

Lent: Fighting the World, the Flesh, and the Devil

Week 2 - The Three Enemies

The other night I was here for our Ash Wednesday service, sitting over to the side with my LifeGroup. I didn't have any responsibilities and I just got to participate. We all sat down and Ryan Rike and Tim Olson stood up to lead us and said "this service has not been created with your entertainment in mind. This service has not been created with your comfort in mind. It has been created to help us contemplate our own death. The wages of sin is death, the first sin brought death into the world and because of the curse of sin, we will all die as well.

And then I watched as a few minutes later, we all began to line up to come to the front and have ashes placed onto our foreheads and have Ryan or Tim look us in the eye and say, "You are dust, and to dust you shall return", which is just fancy way of saying, "You are going to die." And I sat there and watched as person after person that I love and care about walked forward to be told "You are dust and to dust you shall return. You're gonna die. And you are going to die. And you, you sir, you are going to die. And everyone you love, they are gonna die too." And there were children who walked up and Ryan got down on one knee and kindly looked into their eyes and smiled and said "you're gonna die."

And I thought, "He was right when he said this is gonna be uncomfortable." The rest of the room is drop dead silent as person after person after person "you are dust and to dust you shall return." It was unsettling. Alarming. Off putting. And true. 100% true. And sobering. And good for me. And it was definitely not what I would have otherwise been thinking about on a Wednesday night.

That is part of the idea of the season of Lent. It is a set aside season for repentance, for fasting, for prayer, and for preparation of the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus. It's a time to contemplate our need for a savior and to zoom out of just day to day living and think about things we might otherwise not.

We want our teaching for the series to match that theme. I appreciate Jake teaching last week to help us approach fasting the right way. Today we will introduce our teaching content for the next few weeks.

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 follower of Jesus or not, this tension that we all feel, this fight, outside our body, and inside our body itself, between good and evil. Three 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 **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— **3** 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.

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.
- 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 whole other 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 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**.

Another example would be in Romans 12

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.

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, 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 living below their means so that they can store up treasure in heaven. And that's exactly what we mean by "the world."

Second, Paul refers to our flesh.

Once again, this term is used in different ways in the bible. Here it is referring to our sinful nature.

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,

Once again, much more to come on this, but the way 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 son, your daughter, 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 teenager or your kid. But when you love him or her more than God, that's a disordered love. And it will wreak havoc on you and other people in our society.

To continue the financial, consumerism example. One of the reasons 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 want them. And in this way, the world and our flesh team up against us.

The devil

And then, what I assume will be most unsettling to many of us in the room, if not unbelievable...all of this is in some way being orchestrated by real, supernatural evil.

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

In the Bible, the prince of the power of the air is another term for the devil. Think less, pointy ears and pitchfork, less Will Ferrell in a red outfit. Think supernatural evil working to steal, kill and destroy, often through deception and lies. Elsewhere in scripture he is called the deceiver. Jesus says that lies are the devils native language. He operates primarily by deceiving.

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

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 systemitized into slavery, corporate fraud, comodification of others.

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

I'll give you another example, from my life. I am 37, squarely in mid-life and I feel it. I do basically the same things every day. 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.

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, if not seem as a positive...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 every dad in my LifeGroup talks about the temptation to just get through bedtimes, not really be present to enjoy our families, as though our lives begin when their days end. 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.

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 they are being normalized by a sinful world around you.

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 what it looks like to be dead in sin. Like a dead body has no ability to perceive its surroundings or do anything about it, neither do we.

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. 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.

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, children of wrath, opposed by God, under the power of the devil, deceived by the world, controlled by disordered desires.

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. 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 it’s 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. They don’t decide 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. I need to be saved.

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 3 enemies do not have to be the final story for you.

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. Thus, these 3 enemies still remain. 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. This is our aim for Lent - to know our enemy well... and to know our Savior even more.