

Taking Up the Fight of Faith
~ Matthew 18:7-9

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In the summer of 1972, the world turned its collective eye onto Munich, West Germany. For the first time in 36 years, Germany hosted an Olympic games. The last time Germany hosted the Olympics, someone named Adolf Hitler ruled the land. He used the 1936 Berlin Olympics to display the Nazi rule and try to convince the world of the superiority of the Aryan race. The Nazis used those games to portray Germany as a strong military power ready to assert it's will.

Mindful of this, the organizers of the 1972 games, with good intention, wanted to portray a very different Germany. So they decided they would drastically reduce security and minimize the show of armed force. The security personnel barely stood out from the crowds. They prepared to deal mostly with ticket fraud and drunkenness.

The athlete's village revealed the toned down security. Athletes could come and go as they pleased. They could also sneak past security to other countries areas by going over the chain-link fences dividing the village. Things seemed to go well through the first week.

But in the second week 8 members of the Palestinian Terrorist Group called Black September dressed up like Olympic athletes in track

suits. They carried duffel bags with them. But they didn't contain gym clothes. They held assault rifles, pistols and grenades. They scaled the chain link fence outside the building housing Israeli athletes. They soon broke inside and took the Israeli athletes hostage.

News broke the next day of the hostage taking. The terrorists demanded the release of friends in prison and safe passage out of Munich. But in response to a rescue attempt, the terrorists killed all the athletes. In the end 11 Israeli athletes, 5 terrorists and 1 West German policeman lost their lives. This happened partially because of this desire to reduce security. It was an attempt to portray a friendlier and more carefree atmosphere.¹ This approach also minimized the ongoing struggle between the Palestinians and Israelis. It seems the Olympic organizers did not believe that this fight could erupt in their own back yard.

If you, like me, are a Christian, we are in a war. We have an enemy, the devil, who opposes and tempts us. We have a sinful nature that opposes our walk with Christ. We have normal desires that can quickly get out of control. The world presents us with temptations to satisfy our desires outside of God's good boundaries.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Munich_massacre

However, we may live like we're not in a battle. We don't like fighting or war. We don't see the need to adopt a soldier's posture or even use such terms. We'd rather live at peace. We believe everyone needs to calm down and back off on all this battle talk.

But if we are in a war and we're not taking up the fight, we can be just like those Olympic organizers. They reduced security with good intentions. But the reduced security contributed to tragic results. Our unwillingness to take up the fight may result in a tragic outcome for us.

Now you might still think I am overstating it. So let's bring Jesus into this discussion. We will look at some statements Jesus made. I think they rank pretty high among the most controversial words He said. These statements have to led to some confusion and even repulsion. However, if we take some time to absorb Jesus' statement, we will gain a vital perspective on this war we face. After this, we will look at some key Biblical intelligence that will help us in this battle. By intelligence, I don't mean brain power. I'm talking about information that aids those going into battle. I pray that with Jesus' words and this intelligence will encourage us to wisely engage in the battle of the Christian life. Our text is Matthew 18:1-9. It contains a section of Jesus' teaching. The controversial statements are at the end of this passage.

Matthew 18:1-9 (ESV)

18 At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" ² And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them ³ and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

⁵ "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, ⁶ but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

⁷ "Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! ⁸ And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. ⁹ And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.

Jesus teaches about life in the kingdom of heaven. This is life under God's reign and in God's community. Jesus reveals that the truly great in God's kingdom will become like children. They will have faith like a child that takes God's Word at face value. Just as most children naturally trust the people caring for them, we need to treat God as trustworthy and humble ourselves before Him.

Then Jesus warns about leading children or little ones astray. This could mean leading actual children, or leading young believers, into sin. Either scenario will reap serious consequences. In Jesus'

words, a quick death by drowning would be better than the judgment awaiting such a person.

Then in verse 7, Jesus provides a more general warning to anyone who tempts others to sin. He laments that the world brings temptation but, acknowledges facing temptation is part of living the world. But He warns of severe consequences for anyone who serves as an agent of temptation to another.

