

An Undivided Heart

Teach me your way, O Lord, and I will walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name. I will praise you, O Lord my God, with all my heart; I will glorify your name forever. Psalm 86:11,12

There are many ways to do battle.

Sometimes people on both sides of a conflict make specific arrangements as to how they will engage one another. In a duel, a time and place are selected, weapons chosen, and the precise terms of the encounter are agreed upon. In a famous battle between Israel and the Philistines, it was determined that one man (Goliath) would fight whomever the Israelites selected, and as that one battle went, so would go the entire war.

More often, a nation that desires to go to war with another nation will give itself the powerful advantage that comes through surprise attack. Moreover, the weapons and tactics used in battle are not necessarily balanced, let alone mutually agreed upon. Whether the war is fought for territory, ideology, or simply as the result of personal grievance, it is characterized by all-out aggression that is normally limited only by the resources, courage and endurance of the participants.

There are, to be sure, other ways for one entity to exert power over, and gain control of, another entity. Many “battles” have been fought bloodlessly, simply through the ability of one group to evoke fear in another, thereby persuading them to surrender. Other conquerings come through the persuasiveness of bribes and promises. Occasionally treaties are contracted simply through sheer trickery. The pages of Scripture bear witness to a rich variety of such interactions, which echo down through the kingdoms of human history.

Close examination of the same Scriptures, however, reveals a somewhat unusual strategy in the ongoing war between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness. It is true that our enemy often attacks us directly, through the stresses of life, through alluring temptations, or through the deceit of lies. He has no interest whatever in being fair and continues to barrage God’s children with every sort of weapon he can muster. But he has also availed himself of a far more subtle and therefore more deadly scheme, one that appears almost able to destroy the very fiber of Christendom.

Identifying the Battleground

While there are stories in Scripture that describe physical demonic assaults, there is little to suggest that this has been, or ever will be, the primary arena of conflict between good and evil. Far more evidence indicates that the deeper threats against God’s children are made not to our bodies, but to our minds. Our enemy most often engages us in the realm of our thoughts, using whatever tactics he can to bring us to a place of fear, confusion, discouragement, bitterness or unbelief.

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down

arguments and every thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ (2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

It is clear from this passage that the object of Satan's attention is that which most threatens his power: our knowledge of God. Paul elsewhere admonishes us to put on the whole armor of God, that we might be able to stand against the "wiles" of the devil (Ephesians 6:11). This Greek expression, *methodeia*—which means to lie in wait—is earlier translated "deceitful plotting" (Ephesians 4:14). It is not a violently aggressive warrior that we are up against, but rather a highly sneaky one.

This is why pain is not his primary vehicle of assault. A far more common maneuver incorporates temptation. This was the form of conflict Jesus Himself encountered at the beginning of His ministry, and it is a challenge we also frequently experience. But while Christ fully resisted the tempter, we are not always so able. To the extent that there remains in us any "evil desire," we will (according to James) be "dragged away and enticed" (James 1:14). This is not a literal dragging of our bodies, but the powerful enticement of our minds, i.e. the domain of our contemplated choices.

There is no doubt that these two tactics—distressing circumstances and provocative temptations—operate together to bring great turmoil into the minds of most believers. Paul tells us that the tug of these situations, which would draw us into either mental or actual physical sin, is "common to man." He goes on to assure us, however, that God Himself will intervene, not only keeping such testings within the boundaries of what we can actually bear, but also providing us with a "way of escape" (1 Corinthians 10:13).

What is critical, however, is that we be brought to the realization that we actually *need to escape*. Here, I believe, is the more dangerous activity of our enemy than even his endless outpouring of torment or temptation. A nation at war may have many serious disadvantages and handicaps. But one thing it has without question: it knows it is at war. It knows that if something is not done, the outcome will only be more and more disastrous. But what if the enemy manages to accomplish his purposes without ever arousing the attention of the victim?

The Supreme Strategy

During His ministry on earth, Jesus painted many pictures for us that depict the battle between the kingdom of God and the forces of Satan. One of the more extensive of these, commonly known as "The Parable of the Sower," is found in Matthew 13. As a farmer scatters seed across his field, it lands on four different surfaces. Some grain falls onto a trodden path, and because it cannot sink into the soil, it is eaten by birds. Some grain falls onto rocky ground that can hold little moisture, so even though the seed germinates and a plant begins to grow, its roots are so feeble it cannot withstand the heat of the sun. A third area is infested with thorns, which eventually choke out the weaker plants. Only a portion of the seed falls onto good ground, and is able to mature and yield a fruitful harvest.

