

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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The Christian's Armor: The Shield of Faith (Part 2)

The Apostle Paul, on more than one occasion, expressed concern that Satan would take advantage of his converts (II Cor. 2:11; 11:3; I Tim. 5:15). It was Satan's cunning that alarmed Paul. He knew that the Devil rarely attacks in an openly direct fashion.¹ Luther captured the reality of this conflict in his hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." *For still our ancient foe Doth seek to work us woe; His craft and power are great, And, armed with cruel hate, On earth is not his equal.* But Luther knew equally as well the power of the Gospel. *"The Prince of Darkness grim, We tremble not for him; His rage we can endure, For lo, his doom is sure; One little word shall fell him."* Luther's confidence was rooted in what the Apostle Paul wrote in Colossians 2:15, "And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." In Eph. 1:18-23, a similar reference to Christ's victory of Satan is underscored. "I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way." The Apostle's emphasis on the nature of this conflict (not against flesh and blood) but against spiritual forces, should alert us to the true nature of the battlefield – our weapons are all centered around the finished work of Christ (cf. II Cor. 10:4, 5). These evil spirits, as Hodge notes, "These evil spirits are the rulers of this darkness. The meaning either is, that they reign over the existing state of ignorance and alienation from God; i.e., the world in its apostasy is subject to their control; or *this darkness* is equivalent to kingdom of darkness."² Thus, the shield of faith is specifically designed to protect against the assaults of our enemy. Wisely did one of the Old Puritans write, "Indeed if faith fail, all other graces must fail, by consequence. Faith is the soul's steward, that fetcheth in supplies of grace from Christ, in whom is the treasure of it; and distributes them to all the other graces of the soul. Therefore, when Christ tells St. Peter, Luke xxii. 31, that Satan had desired to sift him by his temptations, lest he should be thereby discouraged and dejected, presently he adds, in v. 32, *But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not:* and wherefore his faith, rather than any other grace, but because other graces must take their lot with faith, and must be strong or weak, victorious or languishing, as faith is. And therefore it is called *the shield of faith:* Eph. Vi. 16: now the office of a shield is, to defend, not only the body, but the rest of the armour also; and so doth faith, when it is dexterously managed: it keeps both the soul, and its graces also, from the attempts of the Devil. I might enlarge here, in showing you how faith preserves from sin: as, by deriving virtue and strength from the death and blood of Christ; by pleading God's engagements and promises to tread Satan under our feet; by urging and importuning Christ to fulfil in us the end of his coming into the world, which was to destroy the works of the Devil; and many such ways I might name, by which faith prevents sin, and destroys it."³

I. THE NATURE OF THIS STRUGGLE

The word translated *wrestle* in the ESV is PALĒ refers to a contest between combatants lit. “hand-to-hand fighting.” That involves cunningness and strategy. This has to do with the believer’s duty to deal with sin and temptation. To help us understand this, I am going to enlist the help of one of the old Scottish divines.

Mr. Ralph Erskine (1685-1752) was the son of a Covenanter, a Scottish Presbyterian minister who was imprisoned for field-preaching and refusing to countenance the official Episcopalian church. A younger brother of the famous preacher Ebenezer Erskine, Ralph was an evangelical pastor with a love for the truth of God’s Word and the doctrines of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is still well known for his “gospel sonnets,” a collection of evangelical poems intended to press home particular Gospel truths. The Erskine brothers were “Marrow Men,” supporting Mr. Thomas Boston’s reprinting of the “Marrow of Modern Divinity,” a puritan book which distinguishes the Covenant of Works from the Covenant of Grace.

1. Gospel and legal mortification differ *in their principles from which they proceed*. Gospel mortification is from gospel principles, viz. the Spirit of God [Rom. 8. 13], “If ye through the Spirit mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live;” Faith in Christ [Acts 15. 9], “Purifying their hearts by faith;” The love of Christ constraining [2 Cor. 5. 14], “The love of Christ constraineth us.” But legal mortification is from legal principles such as, from the applause and praise of men, as in the Pharisees; from pride of self-righteousness, as in Paul before his conversion; from the fear of hell; from a natural conscience, from the example of others; from some common motions of the Spirit; and many times from the power of sin itself, while one sin is set up to wrestle with another, as when sensuality and self-righteousness wrestle with one another. The man, perhaps, will not drink and swear. Why? Because he is setting up and establishing a righteousness of his own, whereby to obtain the favour of God here is but one sin wrestling with another.
2. They differ in their weapons *with which they fight against sin*. The gospel believer fights with grace’s weapons, namely, the blood of Christ, the word of God, the promises of the covenant, and the virtue of Christ’s death and cross [Gal. 6. 14] “God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, by whom [or, as it may be read, ‘whereby,’ viz. by the cross of Christ,] the world is crucified to me, and I to the world.” But now the man under the law fights against sin by the promises and threatenings of the law; by its promises, saying, I will obtain life; and win to heaven, I hope, if I do so and so; by its threatenings, saying, I will go to hell and be damned, if I do not so and so. Sometimes he fights with the weapons of his own vows and resolutions, which are his strong tower, to which he runs and thinks himself safe.
3. They differ in the *object of their mortification*. They both, indeed, seek to mortify sin, but the legalist’s quarrel is more especially with the sins of his conversation, whereas the true believer should desire to fight as the Syrians got orders, that is, neither against great nor small, so much as against the King himself, even against original corruption. A body of sin and death troubles him more than any other sin in the world; “O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from this body of death?” [Rom. 7. 24]. His great exercise is to have the seed of the woman to bruise this head of the serpent.
4. They differ in the *reasons of the contest*. The believer, whom grace teaches to deny all ungodliness, he fights against sin because it dishonours God, opposes Christ, grieves the Spirit, and separates between his Lord and him; but the legalist fights against sin, because it breaks his peace, and troubles his conscience, and hurts him, by bringing wrath and judgment on him. As children will not play in the dust, not because it sullies their clothes,

