful or run. It's the time to resist. Psalm 23 tells us why. "*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for You are with me.*" God is with us. Even as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we don't need to be afraid of evil. Not because it can't harm us - it can - but because God is with us.

Resistance is where you use your skills, background, talents, energy... every bit of who you are to actively resist the darkness. Evil is advancing and we have to use every resource to resist it and push it back.

In war there's often a resistance fighting against oppression - people who fight back in the midst of evil, who say, "I won't go down without a fight." In World War II the resistance in France, Germany, Poland, Austria, included some of the bravest fighters ever known. We're in a war with evil and we must be among the bravest and fiercest fighters against evil.

I love the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy because it's all about resistance. If you haven't read the classic series of books or seen the movies, the story is about the forces of good against the forces of evil. The forces of good include a Hobbit - a small guy - fighting an evil that's much larger, better equipped, with more troops and artillery. Yet the forces of good continue to resist as the forces of evil work to take over.

What I love is, it's a story of courage, of being willing to pay the price to keep evil from winning. Even if you won't survive, you fight; you resist; you stand. In the end with all these forces set against one another, it's this little guy and his best friend who make the difference. They're almost overwhelmed by evil but they resist, and when one of them is overcome, the other backs him up, carries the load and helps him fight on.

The *Lord of the Rings* is symbolic fiction written by a Christian man, meant to say and teach something about how we resist evil in the real world.

We **can** resist evil and the third thing to do is to **Prepare to Protect Yourself**. You need protection from evil. Ephesians 6:11-17 tells us about armor we're meant to have - protection given to us by God; armor God provides to protect our hearts and minds. If you don't have that protection you won't do well in the battle. You'll be discouraged. You'll want to walk away; go back to denying. You've got to have the breastplate of righteousness, the helmet of salvation, the belt of truth, the sword of the Spirit; the word of God. That's our protection.

We don't fight with the techniques and strategies that the world uses. The world uses strategies that lead to cruelty and violence. We use God's strategies which are love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, mercy, forgiveness, justice. That's the arsenal of a believer. We fight a different kind of a war with different weapons.

Prayer is an underutilized resource against evil. Don't go off unprepared, just trying to do something. Get in the presence of God first. Get filled with God's love and power.

Then fourth, **Speak Up for Good**. Proverbs 31:8 says, "*Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves; ensure justice for those being crushed.*" Because most of us have it so good, because we have democracy, a legal system that works reasonably well, access to health care, fairly well stocked refrigerators, we tend to believe that the rest of the world has it pretty good too. They don't. There are people who have no one to speak for them. Women who are vulnerable; children with no advocate; desperately poor people... These are all people who need to have a voice.

You may not feel powerful or influential, but you have power. You have influence. You can raise your voice. In fact you must! The word of God tells us that we are to be a voice for those who have no voice. We are speak up for those who are helpless. It is not an option.

Life is a battle and it's a real battle. We are to face evil, not deny it. We are to hate evil, not just accept it. And we are to resist evil, not fear it.

There's one other thing and this is what makes us like Jesus rather than like everyone else: We don't just face up to evil; we don't just resist it; we never return evil for evil, instead we, **3. Overcome Evil with Good**. That's the opposite of what the world does. It's natural when someone hurts you, to want to hurt them back. When somebody

hits me, I want to hit back. If someone slanders you, you want to slander them. But that's not the way to win this battle. Romans 12:21 says, *"Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good."* That's God's way of winning - overcoming evil with good.

Please understand: good and evil are not equal and opposite forces – they ARE opposite but they are definitely NOT equal. Love is far stronger; kindness is far more powerful; good is much greater than evil. Good will win over evil. Ultimately we win. Good triumphs over evil because love can outlast and overcome anything. Jesus came to earth and with his life showed us that you don't destroy evil with evil. You destroy it by overcoming it with good. You don't retaliate. You overcome it with good.

1 John 3:8 says, *"...the Son of God came to destroy the works of the devil."* He came to obliterate it; annihilate it; eradicate it; wipe it out. One day evil is going to come to an end; God will close the books and settle the score. If you want to be on the winning side you better be on God's side, because evil is going to lose. Evil wins battles here and there but the ultimate outcome is, God wins.

My savior isn't a wimp. I get so tired of these wimpy Jesuses that people have. Fake Jesuses who never say anything controversial, never say "That's wrong!" Never demand much. That's not the Jesus I see in the Bible. In fact Jesus often spoke out against evil and hypocrisy and he wasn't slow to say who would be winning and who would lose.

How is God going to overcome evil? Not through government or business or even through charities as wonderful as those are. God's going to do it through the church. Politics are not the hope of the world. Business is not the hope of the world. Education is not the hope of the world. Nothing can change the hearts of people except Jesus Christ. He's the only one who can transform. The hope of the world is the power of Christ through the people of Christ, his family, the Body of Christ. The church is the hope of the world.

In Matthew 16:18 Jesus responded to Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. with this statement *"...on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."* Notice: gates are defensive tools. You use them to defend yourself. When you're being attacked, you close the gate. Who's got the gates? Not us - Hell has the gates. So who's on the offense? Good is on the offense. Good is going after evil. We're not sitting back cowering, saying, "Oh, the world's so bad. It's so scary." No. We are on the offense because love overpowers evil. We're going after the gates of hell. We're busting them down. We don't want anybody going to hell. We want them all in heaven. We want them all on God's side. We want them redeemed. We want everyone to know the love of Jesus. We want evil replaced with good. We're on the offensive.

You were shaped to serve God. You were created to combat evil. You are called to defeat evil. When you don't fulfill what God designed and called you for then you're either going to feel unfulfilled, or you'll find something else to battle, because the struggle is built into you. You'll pick unimportant things, traditions and preferences and other things to fight for.

As a local church we're called to fight the good fight; called to take on the sources and the forces of evil in the world. We're going to do it by doing what Jesus did - live a life overcoming evil with good – personally, on a daily basis; locally on a daily basis; globally when we get the opportunity.

I want to use my life to overcome evil with good because I decided a long time ago I'm not going to waste my life. And I don't want you to waste your life. This is what you were born for and then born again for: to conquer evil.

Some of us have been hurt in major ways by evil - abused, misused, neglected, hurt by evil in our lives. I want to say this to you: God is not just a God of love. God is a God of justice and God has made a promise that God is going to settle the score one day.

Fighting the darkness is dangerous. Evil doesn't go down without a fight. Evil will inflict as many casualties as it can on us as we fight to overcome. In this series we're talking about surrender, but it's not a surrender to evil, it's giving everything to God. If you surrender to God, God will take all those painful things that have hurt you in life; the evil that has been done to you and the evil you've done and overcome it with good. Let's Pray.