

Jesus' Kingdom Movement

The Gospel of Matthew

The Spirit of Truth and Our Enemy the Liar

Matthew 3:13 – 4:11

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Introduction: The Lies and the Truth

What is spiritual warfare like on the day to day level? Especially as we continue to remember Andrew Sun and his family, and wrestle with not only his death but why students at Harvard and MIT and other elite schools take their own lives at higher rates than other places, I'd like to explore the spiritual warfare angle. What lies are people believing?

After my freshman year in college, I had to make a major decision. I had just gone away to college, and my younger sister had just started high school. I had been praying that she would come to know Jesus. So one day she told me on the phone that she had been going to a Christian club that met every day at lunch. It was put on by a history teacher. On Mondays, this teacher would have a worship time. On Tuesdays, there would be a Bible study. On Wednesdays, he would invite a student from a nearby Bible college to come and teach a passage of the Scriptures. On Thursdays, there would be a time for discussion. And on Fridays, there'd be a movie or games or something. My sister came to know about Jesus and eventually accepted Christ that year because this teacher was so psyched about Christ and spreading God's kingdom, even at a public school! I went to meet this man, and to me, he was funny looking. He had gray hair, he wore a red plaid shirt and bright red tie. But joy was written all over his face, and I said to myself, 'I can see myself doing this. This is important work.' I said to him, 'Thank you.' He said, 'God bless you.' I took all of my sophomore year to think about this Jesus and ask him to disentangle truth from lies.

My mom had told me that I had to be rich for my life to matter, and that was becoming hard to square with Jesus. I had been told that since I went to Stanford, it was to get to a high place that God could use. At one point, I also wanted to become a professor of Middle East history who knew everything about this region with the most written history, to be the leading consultant about the present Middle East crisis. But the more I found out about how smart real scholars are, and what my personal limitations are, what else Jesus called his people to be and do, the more I had reevaluate my motivations. Being useful by knowing things was one thing. Being at the top of an ever-changing field to satisfy my self-importance was another.

The next summer, I told my parents that I MIGHT want to be a high school teacher, and I wanted to take a step in that direction to see if it fit me. They were furious. They demanded, 'Why are we sending you to Stanford, then?!' Shocked, I said, 'I don't know.' The summer of 1992 was filled with tension. My parents threatened to yank me out of school. I wanted to hold on to Stanford. The question for me at that point was, 'What would I seek first? Being completely available to follow Christ? Or following my own agenda and having a nice backup plan called a Stanford degree?' By the end of that summer, in my heart, I let go of Stanford, I let go of a cushy lifestyle, I let go of however making big money made me an 'eligible bachelor.' As best I knew how, I asked Jesus Christ to be the only King for me. I said to my parents, 'I'm not saying that I KNOW I want to teach high school. I'm just saying that I'd like the freedom to explore it. But if sending me to Stanford makes you feel like you have control over my choices, I'll leave Stanford. I'll put myself through school somewhere else. It may take longer, but it'll be okay.' I meant it. Later, they said they would keep sending me to Stanford, and that I could choose. But the significant part of that episode is that Jesus used it to change something deep in me. I started to understand the truth about my identity in Jesus. I had stopped living in certain lies.

Relevance

We grow up believing many things about our identity, having to construct this thing called our identity. It is important and yet elusive. Is identity something that can be constructed? Then when we enter into a life of faith, it can become a little more complicated for us. Is our spiritual life and our relationship with Jesus just another slice of this thing called 'our identity'? What is Jesus by his Holy Spirit wanting to say to us about our identity?

Let's look at what I think the pivotal passage is about that. In the process, we will see how spiritual warfare is most deeply and fundamentally a contest of voices. Will Satan succeed in darkening or twisting the identity that God's Spirit wants to bestow upon us? We go to what you can tell by now is one of my favorite passages: the baptism and wilderness temptation of Jesus. It is fundamental for understanding Jesus, ourselves, and spiritual warfare, not least because it parallels the death and resurrection of Jesus in the chiasmic structure of Matthew's Gospel. Baptism represents dying and rising. But also because this passage more than any other helps us understand the battle between truth and lies.

