

Meet Your Enemies

If you have a bible, go with me to Ephesians 2. Happy New Year to you all, hope you had a great Christmas season. We missed seeing you the past couple weeks—if you didn't already know, we took two weeks off around Christmas to allow our staff and volunteers time to rest and travel and be with their family. I know that probably seems like an odd thing for us to do, seeing as how *Christmas* is kind of like our *thing* as *Christians*. But we've actually found it to be a really helpful practice for us as a church. If for no other reason, because it is one more reminder that *this right here* is not the totality of church. *We* are the church, and *this* is simply one thing we do. So if nothing else, maybe it gave us a reminder of that.

But all that said, *this* Sunday we are back at it and starting a brand new teaching series. Or at least *sort* of brand new. It's a series that we've done every year, dating almost back to the very beginning of our church, called *Formation*. Believe it or not, it's actually not a series named after the Beyonce song (although that sounds exciting—I'm sure a church somewhere has done that before). *This* is actually a series about what theologians often call *spiritual* formation; which is just a fancy way of talking about the art and science of how we *change* as human beings. And specifically, how *followers of Jesus* change to become more like *Jesus*.

And I think that *idea in general*—how we change—is an idea that an awful lot of us are interested in. And you don't have to look very far to see that, especially this time of year. At this point, at least some of us are about seven days into our New Year's *resolutions*. And don't worry, I'm not going to ask you how they're going; we want this to be an *encouraging* space. ...**But at the end of the day, what are *resolutions* if not attempts at *change* in our lives?**

Most of us, in one way or another, do want to change. We want to grow, we want to improve, we want to become healthier types of people—whether that's physically, emotionally, psychologically, or spiritually. For all the platitudes we throw out in our society like “being true to who we are” and “being ourselves,” a lot of us don't actually want to just “be ourselves”—we actually want to grow and change and improve and become different *types* of people.

And **at least once a year, we seem to collectively realize that if change is going to *happen* in our lives, it is going to happen *largely* through our *habits*.** We're not just going to wake up one day and all of a sudden become a healthier person; we're going to have to *work* at it. We're going to have to set up rhythms and habits and patterns of

behavior that we participate in, on a recurring basis, that create a desired end result. That, in a nutshell, is the premise of New Year's resolutions.

And whether we realize it or not, a lot of how we change *spiritually* works that way too: through our *habits*. **Our habits—the things we participate in over and over and over again—are a huge part of how we become more like Jesus.** Jesus himself alludes to this in a story he tells about two types of people.¹ One person, he says, is like a person who builds his house on a *shaky* foundation; and the other, on a *solid* foundation. And then Jesus says plainly that the *difference* between those two types of people is that the first one only *heard* what Jesus said; while the *second* one put it into “practice.” **The difference, in Jesus' mind, between health and unhealth, maturity and immaturity—is just one word: practice.** And that word “practice” is exactly what it sounds like; it implies regular, ongoing, and especially *repetitive*, action.

So Jesus says there is a direct relationship in our life between repetition and formation. We become the people we are largely based on the things we do over and over again.² So, each year as a church, beginning in January, we take a month or two to focus on at least one particular *practice* or *habit* that has the ability to change us over time. In *past* years, we've covered habits like *prayer*, *bible reading*, *rest*, *mission*, and last year, *fasting*. ~~That was a fun one. And by “fun” I mean really difficult.~~ Historically, followers of Jesus have called these things “spiritual disciplines” or sometimes, “spiritual practices.” But **whatever you call them, they are simply things we do, repeatedly, that can transform us over time into the image of Jesus.** And that, at its core, is *why* we do them. Not because we think we're better than anybody else, not because we think God loves us more when we do them—not any of that. We do them simply because we want to become more like Jesus, and we know that a central piece of how that will happen is through *practices* like these. Make sense so far?

