

“Three Enemies”
The World, The Flesh, and The Devil
Downtown
April 11, 2021

Today we will introduce our teaching content for the next few weeks. I want to go back to a series that was interrupted by Covid last year. We had done 1 week when the shut down happened and I want to jump back to it and start over. So this is a sermon that I preached just over a year ago and I want to do it again so that it is fresh and the good news is that most people forget everything I say anyway so for most of you it will be like brand new information.

We want to talk about what Christians have called the 3 enemies of the soul. The world. The flesh. And the devil. We're going to look at the nature of evil both in our society and in ourselves.

Now, I'm aware that very few of you walked in this morning thinking “you know what would really help me out? I could really use some help in fighting the world, the flesh and the devil.” These are probably not things you would have otherwise thought of, but I think if you will extend to me just a bit of trust you'll see as the series unfolds how relevant it actually is.

We will start in the one place in the bible where all three are mentioned in the same place. Ephesians 2. This is where the early church got the language of the three enemies of the soul, language that was used to name the sense that we all feel between right and wrong, good and evil. Both inside ourselves and out in the world. 3 influences set against God and his people. The world, the flesh, and the devil. These 3 enemies of the soul team up to take us down.

Ephesians 2:1-3

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this **world**, following **the prince of the power of the air**, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our **flesh**, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of **mankind**. [emphasis added]

What would you say is the biggest problem or obstacle in your life? The thing that is causing the most amount of misery? The thing that is causing the most struggle or conflict in you? The thing that is causing you to fail to be the person you know you should be?

What's that thing?

- I just work too much. I need a different job. Too stressful or too boring, too insignificant.
- I just need more money. If I had more money, I definitely would not be an anxious person.
- If my kids were quieter and had better listening skills, I guarantee I would not be as angry as I am.
- I need better opportunities, different education, less stress, better coping strategies, a different group leader, different pastor, different church, different city, a different president... and so forth and so on.

We live in a context that almost solely focuses on the material. Every object is a purely physical object. Every event that occurs has a purely physical cause. And thus every problem has a purely physical solution.

- Are you stressed out? Take a vacation.
- Are you unhappy in your marriage? Get a new one... or go to counseling and if that doesn't work... get a new one.

- Depressed? Anxious? Here's some medicine.
- Kids are annoying? Get time away from them.

While these can be real problems and obstacles in our lives, the worldview of the Bible offers a more holistic view than this. The biblical worldview says there is more going on than meets the eye. The Bible opens up for us a whole other dimension of reality - a different lens by which to view good and evil and the tug-of-war we sense in our souls...

The assertion of the Bible is that everything you and I see and sense that is wrong with our lives and with society, traces back to the fact that we are spiritually dead and under the controlling power of these 3 enemies. The world. Our own flesh. And the devil. In the deepest problems in your marriages, in your work, in your finances... in our global economic and political systems. These three enemies are always at work.

This will be the content of our teaching over the next few weeks so let me quickly introduce each of the 3.

First, the world.

Ephesians 2:2

...In which you once walked, following the course of this **world**. [emphasis added]

Another example would be in Romans,

Romans 12:2

Do not conform to the pattern of this world,

In these verses, the world means 'Sinful ways of thinking, living and believing that defy God that become normalized to those living in a society.'

I heard one person say recently, the world is any way that sin is made to seem normal and righteousness is made to seem strange. That's a helpful definition I think.

One example among thousands - A secular society like ours puts the most emphasis on the here and now, by definition. Everything around us prompts us to seize the day. You only live once. Today is all you've got. So decisions that maximize today at the expense of tomorrow are normalized. Practically speaking, one of the ways this shows up, is we go into debt. We don't believe in delaying gratification.

Biblically speaking, according to **1 Timothy 6:12**, we are to "take hold of the eternal life to which we were called when we made our good confession."

We don't seize the day, we seize eternity. Carpe diem is false teaching. It's the world. We are to, for example, store up treasure in heaven.

Accumulation of debt and maximizing our money for the best possible standard of living now is worldly. Yet it's so normal it's what almost everyone does. It's hard to find someone intentionally living below their means so that they can be more generous to store up treasure in heaven. And that's exactly what we mean by "the world." Where it's normal to not operate as God calls people to operate.

Second, Paul refers to our flesh.