The Truth Teller: 3:13 – 17

Every morning, before my kids go to school, I tell them two things. I love you. Remember who you are. Then, they go about their day. Whether they recognize it or not at this time in their lives, I am trying to help them understand that identity comes first, and activity comes second, out from that. Activity flows out of identity as beloved. It is not the other way around. Before we engage in Christian mission publicly or do anything noticeable by others, the most important thing for us to do is to remember who we are in Jesus. That is why Jesus starts his public ministry with his baptism.

^{3:13} Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan coming to John, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ But John tried to prevent him, saying, 'I have need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' ¹⁵ But Jesus answering said to him, 'Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.' Then he permitted him. ¹⁶ After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on him, ¹⁷ and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.'

Here, the Spirit accompanies the words of the Father towards the Son: 'You are my beloved Son.' In essence, the Spirit *is the love* the Father shares with the Son. The Father *delights* in the Son. It's important to point out that up until now, Jesus has lived a quiet life. What has he done up until now? Not much that we know. He's been the neighborhood woodworker, having picked up the trade of his stepfather Joseph. He's loved his family and his neighbors, consistently, quietly. He's been the responsible but occasionally quirky oldest son. He's been a regular reader of Scripture at synagogue. But within his humanity, he is the eternal Son of God relentlessly changing his human nature to be realigned with his heavenly Father. He has been forcing it to repent all the time, as he does in his baptism when he forces his humanity to repent. He confesses sin – not in the sense that he did or thought something sinful – but in the sense that he is carrying sinfulness in himself, the corruption, the infection, the disease. For his entire life, without any human thanks, applause, or even acknowledgement, Jesus has done this. Now in this moment, his inner life becomes his outer life. He opens himself up to us, and it all becomes visible. The Son belongs to the Father. His identity is to receive love and identity from the Father and return love in adoration, eternally. He is now doing that in human flesh to change that human nature within himself. The Spirit is the bond of love between them, manifested in this moment so that people can see momentarily what has been true eternally.

The Main Lie: You Are Not What God Says

Jesus goes into the wilderness to develop a resistance in his body to temptation and the devil. The liar comes to hiss in his ear. 'If you are the Son of God...if you are the Son of God.' I'll expand on the specifics of the three temptations in just a moment, but I want to point out that the devil attacks Jesus' sense of identity. With us, he will always first go after our sense of identity in Jesus. That is the first part of spiritual warfare, always. The Father had just said to Jesus, 'You are my beloved Son,' and the Spirit had just come with those words to fill Jesus with their reality. The devil comes to chip that away piece by piece. He did that with Adam and Eve. You can't trust God. He's holding back on you. You aren't really who He says you are. You've got to define good and evil for yourselves. So you had better proceed from a place of fear and not trust. Here, the devil says the same to Jesus. You aren't really who He says you are.

Why? The devil cannot create anything. All he can do is to twist reality in your mind so that what God has given you out of His love, you feel like you have to get on your own or earn from Him because God is begrudging. His central trick is to get you to view yourself from only your own perspective, and to view your own development as a curse and not a blessing.

We have a very strong tendency to tie things to our identity that God does not tie. For example, a friend of mine who I'll call Albert thought that God had called him to be a doctor – he hoped to serve poor communities overseas

in the country of his parents. After he finished college, he wasn't accepted by any medical schools in the U.S. He applied to a med school in the Caribbean and got in there. But while he was there, he developed ulcers. He managed to finish despite the stress, but did not pass the board exam. He was wracked by disappointment. He tried a second time, and failed. He went through a faith crisis. Was God still good? Was he really a son of God? Was God still real at all?

Now compare Albert's experience with the experience of my friend Dan. Dan was in Tufts Medical School when he started a non-profit organization reaching out to at risk Vietnamese youth in Dorchester. He left medical school for 5 years as he developed this non-profit and was part of a church plant in the Vietnamese community, which eventually folded because it was too hard. Eventually, the non-profit ran out of funding and he couldn't sustain it. So he closed it, obviously disappointed. At around that time, he developed a sickness called Miniers' Disease, with at times debilitating brain fog and dizziness. He decided to try to finish medical school, despite this disease. Miraculously, he did. He now practices medicine out of his home office. In fact, he had to leave his first job, at a health clinic, because he wanted to pray with patients, partly because of his conviction that spiritual and emotional health affects our physical health. But Dan constantly dreams of the day when he can go part time or even do something else because he loves praying with people.

