

There is a story about a contest that took place one day between two men. The prize for the winner would be gold and honor and the punishment for the loser, unfortunately, would be death. One contestant was much older and had never lost a match; the other was younger, in fact he was just a boy, and it happened to be his first go at the game. He wasn't told the rules of the game because the older contestant determined them. One advantage the boy did have was that he understood his opponent and took him very seriously. Needless to say, the older man laughed at his challenger, thinking that it was ridiculous to be pitted against a boy. So, the older man walked into the contest like a drunkard, belching and wagging his head, while the boy entered with a razor-sharp focus on his opponent. The boy made his first move, and Goliath came crashing down to the earth.

In general, whenever you enter a fight, a basketball game, or a chess match, you must understand your opponent. This means you must watch his moves, analyze his style, and make note of his tactics; in short, you must take him seriously. If you underestimate your foe, you've already lost the contest. In 2004, the USA basketball team strutted into the

Olympics imagining they would be kings of the court. Instead they were defeated by Puerto Rico and Lithuania. *"Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall."* (1 Corinthians 10:12).

The flesh, the world, and the Devil have been the three main sources of trouble traditionally noted by the Christian Church. It has been said—not as a strict theological rule but simply as a general observation—that every problem we have and every sin we slip into can be traced back to one of these three sources. They are placed in order of influence, with the flesh (a part of ourselves) as the first source of trouble.

So what is this "flesh" that we keep hearing about? Is it simply the skin that covers the body? Is it an uncontrolled eye or tongue or is it something more deeply seated in the brain? Is it a matter of puberty and hormones or a state of fallen human nature? In short, is the "lust of the flesh" a fundamental flaw of the body or of the mind?

St. Paul said, *"I am carnal, sold under sin."* (Romans 7:14) He was certainly not a slave of sin in the sense we mean; but he had a definite sense of a "sinful" nature within him that was spoiled, like a fruit.

And despite the

SPIRITUAL WARFARE 101: KNOWING YOUR ENEMY

By J. M. Stephanos

WHAT?

WHO?

immense spiritual force within him that propelled him like a rocket to do good, the sinful nature—or “flesh”—was always there to pull him down, slow him down, and turn the firm ground on which he ran into mud. But he stubbornly refused to ever give up; he struggled with colossal energy against the enemy within. And at those times he felt near the breaking point, he knew Christ would carry him.

But why would God allow in us this enemy? Why must the spiritual life be so arduous, so tedious, so tiring? The desert fathers have always been the grandmasters of wrestling against the flesh. You might say that they hide themselves away in a monastery to develop the best remedies for the soul—much as a medical researcher would hide himself away in his laboratory for months to develop the best remedies for the body.

The excellent book *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* explains the significance of this war with the flesh: “Abba John the Dwarf once prayed to God to take the passions of the flesh away from him, so that he might be free of anxiety. He went and told an old man this: ‘I now find myself in peace, without an enemy.’ The old man said to him, ‘Go, beseech God to stir up warfare so that you may regain the affliction and humility that you used to have, for *it is by warfare that the soul makes progress.*’ So he besought God and when warfare came, he no longer prayed that it might be taken away, but said, ‘Lord, give me strength for the fight.’”

The “world” is the second enemy category we must face. It is the third type of “seed” described in the Parable of the Sower in Mark 4. The great threat of this enemy is not really in its ability to reach out and strike us, but in its role as a “distracter.” If we can imagine a man walking along a road that leads to his homeland, the flesh would be his body weight, representing how much he indulges in food; and the world would be like a circus on the side of the road, performing in a frenzy to capture the attention of passersby.

We live in an eminently “distracted” age. Who has not had a warm discussion with a close friend disrupted by a phone call, text message, billboard, or television airing? Whereas our ancestors could

sit and focus for a long time on a particular chore or thought, we have our attention divided among ten different productions of technology. Once the world used to be an ugly adversary living outside our homes only to be dealt with when we exited. Now the world has become a comfortable member of every household in America.

The “Devil”—our age-old adversary! The Devil is like a tyrannous dictator who has official control of a country’s laws and social life, but whom the citizens barely ever see. He once had more might than the mightiest archangel, but he was demoted to the level of the lizard at the Cross.

Thankfully, in our spiritual warfare, we never perform hand-to-hand combat with this enemy. He may fight us through the Flesh and the World, but the Bible has strictly forbidden us from ever looking him in the face. In fact, we are not even allowed to argue with him (John 8:44). The *Imitation of Christ* counsels us: “We must be especially careful when temptation begins. For it is easier to overcome the enemy if he is forbidden entry into the mind. Reject him, therefore, at the threshold where he knocks.” In modern language, we would say, “Slam the door shut in his face. It is easier to keep him out if he is never allowed in to begin with.”

“Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.” (Ephesians 6: 10-11)

WHY?