Ephesians 2:3

...among whom we all once lived in the passions of our **flesh**, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, [emphasis added]

Once again, much more to come on this, but the way African church father Augustine talked about this is "disordered desires."

We either love the wrong things, or love the right thing in the wrong order. So it's not bad to say love your career. But when you love it more than your child that's a disordered love, and it will wreak havoc in your soul, and that of the people you parent.

It's not bad to love your child. But when you love him or her more than God, that's a disordered love. And it will wreak havoc in you and other people in our society.

To continue the financial example...One of the reasons the accumulation of debt has become normalized is because it plays to our disordered desires for comfort and approval and power and control. They aren't being forced on us, we think we want them. And in this way, the world and our flesh team up against us. The world normalizes something that gets attached to a disordered desire in us, and we think we are getting what we want.

The Devil

Look back at verse 2.

Ephesians 2:2

In which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience

I need you to not think of pointy ears and pitchforks. Feel free to delete from your mind Will Ferrell in a red outfit. When the bible refers to the prince of the power of the air, that's bible language for the devil. I want you to think supernatural, personal evil working to steal, kill and destroy.

I'm gonna ask you to suspend your disbelief as modern rational Americans who think everything has a physical material explanation. We will zoom in on the devil later so if for today you will suspend your disbelief.

In scripture, particularly Jesus' own words, he says the primary way the devil operates is by deception and lies. Elsewhere in scripture, he is called the deceiver. Jesus says that lies are the devil's native language. He operates primarily by deceiving.

One pastor summarized these 3 enemies' relationships with each other this way - Deceitful ideas, (devil) that play to disordered desires, (flesh) that are normalized by a sinful society. (world)

To continue the financial illustration - Our entire economic system is built in part on the deceitful idea that what we currently have is not enough to be content. We continue to buy things believing that contentment is found in purchasing.

And we all participate in this. We talk about new things, subtly encouraging each other into this lifestyle instead of overtly encouraging each other to find contentment in what we already have.

We've been trained to become consumers of products that we do not need.

Or, as the saying goes, "We buy things we don't need with money we don't have to impress people we don't like."

This dynamic doesn't just negatively us as individuals but this becomes institutionalized and systematized into slavery, corporate fraud, commodification of others.

This is just one of the hundreds of examples of how deceitful ideas play to disordered desires that are normalized in a sinful society that have the potential to bring death, decay, and destruction into your life and into our society.

I'll give you another example, from my life. I am 38, squarely in mid-life and I feel it. I do basically the same things every day. That's why when I see some of you and you ask "what's new?" I just say "oh no, I

don't do new things. That's not where I'm at in life." I have 3 very little children who need me or their mom at all times. Every day that I don't have a midlife crisis, I count as a win. And there is a deceitful idea that creeps into my mind as the day winds down. If I will hurry up and get my kids in bed, then I can finally relax, veg out on the couch, watch tv. And that deceitful idea attaches a disordered desire for comfort and escape ahead of my desire to nurture my kids' hearts through bedtime routines.

The world makes this entirely normal...entertainment is a billions of dollars industry, everyone will be talking about that show tomorrow or at some point and I don't want to be the one loser who doesn't know what they are talking about.

And almost dad in my LifeGroup would say this is a tug of war in their souls, every single night. To be present with their children as the day draws to a close, to invest in those opportunities, to go through normal bedtime routines. And then and only then do we turn the page to something else.

That example may or may not apply to you but that's not the point. The point is to show you how this dynamic is at play in all sorts of ways in and around us. In huge ways and in small ways. Where deceitful ideas get attached to disordered desires and then are normalized by a sinful world.

St. John of the Cross:

All the evils to which the soul is subject proceed from the three enemies already mentioned: the world, the devil and the flesh. If we can hide ourselves from these we shall have no combats to fight.

Why is the world and why am I messed up? Because there is evil in us. There are systems and patterns and structures that normalized that evil. There is a hierarchy of supernatural evil that just aggravates, coordinates, and manages the evil within you and outside of you.

In your life right now, you are believing deceitful ideas. They are attaching themselves to disordered desires. And the world around you is making you think it is normal. This is the biggest danger in your life. We don't realize it's happening. In fact, because of our disordered desires, we actually think we are getting what we want!

This is part of what the Bible means when it says we are dead in sin. Like a dead body has no ability to perceive its surroundings or do anything about it, A spiritually dead person is unable to see what is happening around them.