What's the difference between Albert's experience and Dan's experience? It's their sense of identity. Dan developed his identity in Jesus. He had so much more freedom. He could leave medical school, thinking he wouldn't go back; the church plant and his non-profit could fold; he could do something else because what's important was serving Jesus in whatever capacity. Albert had allowed the incidental to become fundamental. Somewhere deep down, he felt like he needed to prove his identity as a child of God. It was self-inflicted pain. The tragedy was, he already was a child of God.

Now as a side note, this is why I really do not like teaching on the old Protestant idea of career as calling. Why? Because it is so easy to misunderstand and misuse. The language of calling comes from the Catholic-Protestant disagreement in the time of the Reformation. Catholics said people could be called to be priests or nuns, but everyone else did not have a calling. Protestants said that every legitimate career was a calling. So you could be a farmer or shoemaker or tailor as a calling from God. That was their way of leveling the playing field. But fundamentally, back then, you just did what your parents did. It wasn't about discernment of your future, nor did becoming a farmer or tailor require that you be exhausted. Those are our problems today. Waiting to hear God's call is not the standard way of discerning your future. And working until you're always exhausted as a student is not what God has for you. In fact, it's an indication that your sense of identity in Jesus needs to stand alone, and not be tied to something else. God does not sacrifice the present for the future.

Jesus says, 'It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.'" He says, 'The Father just told me who I am. The last thing that came out of the mouth of God was that I am His beloved Son. I can rest in that. I don't have to prove that again. Especially not to you.' So let's look at the specific temptations and how spiritual warfare tends to go.

Lie #1: The Mouths of People Before the Mouth of God

^{4:1} Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² And after he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he then became hungry. ³ And the tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.' ⁴ But he answered and said, 'It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.'"

Jesus never used his power for his own personal advantage, even when it was about his own bodily needs, like hunger. But there is a deeper temptation, which was to always tie his ministry to being able to feed people, like God fed Israel in the wilderness with manna. But that's a lie. Jesus knew he would not always have bread to give, but would always have a word to speak. We as his followers would also find ourselves in that position. And while we are not to ignore people's physical needs, at the same time our mission is most fundamentally to declare a message and give our lives for others, as Jesus did, and we are not to be embarrassed when we have words but no bread (e.g. Jn.6:22 – 51). Jesus was not embarrassed by this. He did not take this as a sign of God's absence.

If you can help someone materially, great! Let's do that. But even if you can't, you can give them something verbally or share something from within your character, or something of that sort. God can always use you even if you don't provide bread for people. So don't tie your identity to bread, or money.

Lie #2: You Must Be Popular

The devil's next lie is 'You should be popular.'⁵ Then the devil took him into the holy city and had him stand on the pinnacle of the temple,⁶ and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you'; and 'on their hand they will bear you up, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'⁷ Jesus said to him, 'On the other hand, it is written, 'You shall not put the LORD your God to the test.'

There is nothing in the Old Testament about this kind of thing. I think the simple issue the devil lies to Jesus about is about popularity. Why don't you WOW people? If Jesus did this thing publicly, he would be all the rage. People would instantly be drawn to him, though for what reason, who could say? And I'm sure Jesus was more concerned that in the long term, people surrender their human nature to him to heal and transform, and not look to him for exciting daredevil-like stunts. Entertaining people is not the same as persuading them that they have a disease and he is the cure.

Illus: After my freshman year of college, I went to be a Christian camp counselor at a week-long family camp. I was a counselor for rising seniors in high school, boys. This was through my home church, a Japanese American church, and a few sister churches on the West Coast. It was also one of my first experiences in ministry, so I was a little nervous. But the boys, who were wanna-be Asian gangsters, seemed to respect me. Even late at night when I would tell them to go to bed. Now it seemed to me like they respected me for fairly superficial reasons, like the fact that at the time I drove a car that they liked, or that I had a cool jacket, or that I went to Stanford. They didn't really care much about my experience with Jesus. But at the time, I didn't mind, because it helped me get some sleep! I had the chance to meet up with some of them a couple weeks later at a post-conference rally. I talked with one of the boys. I asked him how it was going. He said fine. I asked how he was doing spiritually. He said, "Well, I'd like to be a good Christian, but I don't think I can." I asked him why. He said, "Because I can't be a really good student." Deep in my gut, I wanted to say, "But you don't have to be a really good student to be a good Christian," but I didn't know how to say it at the time. On my way home, I felt like God helped me piece it together. He was saying, "I can't be a good Christian, because I can't be successful like you." I said back to God, "But I never said that." God seemed to say in reply, "You didn't have to. It's still in your heart. You value Jesus AND success equally, and here is a time to examine that – what do you really value?" I went home and cried. That was a real shock to me.

