



Half Truths and Whole Lies

In the name of him who for us defeated the temptations of the evil one, dear friends in Christ: In just six months, our nation will have been engaged in what we've been calling "The War on Terror" for ten long years. It is by its very nature an unconventional war. Our enemies, who are very cunning and resourceful, operate covertly, hiding in the shadows and remaining unseen until they're ready to strike. They are dispersed – a wide, loosely organized network of groups that are constantly plotting against us and probing for weaknesses. They have successfully infiltrated our home turf, taking advantage of our freedoms to place their assassins and agents right in our very midst. They've even turned some of our own citizens against us. And when they strike, they do so without warning, usually directing their attacks where we the most vulnerable. They know how to hit us where it hurts the most. They have no regard for their victims, be they men, women, or children. They have no pity for the weak or injured. And make no mistake. They are bent on one purpose: they want nothing less than our total destruction. And they will use any means at their disposal to attain their goal. And because they are fanatics, slavishly dedicated to a religion and way of thinking completely opposed to our own, the hope of changing them or somehow peacefully coexisting with them is nil. Some say that we can win the War on Terror. I don't think so. The best we can hope for is an ongoing struggle in which we remain on guard against the enemy and prevent them from taking too many lives and doing too much damage. It's said that the price of freedom is *eternal* vigilance. And so it must be in our ongoing War on Terror.

But today I want to talk about the original War on Terror – the one against the terrorist with whom we've been at war since the creation of our race. I mean Satan, of course; and you *must* understand that he is a terrorist – everything I said about Al Qaeda and their Islamicist allies applies to him and his evil forces. But the stakes in this war are much higher. In the war against radical Islam, you might lose your life. In the war against Satan, you may lose your eternal soul. If the enemy wins, you'll be in hell forever. More than that, he will use you to help him drag others – especially those you love – down with you.

The battles of *this* War on Terror are not fought in far away places with names you can't pronounce; they are fought inside you. They're the struggles between your sinful old nature (the enemy's ally within you) and your new nature – the one reborn by God and kept alive by the power of the Word and the Spirit of Christ. They are the moral battles that take place every time you have to choose between doing the hard right or the easy wrong, between being selfish or generous, between forgiving someone who's hurt you or holding a grudge against them, between firing back a mean spirited comment when provoked or giving a gentle response, between indulging your old flesh in some wicked pleasure or denying yourself for the sake of something higher and better, between believing what God has said or doubting his Word.

And there is no neutral ground in this war. You cannot avoid taking sides or let the enemy exist within you unchallenged. If you provide a safe haven for the terrorists, you're on their side. And if you are not aware of the conflict, if you don't feel the heat of these battles, it's because the enemy has already won you over. And if these words are painful to hear, because maybe you've given up the fight in too many of these battles and let the enemy have his way with you, then it's high time you got back into the fray and that you developed a more effective battle plan.

You may have heard of the ancient Chinese military strategist Sun Tsu. He wrote a book called *The Art of War* that is still studied by military planners and tacticians even today. In it he said that to win many battles it is necessary first to know yourself and then to know your enemy. And what I'd like to do this morning is spend a few moments applying this inscrutable wisdom from the East together with the infinitely more profound wisdom of God found in today's Scripture readings, to the tactical situation we face in the spiritual war in which we are engaged every day.

We begin with an analysis of friendly forces. The question is: what do you know about yourself? Well, a good place to start is a diagnostic tool we call self-examination. It's a hard and careful look in the moral mirror. You evaluate yourself and your recent thoughts, words, and actions in light of the perfect Law of God. When you do that, if you're honest anyway, you'll have to admit things don't look so good. The enemy has been winning all the battles. So we could describe the status of friendly forces as ragged, wounded, beaten, ill equipped, poorly trained, low on ammunition, demoralized, and in a full and disorganized retreat. The situation looks pretty grim.