So *this* year, we're focusing the series as a whole on this word, *resistance*. Now, chances are, *this* practice is not quite as familiar to you as others like prayer or reading the bible. That's in part because it hasn't been quite as *popular* as the others throughout history. It's also in part because *this* one sometimes goes by other names. A lot of followers of Jesus a few hundred years ago described it with the word “watchfulness.” They get that language from the variety of times the New Testament encourages us to be “watchful,” or to “watch out,” or to “be on our guard” against certain things.

Jesus tells his disciples to “watch and *pray*,” so they don't fall into temptation. He tells us to “watch out” for false prophets. To “watch and *beware* of” hypocrisy. He tells us to

¹ See Luke 6:47-49.

² This is at least paraphrased from R.J. Snell in his book, *Acedia and Its Discontents*.

“watch out” so that no one deceives us. He tells us to “*keep watch*,” because we don’t know when he will return. He tells us to “watch out” and “be on our guard” against *greed*. The New Testament authors call us to “watch out” for those who cause division. To “watch” our life and our doctrine. To be “watchful” about the schemes of the devil—more on that in a few weeks. They tell us to “watch out” for unbelief in our hearts.³ And believe it or not, there are quite a few more where *those* came from. So **this is a bit of a theme in the New Testament. The biblical authors seem to think we should regularly “watch out” for things that could threaten our faith.**

Now, that’s not to say **that being against things is all it means to follow Jesus**. I think there are people who at least functionally believe that. That’s not my point at all. I think there are lots of things we should be *for* as God’s people. **But, at the same time, if you don’t think there are any threats—any oppositional forces to you following Jesus—think you’re being a bit naive.** If you think everything in our world is just *rooting* for you—cheering you on—as you seek to deny yourself, pick up your cross and follow Jesus, I think you’re going to be caught a bit off-guard by all the *opposition* you face as you endeavor to do all of that. So **we talk often around here about the things we want to be for as followers of Jesus; in this series, we’re going to talk for a month about some of the things we are also called to be on guard against.** Things we are called to resist.

All of this, I think, is why the Scriptures actually employ *war*-like imagery to describe the Christian life. Which is saying something for a faith that generally advocates for *peace*. Let me show you a few examples of what I mean on-screen:

Romans 7:23:

Paul says: ...but I see another law at work in me, **waging war** against the law of my mind and making me a **prisoner** of the law of sin at work within me.

This, from **2 Corinthians 10:3-4:**

For though we live in the world, we do not **wage war** as the world does. The weapons *we* fight with are *not* the weapons of the *world*. On the contrary, *they* have divine power to **demolish strongholds**.

1 Peter 2:11, which says:

Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which **wage war** against your soul.

³ The preceding sentences, in order, are found in: Matthew 26:41, Matthew 7:15, Matthew 16:6, Matthew 24:4, Matthew 24:42-43, Luke 12:15, Luke 21:34-36, Romans 16:17, 1 Timothy 4:16, 1 Peter 5:8, and Hebrews 3:12.

And finally, Ephesians 6:11-13:

Put on the full **armor** of God, so that you can take your **stand** against the devil's schemes. For our **struggle** is **not** against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full **armor** of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to **stand your ground**, and after you have done everything, to **stand**.

This type of language is threaded *throughout* the Scriptures. So **the Christian life may in fact be a “journey” or an “walk” or an “experience,” or any of the other language we often love to put around it—but one thing it *definitely* is, is a *battle*. A war. An exercise in resisting opposing forces and standing your ground no matter what. And if you somehow *miss* that reality—if you don't *realize* that—chances are you *will* be caught up *in* those opposing forces. Maybe, without even *realizing* that's what's happening.**

And maybe you hear all of that go, “okay—but doesn't thinking about it that way encourage us to take a defensive, antagonistic posture towards everybody around us?” Like, isn't this mindset how we all either end up as “culture warrior” talking heads on TV, or out on the streets holding “turn or burn” signs? And that's an understandable pushback. But I would argue *that* mentality is a *misunderstanding* of these ideas, rather than a proper understanding of them. People who respond in *those* sorts of ways *have* latched onto the idea of the Christian life as a “war,” but they've missed entirely what the Scriptures teach that it is a war *against*.