So often we think if we have Jesus AND are part of the successful group, we'll be better off. Don't get me wrong: It's good come to Jesus if you're powerful. It's good to come to Jesus if you're wealthy. But we don't need those things to be faithful Christians. So pursuing that stuff leads to a lot of self-inflicted pain. It's adding popularity to identity, and it disempowers others and damages them spiritually.

Jesus says that he's not going to test God. Jesus receives his identity from God regardless of whether God saves him from pain. It's not just about the stunt, but about the protection, the protection from pain. The unspoken allusion the devil is making is to the cross. Why should Jesus have to suffer? Should Jesus just call ten legions of angels to prevent him from having to die?

Lie #3: You Can Take Shortcuts (and the Devil Shares Power)

And that brings us fully to the topic of shortcuts. This is lie #3.

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory;⁹ and he said to him, 'All these things I will give you, if you fall down and worship me.'

Third, Jesus knew that his mission was radically different from what Satan suggested. Jesus came to liberate humanity out of Satan's dominion by first going to his death and killing the corruption in himself that also exists in each one of us. If he avoided death, he would allow human beings to continue to be influenced by Satan. So Jesus would not deviate from the course set out for him. That is what was fundamental to him. We must not deviate either. Before we are students, or employees, or citizens of a country, we are missionaries. Before we are anything

else at all, we are missionaries sent by Jesus, continuing his mission to the nations. And before we do anything else, we have to let Jesus heal us of the lies we've believed and the brokenness we have.

For most of my life, I was trained to define myself by my successes, and just doing things that I felt competent in. But the very first Bible study I ever led was when I was in college. It was with a group of friends and it went for a few weeks. It ended because the group became fairly divided. I was really sad. A discussion I led with high schoolers on dating, some of them fell asleep. This was on the topic of dating! I was so sad after that, wondering, "Do I have anything to give?" For 6 years I worked at Intel during the tech heyday of the late 90's, and then left to join an African American friend of mine, also a Christian, to do a startup business. We hoped to start an IT and software business in the inner city, bring employment to single moms and others, redistribute wealth back into the community, and so on. But a year later, we had both gone without pay for 8 months and our company owed money. So we closed shop. Bills and paperwork are all that were left.

But I am not here to worship myself or my successes. I am here to grow and develop by the Spirit of Jesus to become more like Jesus. And part of that clearly is to be willing to love other people and attempt things that don't always succeed. Even Jesus didn't completely succeed with his disciples. And that's because we don't control other people's choices. But we don't worship control. We don't worship our own privilege. We worship God. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to him, 'Go, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the LORD your God, and serve Him only.' ¹¹ Then the devil left him; and behold, angels came and began to minister to him.

Illus: Dietrich Bonhoeffer was the German pastor and theologian who went back to Germany during Hitler's time in order to support his friends in the persecuted Confessing Church and oppose Hitler's agenda. He was jailed a year before Hitler was defeated and executed before the end of the War. But while he was in prison, he wrote a poem called 'Who Am I?' which gets at this question very well.

Who Am I?

Who am I? They often tell me
I step out from my cell
calm and cheerful and poised,
like a squire from his manor.

Who am I? They often tell me
I speak with my guards
freely, friendly and clear,
as though I were the one in charge.

Who am I? They also tell me
I bear days of calamity
serenely, smiling and proud,
like one accustomed to victory.

Am I really what others say of me?
Or am I only what I know of myself?
Restless, yearning, sick, like a caged bird,
struggling for life breath, as if I were being strangled,
starving for colors, for flowers, for birdsong,
thirsting for kind words, human closeness,
shaking with rage at power lust and pettiest insult,
tossed about, waiting for great things to happen,
helplessly fearing for friends so far away,
too tired and empty to pray, to think, to work,
weary and ready to take my leave of it all?

Who am I? This one or the other?
Am I this one today and tomorrow another?

Am I both at once? Before others a hypocrite
and in my own eyes a pitiful, whimpering weakling?
Or is what remains in me like a defeated army,
Fleeing in disarray from victory already won?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, thou knowest me; O God, I am thine!

(Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, written July 1944)