When questioned by His disciples concerning this parable, Jesus graciously provided the following explanation.

When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the wayside.

But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles.

Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful.

But he who received seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty (Matthew 13:19-23).

Here, in the span of just a few verses, Jesus actually unveils the entire battle plan of Satan against the church. First, the enemy wishes that God's Word would simply "bounce off" the hardened hearts of people who hear it—and for many, this is exactly what happens. Second, if the heart is sufficiently soft to understand the joyful news of the gospel, then the enemy begins to apply the tactics we described earlier. Because the word of God brings with it exposure to trials and persecutions, those who have grasped only the *joyful* aspects of God's kingdom become "burned." They have not allowed their roots to go deeply enough into the soil of suffering and self-denial, and eventually fear, doubt, bitterness, and confusion cause them to wither away.

It is in the third scenario, however, that I believe we find Satan's least understood and therefore most sinister strategy for the immobilization of God's forces. The word translated "cares" in verse 22 is *merimna*, taken from a root word *merizo*, which means "to divide." Literally, there are things in our world that work to divide the believer, that is, to divide his attention, his thoughts, his mind and eventually his heart.

Matthew's record of this parable identifies one of the primary sources of such division: the deceitfulness of riches. When Mark tells the same story he adds to the list "the desire for other things" (Mark 4:19). Luke points to yet another diversion, the "pleasures of life" (Luke 8:14). Notice carefully that none of these dividing forces is in itself necessarily evil. Wealth is not innately evil, nor are "other things," nor is pleasure. The problem arises when our desire for these competes with and overtakes our desire for God.

To better understand this, let's look at a couple examples the Bible gives us of people who are thus divided. Esau was a man entitled to the incredible blessing God had promised to his father and grandfather. Yet in Genesis 25:32, we see that his desire to eat became stronger than his desire for God's blessing. Centuries later, Hebrews 12:16 describes him as a "profane person...who for one morsel of food sold his birthright." Eating the morsel was not Esau's sin, but valuing it above God's promise was.

Another person with misplaced priorities was Martha, who, when Christ Himself was in her home, found herself "distracted with much serving" (Luke 10:40). Jesus admonished her, "Martha,

Martha, you are worried (*merimnao*) and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her.” Here an excellent priority—serving—had nevertheless gotten out of order.

Devious Distractions

Christ later warns His disciples more explicitly to guard against the quicksands of worldly distractions.

But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares (*merimna*) of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. Watch therefore, and pray always, that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man (Luke 21:34-36).

Clearly, the things that divide our attention from the supremacy of kingdom affairs can come in many guises. Pleasures (both healthy and unhealthy), cares (both legitimate and illegitimate), even godly ministry itself—anything can become a snare if it draws our attention away from our Master.

It is important for us to understand too that *that which distracts the mind eventually weighs down the heart*. Paul tells us that the “enemies of the cross of Christ” are those who, among other things, “set their mind on earthly things” (Philippians 3:19). By contrast Isaiah describes a man whom God keeps in perfect peace, because his mind is “stayed on” Him (Isaiah 26:3). Jesus puts it quite simply: “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matthew 6:21).

How vital it is, then, that each of us examine our lives carefully to determine exactly what it is that we treasure. What riches, what “other things,” what pleasures entice us to spend on them our time, our money, our energies, and (most especially) our thoughts? Remember, the effectiveness of this strategy of our enemy is precisely that it is all but invisible to its victims. A believer is always troubled, at least at some level, when he indulges in sin. But it is quite possible for us to feel no remorse whatever when we pursue something that appears innocent, perhaps even noble, but which in reality robs God of the resources of our lives that properly belong to Him.

To grasp the enormity of Satan’s “deceitful plotting,” consider the nature of our modern culture. One of the premises upon which America was founded was that we have an “inalienable right” to the “pursuit of happiness.” It may well be that our founding fathers understood happiness to be integrally joined with an individual’s search for God. However, contemporary wisdom has veered well off this course. Today our happiness (we are told) comes through such things as financial stability (ah, the deceitfulness of riches...), popular acclaim, personal comfort, and the ever-present and insatiable whirlwind of entertainment options.