For instance, just look back with me at that last passage we just mentioned from Ephesians 6. It says that this war is, quote, “*not* against flesh and blood.” Who is made of flesh and blood? *People*, right? *Human beings*. So the point that Paul is making is that **we are in fact in a war, but that war is *not* against other people**. It's not a war fought by traditional means, with normal weapons, and normal tactics. It's a different type of conflict entirely.

Here's what I'm getting at. Seen *rightly*, **understanding your *spiritual* enemies—understanding that those things are real and really are opposed to the way of Jesus—actually *prevents* you from making other *people* into your enemies**. Your family member who is not quite following Jesus, your coworker who drives you absolutely crazy, your neighbor who votes or thinks or believes *very* differently than you do—those people are not your enemies. Those are people God loves and desires relationship with. The *real* enemies are not the flesh and blood people standing in front of you; the *real* enemies are the things that have taken *those* people *captive*. Which

means the *solution* isn't to hate *people* or argue at people or dismiss and distance yourself from *people*—the *solution* is to help them find *freedom* from the captivity they're in. Am I making sense?

The *less* you believe in *real* spiritual enemies in the world, the *more* you will *make* enemies out of people in your life. There's something about our wiring where our soul *searches* for an enemy. And the truth is, we *have* enemies as followers of Jesus. But when we insist that *people in our life* are the enemy, we're not looking *deep* enough. The enemies are the animating forces *behind* all of that. **Understanding your *spiritual* enemies actually prevents you from making other people into your enemies.**

So *that* brings us, finally, to answering the question: who *are* our enemies as followers of Jesus? Or to ask it more accurately in light of everything we just said, *what* are our enemies? I think our passage from Ephesians 2 actually provides a good summary of what they are. So take a look with me there. We'll also put it up on the screen—starting in v. 1:

*As for you, you **were dead** in your **transgressions** and **sins**, in which you used to live when you followed the **ways of this world** and of the **ruler of the kingdom of the air**, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived **among** them at one time, **gratifying** the **cravings of our flesh** and following **its** desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of **wrath**.*

Stop there with me for a bit. If you've been around church long, you've probably heard this passage before. Maybe quite a bit. And you've probably heard it *described* as a passage about how "God saved us from *sin*." And in a way, that *is* what the passage is about. That's true: God saved us from *sin*. That's *gloriously* true, even. But I do think describing the passage *only* like that does *ignore* some of the detailed, *specific* language Paul uses in the passage itself. In describing the situation that we were in prior to God saving us, Paul actually lists three specific "oppositional forces" (or, we could say, "enemies") we faced. Three things that carried us along when we were "dead in our sin." He starts listing them in v. 2. I'm going to show them to you in the passage itself. First...

- "...the **ways of this world...**" (v. 2), then
- "...the **ruler of the kingdom of the air...**" (v. 2) (which is Paul's language for Satan), and then...
- "...the **cravings of of our flesh...**" (v. 3)

According to Paul, *those* were the things that Jesus died to save us *from*. And I would argue that those *continue* to be things we are called to *resist* as followers of Jesus, now

that we have been *saved* from them and liberated from their power. Theologians going back hundreds of years have summarized these enemies with one word each. *They* call them...

**The World
The Flesh, and
The Devil**

That listing is in a slightly different *order* from how they're listed in Ephesians 2, but you get the idea. These things, in overarching categories, are our "enemies," as followers of Jesus. If you read through the bible as a whole, and particularly the New Testament, you'll notice that those ideas get brought up again and again as things God has rescued us *from*, and things that we are *still* called to *resist* the pull *toward* as God's people: we are called to *resist* the influence of the *world*, the *flesh*, and the *devil*.

