

KNOW YOUR ENEMY

The Three Fold Nature of Evil Influence

In Ephesians 2:1-3, Paul describes sinful behavior as stemming from basis of human nature, environment and the demonic - all three simultaneously. One part may play a leading role, but all three parts need to be considered. These three compelling influences - need to be seen as three strands combining to make one sturdy cable.

1. THE WORLD: “the ways of this world”
2. THE DEVIL: “the ruler of the kingdom of the air”
 “the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient”
3. THE FLESH: “the cravings of our sinful nature... its desires and thoughts”

Here a set of overriding principles help us to understand how Paul perceived evil as influencing the lives of people in general, Christians or non-Christians. Christians will still need to contend with the same sources of evil influence, but Christians have a new means of overcoming these influences through the power of Christ.

When he spoke of “the ways of this world,” Paul was thinking of the powerful influences on societal attitudes, habits and preferences that are at odds with God’s standard of holiness. This influence begins at birth with values that are passed on from the parents and extended family. It is reinforced all throughout life, both formally and informally, through the educational system and the media as well as through peer pressure. It continues to be transmitted through patterns of thinking, traditions, customs and even institutions.

“The ruler of the kingdom of the air,” is a powerful supernatural being in charge of a whole host of evil spirits often thought by the ancients to reside in the air. Paul is clear that this evil agent and his emissaries exert a very close and personal kind of influence over individuals. This spirit exerts a powerful, compelling influence. Many English translations miss this description. He uses a word that is part of his vocabulary of power and could be translated, “The spirit who is now powerfully at work in...”

“The Flesh” is Paul’s favorite expression to convey the inner drive of people to act in ways deviant to the standard of God’s righteousness. Paul likely envisioned Satan working so as to intensify the human craving for physical satisfaction. As such, it is still a temptation of the flesh, but it is charged with the powerful, compelling, supernatural activity of the powers of darkness.

Paul, therefore, presented the true character of evil influence in all three of its manifestations. The source of evil tendencies is both internal and external to people as well as supernatural. Individuals possess an internal inclination toward evil, and their environment (peers, media, societal norms and so forth) also strongly influences them. The demonic explanation for evil behavior needs to be seen as the thread that ties together all the evil influences. In practice

Satan exploits the depraved tendencies of the flesh and exercises a measure of control over all levels of a social order. Giving in to those temptations does not just confirm the weakness of the flesh, it opens up the lives of believers to the control of the devil and his powers.

Through the cross of Christ Christians gain their freedom from these compelling and enslaving influences. Through the cross of Christ our flesh was crucified, and we can live under the guiding and enabling impulses of the Holy Spirit. Finally the cross of Christ marked a decisive victory by God over the powers of evil. Through union with Christ believers can resist Satan and be victorious over his kingdom.

Adapted from *Power of Darkness* by Clinton E. Arnold IVP 1992.