Verses 8-9 contain the statements we want to focus on today. Now aren't those kind of bizarre. If your hand or foot causes you to sin cut it off and throw it away. If your eye causes you to sin, gauge it out? I remember hearing these statements as a boy growing up in the church. The statements didn't bother me as much as the mechanics involved in carrying them out. If both my hands cause me to sin, how does one cut off both your hands? I could see how to do the first. I would take a hatchet in my right hand and chop off my left one. But then how would I chop off my right one? I'd have to put my axe in my arm pit and someone do a swinging motion. Then how would I do my foot and my eyes? And soon, even as a boy, I suspected Jesus did not mean to literally do this.

He gave such an extreme example to shock his listeners out of their complacency regarding their own sin. I think we all fall into that at

times. I think we can get casual about so called little sins or the little lies we talked about 2 weeks ago. We've talked about how no one wakes up one day and decides they're going to become an addict. It's a series of little decisions that cause a downward descent into addiction.

Jesus warns us against a non-combative approach to our sin. He alerts us to the danger of a casual attitude towards our lack of self-control. He calls out our relaxed acceptance of that which dishonors God. He does this with a striking comparison. He lays before us two options. Which life is better? Is it better to live with both feet, both hands, both eyes and continual sin? Or is it better to lose one hand, or eye, or foot so that you gain protection from sin? Then Jesus reveals the better option. Life without a hand that participates in sin is way better than a life with all limbs, eyes and sin. Why? A life that fights sin leads to eternal life with Christ. A life that tolerates sin is in danger of the hell of fire.

Yet we still might dismiss this as over the top. Most of the world ignores this. It says, "As long as we're not hurting anybody, what we do on our own time and the privacy of our own homes is our own business. As long as we're pretty good people, we'll be alright."

But, here's a couple of great comments I came across by those who have written about this passage. "The pain/difficulty of cutting off limb or gauging out an eye is not comparable to the eternal judgment destined for allowing the passions of life to lead one into sin." "Failure to deal radically with sin in our lives betrays our allegiance to the world and threatens us with the eternal fire of hell."

If we take a casual approach to our sin it may reveal our passionate devotion to it. Jesus awakens us to this spiritual reality. We have real enemies that want to destroy us. If we don't resist them, we may suffer eternal consequences. That's Jesus' teaching. So in light of this, **How can we in dependence on God, take up the fight of the Christian faith?** Here are some pieces of intelligence that will help us in this battle.

1 - We must declare war on our sins. To overcome out of control desires, we must declare all-out war on them. We must not live at peace with our sin. We must not allow it to remain settled in our lives. Ed Welch writes "Declaring war sharpens our senses especially if the enemy hides. As Christians, we often forget that we are at war." 1 Peter 2:11 – Sinful desires wage war against your soul. Eph. 5:15 – Be very careful how you live. Eph. 6:11 – Put on the full armor of God. 1 Peter

1:3 – Prepare your minds for action. 2 Peter 1:5 – Make every effort.

1 Peter 5:8 – Be self controlled and alert.

This battle consists of war against an unseen enemy. He has strategically placed snipers. If we let down our guard for a minute, they suddenly opens fire. Going to war means we put on the armor of God found in Ephesians 6. Our greatest weapons are the Scriptures and prayer.

2 – Yet we can rest in the peace brought by God. If we have turned to Christ in faith, we have peace with God and a conscience that is no longer troubled. We receive the peace of God when we bring him our anxious thoughts. Philippians 1:4-7; Jesus Himself promised that He would leave His peace with us. John 16:33; We live in a conflicted world and face a determined enemy. Yet we experience peace with God and live with the peace of God.

3 - We must show no mercy to our sinful desires. 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 – ²⁴Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. ²⁵Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. ²⁶So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. ²⁷But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified."

The image changes here from war to running a race. But notice in verse 27 the battle with the body. “I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” Welch writes, “Since our sinful tendency is to carelessly indulge our desires, Paul implores us to have a battle-like, aggressive, rigorous, take no prisoners style of life towards our sins.” We must not harbor or show mercy to our sinful desire. They wage war against our souls. They need to be killed out of us.

4 – We do not fight this battle alone – God, and his ministering angels, fight on our behalf. The Old Testament often portrays God as a warrior fighting on behalf of His people. The Israelites turned to God pleading that He would strike their enemies. He often did bringing them down through His direct intervention or by empowering Israel to overcome. 2 Chronicles 32:20-21 show one example of this. “Then Hezekiah, the king and Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amoz, prayed because of this and cried to heaven. And the Lord sent an angel, who cut off all the mighty warriors and commanders and officers in the camp of the king of Assyria.” So, the Lord introduced and destroyed Israel’s enemies. In the battle against our sin, God intervenes providing ways to escape. 1st Corinthians 10:13 – “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be

tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.” So God helps us escape from temptation put before us.