Now, those words *might* feel a bit old school to some of us. When we hear "the world" used negatively in a church setting, it might conjure up images of a fundamentalist Baptist preacher warning about "*worldliness*" (which somehow has a couple additional syllables when he says it). When we hear the word "*flesh*" used the same way it might have hellfire and brimstone vibes in our minds. And many of us, when we hear people talk about "the devil," we think of the guy with red, hairy skin and a pitchfork, straight out of an SNL skit (or maybe a Lil Nas X music video). Likely all of these words feel a little *dated* to us in our modern world.

But that said, let me assure you that each of those three things are very much alive and well in the 21st century. And more pointedly, **together, they are likely responsible for just about all of the opposition you face in becoming more like Jesus.** If you feel stuck or stalled out in your relationship with Jesus, there's a pretty good chance that one or more of these things are responsible for it. And I'll also say this: **if right now you claim to follow Jesus, and in ten years you no longer do, I can just about guarantee you that one or more of these three things are responsible for that shift. Simply put, if you want to grow in your relationship to Jesus, you need to know and understand these *enemies*.**

So we've got three objectives in this series over the next three weeks. First, we want to **know our enemies.** We want to be able to recognize and call them for what they are. *Second*, we want to **understand how they fight.** We want to know what their strategies are, what their tricks are, and where we might be vulnerable to those things. And then lastly (and most importantly), we want to learn how to **resist and overcome them.** We want to know how to, in the language of those passages from earlier, "wage war" against

them successfully. That's our roadmap for the next month together: know our enemies, understand how they fight, and learn to resist and overcome them.

In the military, they have a *word* for this type of process. They call it *intelligence*. A friend of mine who's in the military told me that intelligence gathering is objectively the most important war preparation activity the military does. More important than training, more important than purchasing and preparing weaponry, more important than *strategy*, and on down the list. And here's why I think he says that. Because without good *intelligence*, all of that other stuff can only be so helpful. Gathering intelligence actually *precedes* everything else, and in many ways, *shapes* the way you *do* everything else. If you don't know what type firepower your enemy has, if you don't know the terrain they're used to fighting on, if you don't know how many soldiers they have and what technology and weaponry those soldiers possess—there is a pretty severe *limit* to how helpful any of your *other* preparation can be. I heard it said once that “power without intelligence would be like a *hammer*, with no *hand* to wield it.”

So for the rest of our series, what we're going to do, in essence, is gather our *intelligence*. We're going to discuss what exactly these enemies *are*, and how they tend to operate. All with the goal of helping us become successful in *resisting* them. We'll do a week talking about “the world,” a week on “the flesh,” and a week on “the devil.” We're also going to give you some *practices*—some tangible things you can do throughout this series—to help train to resist them. More on that at the end. But what we want to do through this series is help all of us live *aware* of the enemies that we face.

Today, I'm gonna just give you the SparkNotes version of it all. Are SparkNotes still a thing? Okay, here is the SparkNotes version—the quick summary—of this series. This is from a guy we quote from time to time named John Mark Comer, who wrote a book on all of this called *Live No Lies*—would definitely recommend that book to you. He offers a sentence that summarizes how the world, the flesh, and the devil tend to operate in tandem with one another. He puts it like this. The problem is...

Deceitful ideas
that play to **disordered desires**
which are normalized in a **sinful society**

Deceitful ideas refers to “the devil.” The Scriptures tell us that one of Satan's favorite tactics—if not his *primary* tactic—is *deceit*. *Lies*. *Untruths*. Jesus says that when Satan *lies*, he “speaks his native language.”⁴ Satan's goal is to plant *deceptive* ideas in the

⁴ See John 8:44

minds of people, and societies as a whole. *Deceptive ideas*. Then, *disordered desires* refers to the “flesh.” Our base instincts and desires that, because of sin, are now all out of whack. They’re disordered. We want things that we shouldn’t want; we *don’t* want things that we *should* want. And we want things in the wrong order and in the wrong proportions. *Disordered desires*. And then finally, all of that becomes *normalized* in a *sinful society*—in other words, “the world.” We live in a world that justifies and rationalizes all of those things. Makes them feel “normal,” or even *expected* to engage with. *Deceitful ideas* that play to *disordered desires*, which are normalized in a *sinful society*. That sentence summarizes really well the enemies we face as followers of Jesus, and how they work in tandem with one another.