Thank God that all is not lost, because we have a powerful ally on our side; but I'd like to hold off discussing him until a bit later. First I want you to probe more deeply into your own unique tactical situation. I've been speaking in generalities; now consider your own personal weaknesses. No one knows better than you what temptations you have a hard time avoiding, what predilections and susceptibilities most frequently lead you to fall in moral combat: greed, materialism, gossip, a tendency to think the worst of people, mistrust, lust, pornography, over-eating, over drinking, jealousy, lack of compassion, thoughtlessness, irreverence, disrespect for authority, dishonesty, laziness, propensity to anger, ill temper, vengefulness, pride, self-sufficiency, self-importance, selfishness, ingratitude, discontentment ... if I've missed anyone completely, please stand up and tell me what I should add to that list. ... Like I said, no one knows better than you what battles you have the hardest time facing.

But then, that isn't exactly right, is it? What about the enemy? Seems he always knows exactly when to show up and where to put the pressure on, doesn't he? Apparently he's also studied his Sun Tsu: he knows us maybe even a little better than we know ourselves. And he has been a master at keeping people from knowing him and his tactics. One of his most successful accomplishments in recent history has been to get people not think about him at all. Today there are many Christian denominations and bodies that deny his existence altogether. They claim that Satan is merely a biblical metaphor, a personification of evil who has no real personality or individual existence. They think that the devil is the stuff of medieval superstition. How convenient for him – and how dangerous for us – that people don't take him seriously.

But even we who recognize his existence can be duped or lulled into not taking him seriously. Be honest, how often do you think of him and the danger he poses to you? You know, back during WWII, our nation was seriously threatened; and as a result, people thought about the Nazi Germans and the Imperialist Japanese all the time. Satan is a foe infinitely more dangerous, and let's face it: we hardly think of him at all. Do you see how effectively he's hidden himself among us? Or how he's disguised himself by making us think of him as silly caricature of a guy with horns, a black goatee, a red suit, a pitchfork, and a pointy tail? Who's going to be concerned with an image like that? Or even with the more frightening Hollywood version of a guy who's got nothing better to do than hang out in a child's bedroom and make her levitate, spit up pea soup, and speak in a low, raspy voice? Is that the enemy we imagine?

Scripture tells us we are dealing with a far more crafty and subtle fellow than that. We are told that very often he appears as an angel of light. Most people will not know him when they see him. They will take him for something good and holy and right, because deception and trickery are his best weapons. His goal is to *fool* you into believing something false, therefore it requires that what he says at least have the appearance of wisdom; there must be some truth to his statements that beguile and entice the unwary. If what he said were blatantly false, no one would be taken in. And so instead he uses what we might call “half-truths”, which, upon examination, we will discover to be whole lies.

We can get a pretty thorough idea of his lying tactics and underhanded strategy by considering today’s Old Testament and Gospel lessons, the temptation of Eve and the temptation of Christ. These two recorded attacks are surprisingly similar in approach; but we’ll note that one of these attacks succeeded and the other one failed. And we should also note that the intended victims in each of these attacks had an advantage that we don’t have: namely, they had been undefeated prior to the conflict. Neither of them went to war with a will weakened and predisposed to evil like we have. So, whatever we learn about Satan’s attack methods so that we might defend ourselves against them, we should anticipate that the battle will be even more difficult for us because we’ve already been routed on more occasions than we can name.

But let’s consider his first wave of assault. He tries to convince Eve in her Garden Paradise that God is deliberately depriving her of something she has a right to expect. “Did God really say you that may not eat from *any* of these trees in the Garden?” The implication is clear: “God is treating you very badly, my dear – here, surrounding you with all these delectable, mouthwatering fruits, and then saying that you can’t have *any* of them. Oh, that is so cruel. How can you put up with his tyranny? Why do you stick with a God who loves you so little?” Now, you see what Satan’s doing: he’s taking the one little exception and focusing everything on it. Eve is surrounded with proof of the Lord’s boundless love and providence – there are hundreds of trees she can eat from; but Satan makes it sound like the tiniest restriction is pure, unbearable oppression. It’s proof that the Lord has no love for her.