but flies into their eyes, and hurts them, so the legalist will not meddle with sin, not because it sullies the perfections of God, and defiles their souls, but only because it hurts them. I deny not, but there is too much of this legal temper even amongst the godly.

5. They differ in *their motives and ends*. The believer will not serve sin, because he is alive to God, and dead to sin [Rom. 6. 6]. The legalist forsakes sin, not because he is alive, but that he may live. The believer mortifies sin, because God loves him; but the legalist, that God may love him. The believer mortifies, because God is pacified towards him; the legalist mortifies, that he may pacify God by his mortification. He may go a great length, but it is still that he may have whereof to glory, making his own doing all the foundation of his hope and comfort.
6. They differ in the *nature of their mortification*. The legalist does not oppose sin violently, seeking the utter destruction of it, if he can get sin put down, he does not seek it to be thrust out; but the believer, having a nature and principle contrary to sin, he seeks not only to have it weakened, but extirpated. The quarrel is irreconcilable, no terms of accommodation or agreement, no league with sin is allowed, as it is with hypocrites.
7. They differ in the *extent of the warfare*, not only objectively, the believer hating every false way; but also subjectively, all the faculties of the believer's soul, the whole regenerate part being against sin. It is not so with the hypocrite or legalist; for as he spares some sin or other, so his opposition to sin is only seated in his conscience; his light and conscience oppose such a thing, while his heart approves of it. There is an extent also as to time; the legalist's opposition to sin is of a short duration, but in the believer it is to the end; grace and corruption still opposing one another.
8. They differ in *the success*. There is no believer, but as he fights against sin, so first or last he prevails, though not always to his discerning; and though he lose many battles, yet he gains the war. But the legalist, for all the work he makes, yet he never truly comes speed; though he cut off some actual sin, yet the corrupt nature is never changed; he never gets a new heart; the iron sinew in his neck, which opposes God, is never broken; and when he gets one sin mortified, sometimes another and more dangerous sin lifts up the head. Hence all the sins and pollutions that ever the Pharisees forsook, and all the good duties that ever they performed, made them but more proud, and strengthened their unbelieving prejudices against Christ, which was the greater and more dangerous sin.

Thus you may see the difference between legal and gospel mortification, and try yourselves thereby.⁴

CONCLUSION: Ezekiel Hopkins, who I cited earlier, exhorts us by saying, “we are commanded, to *strive* that we may enter in at the strait gate? Luke 13:24; so to *run*, that we may obtain? I Cor. 9:24; so to *wrestle*, that we may be able to stand? Eph. 6:11-12; not to *faint* in our minds? Heb. 12:3; nor to *grow weary* in well-doing? Gal. 6:9. Do not all these expressions imply great labor and pains? Can you strive, and run, and wrestle, and fight, and all this by doing nothing? or, were it needful to be taught not to grow faint, nor to be weary, when we have no work to do? Therefore, it is the genius and sum of the Scripture, to excite men to be always active and laborious in the ways of holiness and obedience.”⁵ Mind you, this is not *legal obedience* but *Gospel obedience* – for it has as its reference faith in Christ as its shield.

ENDNOTES

¹ The text we alluded to last week – I Chron. 21:1 – declares that Satan *incited* King David. The Hebrew word is SŪT and the underlying idea is that of cunningness. See *Theological Wordbook of The Old Testament* II ed., R. L. Harris (Moody 1980) p. 621.

² Charles Hodge, *Commentary On The Epistle To The Ephesians* (rpt. Revell, 1971) p. 378.

³ *The Works of Ezekiel Hopkins* II (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria 1997) p. 68.

⁴ This section from Erskine's Collected Works can be found at http://www.covenantofgrace.com/r_erskine_legal_and_gospel_mortification.htm.

⁵ Hopkins, p.461