I'll give you an example that won't apply to all of us but I think it will apply to enough of us to be helpful. **This is the normal pattern of American life.** Believing the next thing, right around the corner, will bring a contentment in my soul.

And we rarely catch on to the fact that it's happening. That is what spiritual deadness looks like. This is why simple solutions tend to provide minimal help. Vacations don't really help dead people. Better education is not all that helpful for dead folks. They tend to not learn well. New habits are only so beneficial for someone who is dead. Religious activity and ministry performed by a person dead in sin are like hot sauce on rotten chicken meat. You're just putting stuff on the outside.

Stress reduction doesn't help dead people. We don't first need education. We don't first need better government or rehabilitation or better job opportunities or better parenting or better circumstances. Those are all good things that we should pursue. But better parenting cannot help a dead person.

Dead people need life. Really, I think it's a fair argument that not much else really matters for a dead person until they have life. That's pretty much the only thing relevant, at least initially.

Apart from understanding this, it's hard to really understand why Jesus did what he did. Apart from this, I don't need a savior. I just need some help. I just need a spiritual pick me up. "You can do it, God can help." I need to reduce stress, learn time management, have a mental health day, learn to love myself. I need to realize the strength I already have inside of me. I need a vacation. I need better circumstances. A better job. A better church. Better friends. All of those are fine and good, especially vacations. I love vacations.

But we were dead, under the power of the devil, deceived by the world, controlled by disordered desires. None of those things are going to solve our problem. And there is nothing you can do about it...because you're dead. Dead people cannot change the fact that they are dead.

What we need, is to be saved.

Ephesians 2:4-5 **But God...**

John Stott calls this the "greatest 2 syllables in the English language." When we were dead. Unable to do anything to remedy ourselves or fix our condition. We were helpless, but not hopeless...But God

...being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—

Notice this is all in the past tense. Not "will make us alive" but "made us alive"

It's in the past tense because Paul is referring to what Jesus already did on the cross. He's not talking about a gradual religious process of coming alive, where you slowly become a good, God-fearing person. He's talking about something that Jesus did for you all at once, in the past.

On the cross, Jesus became our sin. He died a sinner's death. He was treated by God like he was a follower of the devil, a son of disobedience, a child of wrath. He bore our sin in our place. Jesus gains victory over satan, conquers the world, is tempted but never sins, and purchases freedom from the flesh for us.

Notice that he uses the word "saved." I know Christians get made fun of sometimes for that word and it can sound a little backwoods. Especially if you insert extra syllables into it. But I don't know of a better word to describe what Jesus has done for us - He destroys the work of the devil, overcomes the world and its hopeless attempts to find life, sets us free from the all-consuming slavery to our flesh, and gives us life when we were dead - I'm sorry, but there is only one word for that: salvation.

It was "by grace," which means I did not earn any part of it and really had nothing to do with it. We were dead. Dead people don't do things. Dead people don't say one day, "I'm tired of being dead, I think I'll get up and live a few more years." You were dead. You didn't decide you wanted to know God or that you wanted to live spiritually. You couldn't decide that. You were dead. Jesus extends to us spiritual life as a gift we receive.

When it comes to our biggest problem, our biggest obstacle, our biggest enemies - we don't need to be improved, edited, updated, upgraded, rebooted, or enhanced. You don't first need to find yourself, love yourself, improve yourself, hug yourself, accept yourself, or find strength within yourself. We need to be saved. We need to be forgiven, restored, redeemed, and resurrected. We need life.

And this is what Jesus has come to offer us! Jesus has overcome the works of the world, the flesh, and the devil. He has brought us life to where there was death. Now, these three enemies do not have to be the final story for us.

And from there, we can begin the fight to lessen the influence of the world, the flesh, and the devil in our lives.

Instead of deceitful ideas, we need truth, scripture. Instead of disordered desires we need reordered desire of the Spirit of God in us. And instead of what's normalized in a sinful society we need the new normal of Jesus' vision for life in the family of God. These are some of the ways that we fight.

There will come a day when, as the Scriptures say, Jesus finally puts every enemy under his feet - but that day is coming, it is not yet here. There is still a fight to be had.

For the next several weeks, we're going to look at these enemies in a bit more detail and how we fight them as disciples.

Let's pray.