5 – We are not abandoned – Our commanding officer died for us. Abandonment by officers is an apparently great discouragement for front line troops. Lack of ammunition, lack of preparation, or poor leadership decisions contribute to the sense of abandonment. They may feel abandoned because their officers may literally run away in the face of the enemy leaving the soldiers on their own.

But we don’t have to fear this. Our commanding officer – our king – faced the worst the enemy had to offer. Jesus did not run. He did not hide. He offered himself up to be killed on the cross. It initially looked like a massive defeat when Jesus died on the cross. It actually laid the foundation for great victory. Just 3 days later, Jesus rose and conquered our 3 great enemies – sin, death and the devil. Jesus demonstrated His commitment to us by going to the very front of the line and dying for His people. Yet His resurrection secured ultimate victory over our enemies. We are not abandoned.

6 - Remember this is a war not one single battle. Yes, Jesus has given us victory over the devil. But we still struggle against him and his forces of evil. Yes, we will one day experience resurrection.

But first we may have to go through death. Yes we have been forgiven of our sins but we still struggle to overcome sinful living.

This struggle against sin goes on through our whole lives. It's called the process of sanctification. We slowly grow to become more and more like Christ. So it's not like we come to Christ one day and never sin again. We come to Christ. We begin to leave behind sins as we follow our Lord. To keep this in perspective, we need to look back a year or 5 years. Then we will hopefully see the changes God has brought in our lives and continue to pursue growth in holiness.

We must keep perspective on the great spiritual battles already won.

Spiritual Victory 1 - Satan is already defeated. He's already lost the war, but He continues to fight battles. He wants to take down as many as he can with him. At one time, we were easy prey, vulnerable to Satan's devices. But now "the prince of this world stands condemned (John 16:11) before Christ. He cannot dominate Christ or those who have his Spirit. We can stand against the devil's schemes (Eph 6 11). We can "resist him standing firm in the faith (1 Peter 5:9). We can resist him and he will flee from us (James 4:7).

Spiritual Victory 2 - We are not condemned – Romans 8:1 – "There is therefore now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus.

Welch writes "When Satan gets desperate, he accuses us, suggesting that with every single slip, we are further condemned. He aims to take us out of the battle and neutralize us with despair. He will tell us God abandoned us. God is not good. God does not want the best for us. Or he tells us that our superiors thought we were hopeless and have decided not to send in reinforcements. These are all lies. Remember Satan is the father of lies. John 8:44; Lying is his native language. So we must use Scripture to cut through these lies. We are no longer condemned

Spiritual Victory 3 - Sin is no longer our master. Romans 6:6; "We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. Verse 11 – So you must also consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." We were bought out of slavery at the greatest cost possible. We were not set free to serve ourselves, but to serve and love the living God.

Sin is no longer our master. But we still face the alliance of sin, Satan and the world. We will face temptation from the world. But the more we grow in Christ, the less our own sinful desires will influence us. Yet we must not let our guard down. We must not adopt a lax, low security attitude towards our sin. When temptations come, we must

live mindfully. We look past the façade and notice the smell of death that goes with it. If the temptation hooks our desires, we need to go public and ask the Lord and others for help and prayer.

So, if you are a Christian, you are in this battle. The question I leave you with today is this; Which piece of intelligence do you most need to act on?

- Reengage in the fight? Declare war on sin.
- Rest in the peace of God?
- Break the peace treaty you've made with that sinful desire?
- Remember you are not alone or abandoned?
- Keep the big picture in mind? This is a war not one battle. You may have recently lost a battle. But get up and keep going because you're on the winning side in the war.
- Remember the spiritual victories already won? Satan is defeated, you are not condemned. Sin is not your master. What piece of intelligence does God want to encourage you with today?

If you don't know Christ, you are at the mercy of our great enemies – sin, death and the devil. Except, they show no mercy. They want to destroy you. But you can experience rescues from them if you will place the trust of your life upon Christ and His Work for you on the

cross. If you trust Him, God will rescue you. So let us come to the Lord and respond to what He may have revealed to us today.