Now, maybe you showed up this morning and it’s your first time in church—or first time in church in a while—and all of this just sounds certifiably *crazy* to you. To you, this stuff sounds straight out of the 16/1700s. It sounds primitive, and anti-intellectual, and a little backwoods to you. And you’re going “*really?* You guys believe this stuff?” And believe me, I get it. But listen: I know of no other way to explain some of the stuff happening in our world. For instance, let’s just pick some low-hanging fruit for a second; let’s talk about the dynamics around *politics* right now in our country. Right now, we are in a situation where there is growing extremism on *both* sides of the political spectrum. Some of it is becoming more and more bizarre and militant, and logical—even *violent*. It’s becoming quite a problem.

Some of you may even have people in your biological family that hold to those extreme views. Some of you had to spend time with those people over the holidays. And here’s what I’m going to guess: it does not matter how often you sit down and try to logically reason with those family members about why their beliefs are off. It doesn’t matter how *calmly* and *rationally* and *persuasively* you try to appeal to them about it—they are *entrenched* in their beliefs. They’re not changing their mind. Okay—why *is* that? Why is it that logic and reason tend *not* to have an impact on them? Well, the bible would say it’s because there are actually *animating forces* behind what they believe, that are *ensuring* that they continue believing it. Some combination of the world, the flesh, and the devil. And those things are *powerful* enough that you will not be able to just reason and explain someone out of their grip. That person will need to be *liberated* from what has a hold on them. Am I making sense? **You, and I, and our family members, and every single person in our society are held captive by the world, the flesh, and the devil—until we are rescued out of it.**

And here’s where we get to the *good* news of this morning: according to Ephesians 2, *that* is *precisely* what Jesus died and rose from the grave to do. Look back with me at Ephesians 2 one more time. We’ll finish out the passage. Paul says that before the

intervening work of God through Jesus, we were all “dead” in our sins, following the ways of this world, the ruler of the kingdom of the air, and gratifying the desires of our sinful flesh. We were *captive* to the world, the flesh, and the devil. We were in bad shape. But *then* there’s verse 4. The verse that starts with the word, “but.” I heard one pastor describe that word as the most glorious “but” in all the bible. I thought that was a little cheesy and maybe a little irreverent, so I didn’t say it...I just told you that *he* said it. ~~Anyway...~~ The sermon was called “I like this ‘but’ and I cannot lie.” ...Again, *I* didn’t say it, *he* said it. Just for clarity.

But he’s got a point, right?! Verse 4 is a pretty phenomenal *shift* in the tone of the passage. Ephesians 2 starts off pretty *dark*: dead in our sin, held *captive* by the world, the flesh, and the devil, and deserving of wrath. ...But! BUT! Look at v. 4:

*...because of his great love for us, **God**, who is **rich** in mercy, made us **alive with Christ** even when we were **dead** in transgressions—it is by **grace** you have been saved. And (not only that, but...) God **raised us up with Christ** and **seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus**, in order that in the **coming** ages he might show the **incomparable riches** of his grace, expressed in his **kindness to us in Christ Jesus**. Paul’s going off! *For it is by **grace** you have been saved, **through faith**—and this is **not** from yourselves, it is the **gift** of God—not by **works**, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s **handiwork**, **created** in Christ Jesus to **do** good works, which God **prepared in advance** for us to do.**

