

Spiritual Warfare

MATTHEW 6:25-34 (NRSV) *“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ ³²For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”*

I do not know anywhere in scripture, in Christian writings, in any tradition of the church—a clearer, more concise statement of how to live as a Christian. Before we can really know and live the Christian life we have to let go of the world and all its values.

Nothing is clearer in the teachings of Jesus.

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth...”

“Do not worry about what you will eat or what you will wear...”

You cannot serve both God and material possessions.”

“Seek first the kingdom of God, ... and all these things will be added, as well.”

Even secular thinkers, like Henry David Thoreau, who said most men live lives of “quiet desperation”, moved into a shanty on the shores of Walden Pond and lived without benefit of modern comforts. He learned the secret of true peace and happiness. It is in letting go—not clinging to—earthly possessions and relationships.

With some notable exceptions the Amish community still today models that joy of simple living—plain living—unencumbered by complexities and the subtle games and dishonesties of our materialistic, consumer-oriented society.

On Concourse A in the Atlanta airport, there’s a big food court—fast foods mostly—where you can grab something to eat and catch a plane. Not long ago had you been there on just the right day—just the right shift—you’d have been treated to the singing of a beautiful male voice, deep and resonant and obviously well-trained. It might be “Lara’s Theme” from *Dr. Zhivago*, or “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing.” Maybe something from Broadway or an aria from Puccini—or Willie Nelson.

The singing came from Albert in the kitchen. He was the dishwasher at the food court on Concourse A in the Atlanta airport. And if you had opportunity to thank him for the beautiful singing, he’d say, “You know what I’m doing, don’t you?”

It didn't matter how you responded, he'd say, "I'm auditioning."

He'd say, "As many folks go through here all the time, there's bound to be one that's going to come along and take me out of this kitchen."

And then he'd go back to humming at the sink in the kitchen. And you know, *there wasn't five percent of the population of Atlanta as happy as that guy washing dishes in the kitchen.*

In contrast: less than half the people born since 1969 have grown up in a home with both their birth parents. Crowded jails, sexual exploitation of children, corruption, spousal abuse, racism, immorality, church closings, street violence, the drug culture—and we haven't even mentioned civil wars, ethnic cleansing, germ warfare, famine, disease, international terrorism. And it's almost a cliché that much of the corporate world is corrupt.

You recall, I hope: we've been talking about rebuilding the walls of our ministry and witness. Nehemiah faced stiff opposition as he rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem.

<p>NEHEMIAH 4:11-21 (NRSV) <i>And our enemies said, "They will not know or see anything before we come upon them and kill them and stop the work."</i> ¹²<i>When the Jews who lived near them came, they said to us ten times, "From all the places where they live they will come up against us."</i> ¹³<i>So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people according to their families, with their swords, their spears, and their bows.</i> ¹⁴<i>After I looked these things over, I stood up and said to the nobles and the officials and the rest of the people, "Do not be afraid of them. Remember the LORD,</i></p>	<p><i>who is great and awesome, and fight for your kin, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes."</i> ¹⁵<i>When our enemies heard that their plot was known to us, and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to his work.</i> ¹⁶<i>From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and body-armor; and the leaders posted themselves behind the whole house of Judah,</i> ¹⁷<i>who were building the wall. The burden bearers carried their loads in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and with the other held a weapon.</i></p>
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Paul wrote, *"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"* EPHESIANS 6:12 (NLT). Our world is in a state of spiritual warfare between two kinds of spirituality, and the battle lines are drawn up like this: "Well, if you try to do business by Christian principles—turn the other cheek, forgive one another's debts... You do that you'll get run over in this competitive, dog-eat-dog world of business." "You have to 'go-along-to-get-along'." But to get along with a sick society is to be sick. Before we can really know and live the Christian life we have to let go of the world and all its values—*ALL its values!*

In 1976 a devastating earthquake struck Guatemala on February 4, destroying thousands of homes and schools and businesses and churches. In suburban Wichita Kansas, Eastminster Presbyterian Church was in an ambitious, building campaign. Their architect had planned a \$525,000 edifice. When Eastminster's board of elders

met shortly after the Guatemalan tragedy, one of the elders posed a simple question: "How can we set out to buy an ecclesiastical Cadillac when our brothers and sisters in Guatemala have just lost their little Volkswagen?"

The elders courageously opted for a dramatic change of plans. They slashed the building program by nearly two-thirds and settled for a much plainer but totally functional building costing \$180,000. Then they sent their pastor and two elders to Guatemala to see how they could help. When the three returned and reported tremendous need, the church borrowed \$120,000 [1976 dollars!] from a local bank and rebuilt 26 Guatemalan churches and 28 Guatemalan pastors' houses.

They continued to stay in close touch with the churches in Central America and later pledged another \$40,000 to a seminary there. During the next five years average church attendance increased from 286 to 750, and Sunday School attendance, from 50 to 460. In 1976 the church's missions budget was \$6,000 ("if there was any left over," said Dr. Frank Kick, the church's pastor). In 1980 it was "\$235,000 (Guaranteed!"). And do you know how? In the fall of 1980, still painfully in need of building space, they took a look at another building plan. And again, this time in a full congregational meeting, voted to forego their "ecclesiastical Cadillac", and instead raise their missions budget from \$101,000 to \$235,000.

Since March 1, 1981 (and you can go on their website and confirm this), Eastminster Presbyterian Church, Wichita, Kansas, has scheduled three morning services and two Sunday School sessions—not to cater to the preferences and convenience of the members already present; but because of their phenomenal growth.

When I first occupied my office here I found several copies of Charles Sheldon's 1896 book, *In His Steps*. It's the story of a young minister who, confronted by the realization of his own self-centeredness, and the negative effect it was having on his ministry and on his personal witness, challenged his congregation to join him in a one-year pledge to do nothing without first asking, "What would Jesus do?"

For some, following Jesus brought great joy. For others it led to misunderstanding, conflict and suffering. For all of them, it meant challenge and sacrifice. But the whole community was changed because some Christians asked the right question.

In times of spiritual warfare, some Christian business people in Wichita, Kansas asked the right questions. They didn't bring business principles into the church and try to administer the church through them. Instead, they asked the right question. They asked whether their building plans for a gothic structure with stained glass windows was justified, given the needs of a particular expression of the Body of Christ in another land. "What would Jesus do?" And in "seeking first the kingdom of God," God used them; and blessed them beyond their wildest dreams.