His first assault on Jesus is much the same; but this time instead of being surrounded by plenty, his intended victim is in a place devoid of food. “If God cared about you, he’d give you something to eat – oh, that’s right, I forgot: you’re God’s Son, aren’t you? So, why don’t you use that divine power of yours to whip up a little snack for yourself?” Satan knows full well that Jesus, the eternal God made flesh, intends to live a perfect life completely as a man and subject to all the same restrictions—he has to do this to be our substitute. And no man can change stones to bread. Instead, when faced with times of severe want, he must trust God to provide for his needs. He must trust that God loves him despite the immediate lack of physical evidence. He must trust *that* because God has said so – which is proof more certain than any physical evidence – and which is why Jesus turns the conversation to God’s sure Word: “Food is not what keeps me alive; I live because of the Word and promises of God.”

Now, perhaps you recognize these kinds of assaults in your own life. When things are going very well, when you are surrounded by all the good things that God has given you, how often do you find your attention totally focused on one or two things that you haven’t got? Or when you have lots of room to run around in, lots of options, all kinds of freedoms to enjoy, how often do you find yourself with your nose pushed up against the chain link fence that God has placed there by his Law – placed there not so much to confine you as to protect you from harm – but there you are leaning on the fence, wishing that you could go beyond; convinced that true and lasting happiness can be found only by crossing the line? “If God really loved me, he’d

understand and let me climb over the fence. Surely, if he loved me, he'd want me to be happy." Or conversely, if you've experienced hard times: no money or resources, friendless, injured, sick, family problems, facing surgery, or mourning the death of a loved one – how often have you heard Satan's accusation that it's proof that God does not love you and won't take care of you? More importantly, how often have you fallen for it, and felt that you needed to take inappropriate action to resolve a bad situation? "God won't mind if I cheat, steal, tell lies, fight back, get revenge, go to bed with that person, get divorced, whatever; because if God were really taking care of me like he promised, I wouldn't have to do it." Do you see how Satan's half-truths are really whole lies?

And do you see how Satan moves with his deception plan to encourage you to think that you can get something better and easier by circumventing God's will and command. To Eve he says, "Eat it and die? What, did you believe that? Don't be silly. God knows that your eyes will be opened, and that you'll be so much wiser than you are now if you do this – you'll really be getting ahead; and it's so easy too." To Jesus it's much the same thing: "Everything you see can all be yours, all you have to do is worship me." It's the same deception. He's saying, "God's way is hard and the payoff, if it ever gets here, is hardly worth the wait. My way is easy and gratification is instant. So don't be a fool."

And that's the bitter irony. Adam and Eve get the instant payoff: their eyes are opened and they gain the knowledge of good and evil – but hoping to become wise, they became fools because they believed the half-truths of Satan and threw away their lives. They became subject to death and decay, and even more susceptible to Satan's ongoing attacks. And we, through them, have inherited their weaknesses and their curse. And what's worse, like them we fall over and over again to the same stupid half-truths of Satan.

But Jesus turned away from Satan's half-truths. Satan promised to give him the kingdoms and all the glory of the world, and he didn't seem to want very much at all for it – it was a real bargain. And I believe he would have given it had Jesus complied with his wishes. But Jesus knew very well that it wasn't much of a deal because the earth and everything in it is under the curse of God. He'd be buying a real lemon with no warrantee. He'd be taken in as a fool – and he knew it. So, he turned Satan down cold. He had a better way, a wiser way, a much, much harder way. It was a way that didn't seem so wise, perhaps; a way that didn't seem to lead to happiness. There were times on the way when it seemed that God did not love him at all: "Why have you forsaken me?" But it was the right way; the way that led to life and victory over Satan.

I mentioned earlier that we have a powerful ally, and praise be to God that this is he who – as we sang a bit earlier, "for us fights, the Valiant One, whom God himself elected." Who, by his death on a cursed tree overcame him who used a tree to bring the curse of death on all of us; and who by God's whole truth defeated Satan's deceptive half-truths. In him, that is when we trust in him, we too have victory over Satan. And strengthen by his Word and Spirit, we are given everything we need to win the moral battles we face every day.

We are a people engaged in a war against the original terrorist. As we enter the season of Lent once again, may God give us the grace to keep that in mind, that we may face the foe daily with trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, and shielded by faith in him fight the good fight, and persevere with him through many little victories until we attain the final triumph – through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!