Okay, there’s a lot in there and we don’t have time to unpack it all this morning. So I’m just going to do my best to summarize it for you. You ready? **If you are a follower of Jesus, God has already given you in Jesus everything you need to succeed against the world, the flesh and the devil.** Do you believe me? Because that passage just said that God *saved* us from those things. Now, I’m *begging* you, as a follower of Jesus, not to *hyper-spiritualize* that word “saved.” When Paul says Jesus *saved* us from the world, the flesh, and the devil, he doesn’t mean that we were “saved” in some sort of immeasurable, esoteric, vague sense of the word. He means—get this—that God *saved* us. If you heard your friend say that they were drowning in the ocean, and then the Coast Guard brought a helicopter out and “*saved*” them, what would you think that meant? You’d probably assume that they meant the Coast Guard dipped down into the water, pulled them out, and they survived. Okay, that is the sense in which God *saved us* from the world, the flesh, and the devil. When it says he *saved* us, it means he *saved* us. He rescued us out.

Now, that doesn’t mean we’re never in danger of being *influenced* by those things again, right? The person who’s been rescued out of the ocean may in fact still be in danger in

the future if they go back in the ocean. But **it does mean that God has given you and I the power we need to live unchained and unshackled from the enslaving power of those three things.** There's a reason that somewhere around 70% of Christian worship songs say something about our "chains being gone"—you know why? Because it's the most glorious truth in the universe, and *because we tend to forget* it. **You and I do not have to say “yes” to the world, the flesh, or the devil, any longer.** Because of Jesus, we have the ability to say “no.” We have the ability to live *free*. And that's all possible because of what Jesus accomplished on the cross. Colossians says that he “...disarmed the powers and authorities...triumphing over them by the cross.”⁵ If you follow Jesus, you do not have to go along with those things any longer. Jesus has given you the freedom from them, the ability to spot them, and the power to say no to them. To successfully *resist* them.

So...what we want to do in this series is learn how to make that *theoretical* truth, into a *practical* truth in our lives. We want to learn how to make it *tangible*; make it our *lived experience* as followers of Jesus. How do we learn, at a day-to-day level, to *resist* the world, the flesh and the devil? How do we take what we *know* Jesus accomplished on our behalf, and *actualize* it in our hearts and minds and bodies? That's where we're headed the next three weeks.

What I want to leave you with today is something we've put together and posted online called a *Practice Guide*. Every year we do this series, we put together simple, measurable, practices to participate in during it. Because (as a reminder), Jesus said we don't change by what we *know*—we *change* by what we “put into practice.” There is a direct link between *repetition* and *formation*. So if you want to grow in the things we're talking about in this series, you will need some ways to put it all into practice.

So on our website, citychurchknox.com, you'll find our *Practice Guide* for this series. In the practice guide, we've given you three different suggested “practices” to participate in. One that helps you resist the *world*, one that helps you resist the *flesh*, and one that helps you resist the *devil*. We've typed up a page on each one and how they help specifically. We'll unpack them in more detail here on Sundays each week for the next three weeks. But in the meantime, I'd encourage you to grab the guide on our website, and at least *start* reading through it.

And then I'd encourage you, based on what's in there, to think through what feels like the biggest *threat* to your life and vitality in Jesus *right now*. Maybe it's the world, maybe it's the flesh, maybe it's the devil. Maybe you read through them and you're like “I don't

⁵ Colossians 2:15

know, I think they're all getting me right now. It's like a 3-on-1 WWE situation right now and I'm losing." Fair enough. So maybe you participate in all *three* practices. Or two of them. But I'd go ahead and read through them, and figure out what you *feel like* is most *urgent* to tackle in your life right now. If you're an overachiever, maybe you go ahead and kickstart one of those practices before next Sunday. All power to you. Or you can wait until we unpack them in greater detail over the next few weeks. But bare minimum, take some time this week to discuss with your LifeGroup, and prepare your heart and mind for this series. I think it has the ability to be *pivotal* in our journey together to become more like Jesus individually, and as a community. Make sense?

So we're gonna have some time to respond. We'll open up the communion tables, and we'll sing and celebrate together who Jesus is, and what he's made possible for us on the cross. We'll rejoice in the victory he's already achieved on our behalf, and ask that he would help us learn how to make that victory the operating *reality* of our life.

Let's pray together.