

Sunday 8 March 2026 – Trumpington 8.30am and St John the Evangelist 6pm Evensong

Josh 1:1-9, Eph 6:10-20, Luke 11:14-28 – The rules of engagement for spiritual warfare

Paul's word-picture of how the Christian engages in spiritual warfare with the devil is an absolute staple of Sunday school classes. The Christian who has ***put on the whole armour of God*** and is clad in ***belt ... and ... breastplate ...*** [and] ... ***helmet***, equipped with ***shield*** and ***sword***, and yet still fleet of foot, is a gift to every Sunday school teacher keen to encourage children to be dressing up and making models of Roman shields and swords.

But when war is waged with cyberspace attacks and misinformation as effectively as with torpedoes and tanks and precision-guided missiles, we have to ask: is Paul's picture of dealing with the devil with 1st-century weaponry still relevant to Christians today? In suggesting that it is, I want to take us back to 500 years before the birth of Christ, and the birth of one of the most influential military strategists who ever lived.

Sun Tzu's *Art of War* has long been a favourite of generals as diverse as Ho Chi Minh, Douglas MacArthur, and Norman Schwarzkopf Jr. Let's look at Paul's Guide to Spiritual Warfare in the light of Sun Tzu's golden rule for war: *Know your enemy, know yourself, and you can win one hundred battles.*

First, **know your enemy**. Paul tells us that Christians need to be ***able to stand against the wiles of the devil***. But do we even believe in the devil?

Jesus certainly did believe in the devil. Time after time in the gospels, we hear Jesus referring to the devil, or to Satan, or to Beelzebul. He does it when he's speaking to the disciples, and to the Pharisees, and to the crowds who came to hear him. Jesus never questions the existence of the devil; nor that he and the devil were on opposite sides; nor that his followers needed to choose whose side they were on.

And Jesus never had any doubt that he and the devil were in a war for control of people's hearts, minds and souls, and that the devil's chief weapons in this war are lies and the manipulation of the truth. We see the devil sowing the seed of distrust in God in the Genesis account of how Adam and Eve became estranged from God, with the serpent's words seeking to create doubt in Eve's mind about what God had said and about why he had said it.

But we should not blame the devil for the choices we make. It is our responsibility to choose well; to strive to grow in holiness and faith, and to seek to overcome our sinful desires, knowing that the devil will try to drive a wedge between believers and that he likes to probe

any weakness. That is why, earlier in this letter, Paul has reminded the believers ***let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up***, and has told them ***do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil***.

For that master of warfare Sun Tzu, just as important as knowing your enemy is to **know yourself**. Christians need to remember that they are children of God, redeemed through Christ's death on the cross. If the devil's weapons of war are lies, the Christian's weapons of war are everything needed to countermand and to neutralise the devil's lies.

The devil cannot overcome the word of God, so Paul puts first and foremost in the Christian's spiritual armour the ***belt of truth***. The truth of the gospel underpins everything else that the Christian will put on. The good news of Christ is that ***God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life***. It is trusting in Christ's death on the cross that achieves ***salvation***, makes the Christian ***righteous***, and gives the Christian ***peace***.

So, what are the **rules of engagement** of this spiritual warfare between the Christian and the devil? In the war between Christ and the angels, and the devil and his demons, the first and most important rule is that the war has already been won by Christ's death on the cross. It was at the cross that God ***disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example over them, [and] triumphing over them***". The devil and his demons have been defeated. What we are witnessing is their death throes.

In the words of one theologian, the gospel accounts of Jesus casting out demons reflect a ***"level and intensity of demonic manifestations in people during Christ's ministry [that] was unique, having no parallel in Old Testament times or since"***, as Satan desperately battled against Christ to keep control of the world. But these days, claiming to be subject to demons is much more likely a sign of mental health breakdown than of demonic possession requiring exorcism.

So, what is the **strategy** for what remains of this war; a war Christ has already won, where Christians are asked only to stand firm against the devil's lies? As the culmination of his letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul tells us Christians must ***pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication***, and ***keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints***. So, we pray for one another, with the confidence that comes from knowing how this war will end. It will end with the destruction of the devil and with the children of God safe at last with Christ.