Consider this honestly. Today’s generation has only drawn a very few breaths before, as infants, we are placed under the care of benevolent videos. As we go through our days, we are rarely more than a few feet (or even inches) from a source of music, talk or visual input. Almost to the extent that our lungs crave oxygen, our minds have become intrinsically dependent on the steady flow of electronic

stimulation. To be sure, there is something in us that whispers: if you wanted to, you could turn it off. You're in charge. It's just a machine. But does reality ever prove this argument to be true?

And then there is our deeply-held, if unconscious, conviction that we, as laborers, deserve to take periods of rest. Days-off, paid vacations, retirement—these are inherently part of our picture of human enterprise. For many whose labors are not particularly rewarding in themselves, the “R&R” component of their lives becomes the primary goal. What's more, we have convinced ourselves that rest is best accomplished by self-indulgent activities: eating and drinking and being merry. We travel, we play, we shop, and we scream out our lungs at sports events. One might ask: is this God's idea of rest? If we could somehow stop our ears to the clamor of the world, we might be able to hear His gentle whisper: “Come unto Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).

Unite My Heart

In Psalm 86:11, David offers the following prayer: “Teach me your way, O Lord; I will walk in your truth; unite my heart to fear Your name.” David well understood that the only true defense against the diabolical attempts of his enemy to divide his heart required both his own effort and the help of his God. He needed the instruction of the Lord, and he needed to make a deliberate choice to walk in that truth. Elsewhere he prays, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (Psalms 51:10).

But even as we acknowledge with David our hopelessness apart from God and agree that only by His grace can we ever truly achieve singleness of heart, we must at the same time realize with sober humility that a great deal depends on our own choices and behaviors. Few themes are more prevalent throughout Scripture. Consider carefully the following passages, noting the emphasized phrases.

Examine me, O Lord, and prove me; try my mind and my heart. For Your lovingkindness is *before my eyes*, and I *have walked* in Your truth (Psalms 26:2,3).

I will walk in my house with a blameless heart. I *will set before my eyes* no vile thing (Psalms 101:2,3).

With my whole heart I *have sought* You; Oh, let me not wander from Your commandments! Your word *have I hidden* in my heart, that I might not sin against You (Psalms 119:10,11).

My son, if you receive my words, and treasure my commands within you, so that you *incline your ear* to wisdom, and *apply your heart* to understanding...if you *seek* her as silver, and *search for* her as for hidden treasures; then you will understand the fear of the Lord (Proverbs 2:1-5).

Above all else, *guard* your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. *Put away* perversity from your mouth; *keep* corrupt talk far from your lips. Let your *eyes look straight ahead*, *fix your gaze* directly before you (Proverbs 4:23-25).

Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit *have their minds set on* what the Spirit desires (Romans 8:5).

And *do not be conformed* to this world, but be transformed by the *renewing of your mind*, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God (Romans 12:2).

If then you were raised with Christ, *seek* those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. *Set your mind* on things above, not on things of the earth (Colossians 3:1,2).

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us *throw off* everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us *run with perseverance* the race marked out for us. Let us *fix our eyes* on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:1,2).

Therefore, *prepare your minds* for action; be self-controlled; *set your hope* fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, *do not conform* to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so *be holy* in all you do (1 Peter 1:13-15).

All of the activities mentioned involve specific personal choices. Significantly, many have to do with the decisions we make concerning where to direct our attention, that is, the focus of our eyes, our ears, our minds and, as a result, our hearts. Our enemy is never able to steal our hearts by force. Rather, we give our hearts to him, minute by minute, decision by decision, habit by habit.

Not Just A Better Way

Okay, you may say. So my life is a bit choked these days by the thorns of the world. I've committed my life to Christ. There's a lot that I do right. Surely we live in the season of grace. All things are legal. Nothing can separate me from His love. Can it??

In the final count, of course, I cannot evaluate your life, nor you mine. God alone will judge each of us with His infinite, righteous wisdom. Nevertheless, He evidently put some deliberate warnings in the pages of His Word, which I would propose deserve our most attentive consideration.

First, there is the great commandment itself, which requires that we love the Lord our God with ALL our heart, ALL our soul, ALL our mind, and ALL our strength. Jesus clearly states, "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon" (Matthew 6:24). Mammon is generally understood to mean wealth, but it could also refer to anything by which we are enriched that does not have its source in God. In other words, not only should we not put any other gods *before* the one true God, it is probably safest not to have any other gods at all.

Perhaps it is the result of our culture's esteem of tolerance, but many of us seem to operate on an unspoken assumption that there is some kind of neutral territory, sort of a "demilitarized zone,"

where we can dabble with the enemy's weaponry and not be hurt by it. We have a sense that a small measure of commitment is all it takes. If we choose however to bury our minds in the Word of God instead of the word of this world, we will soon realize that such fence-riding is not a biblical theme. Jesus puts it bluntly in Matthew 12:20, "He who is not with Me is against me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters abroad."

A similar all-or-nothing picture is presented later in Matthew 25. Here Jesus describes ten virgins who are awaiting the return of the bridegroom. Five of these women have extra oil for their lamps; five do not. When the bridegroom abruptly appears, those without oil cannot follow him—and they are given no grace, no second chance. Five are in; five are out.

It is true that God understands our human frailty. David tells us that God has great compassion on those who fear Him, "for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust" (Psalms 103:14). But this passage refers specifically to "those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts" (verse 18). You see, while our perfection is ultimately up to Him, the direction of our attention is up to us. We can never follow a commanding officer whom we aren't looking at or listening to.

Jesus Himself modeled attention to the Father in its fullest expression. In John 5 He tells His persecutors, "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does" (John 5:19). Even as he went about all the ordinary matters of His life, our Savior walked with an absolute focus on His Father's heart. While we cannot see the Father as clearly as He did, Jesus has sent the Spirit of truth, the Counselor, who is able to teach us all things and to communicate God's will to us as well (see John 14:15-25).

The Choice is Ours

Returning once again to the parable of the sower, we are told specifically that what distinguishes the plant growing in good soil from the one being choked by thorns is its ability to produce fruit. It's interesting that Jesus took time to mention that it isn't the quantity of fruit that matters, but rather the characteristic of fruitfulness itself. The question we must ask is whether those who produce no fruit can still remain in good standing with the gardener.

Jesus uses a similar metaphor near the end of His ministry. Alone in the upper room with His disciples, He compares them to branches which are attached to Himself as the true vine.

Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me....If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned (John 15:4,6).

This does not sound like optional fruitfulness. In fact, an unfruitful branch is given the same treatment as the tree in Matthew 7:19, which bears bad fruit because it is a bad tree. Jesus follows that statement with one of the most sobering warnings in scripture.

Not everyone who says to Me, “Lord, Lord,” shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, “Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?” And then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness” (Matthew 7:21-23).

We are most foolish if we become lax in our pursuit of fruitfulness, which Jesus says comes as we do the will of His Father. If in fact fruitless trees and bad trees will look alike in the day of judgment, we have everything to lose by succumbing to the trick of our enemy that perpetually distracts our attention away from God so we can no longer draw adequate nourishment from the Vine.

And, as we saw earlier in the passage from Luke 21, the “Day” Christ is referring to will arrive without any warning. Let’s look at it once again.

But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares (*merimna*) of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. Watch therefore, and pray always, that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man (Luke 21:34-36).

Here Jesus gives us not only a very explicit warning, but He also identifies the effective “way of escape.” It’s really quite simple: watch (stay alert), and pray at all times. Focus our minds (through our eyes and ears) and our hearts (through the Spirit who dwells in us and prays through us), not on the things of the world, but on the eternal matters of God. As it says in 2 Corinthians 10:5, we defeat the enemy precisely by “bringing every thought (perception of the mind) into captivity to the obedience (which can also be translated ‘attentive hearing’ or ‘compliant agreement’) of Christ.”

It all comes down to the simple choices of life. Some things we have no control over, but some things we do. Whether we’re in a large crowd or in an isolation cell; whether we are highly educated or simple minded; whether we are old or young, successful or a failure, healthy or ill, busy or bored—there are still places where we alone decide what we think about, what we look at, what we listen to and what we do with the time and energy allotted us.

God has clearly called each of us to pursue Him—His thoughts, His character, His agenda—with *singleness of mind and heart*. It may well be the hardest thing we ever do—but then, war isn’t supposed to be easy. Our enemy hates us almost as fiercely as our Savior loves us. Whether we like it or not, our minds and hearts are the battleground. We can, by God’s grace, pull ourselves from the lure of the world, arm ourselves with His truth and nourish ourselves through consistent daily communion with His Spirit. Or, we can become—slowly, progressively, obliviously—another casualty of war.

The *backslider in heart* will be filled with his own ways, but a good man will be satisfied from above (Proverbs 14:14).

Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!...Do not be anxious (*merimnao*) about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will *guard your hearts and your minds* in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:1,6,7).

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