

LESSONS ON SPIRITUAL WARFARE FROM MATTHEW 23

OFFENSIVE SPIRITUAL WEAPONS IN THE WORD OF GOD

A familiar list of *defensive* military equipment called “the full armor of God” is found in the New Testament: the belt of truth, breastplate of righteousness, sandals of the preparation of the gospel of peace, shield of faith, helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit (used defensively) (Eph. 6:10–17). But no similar list of *offensive* spiritual weapons is obvious. We know they exist, however: “the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left” (2 Cor. 6:7). So how do we discover what offensive weapons God has provided for our use in spiritual warfare? And what are they? The answer: you have to hunt and make your own list! May I suggest the following four point procedure. (1) *Identify spiritual weapons from battle scenes*: Jesus, for instance, used “the sword of the Spirit” three times to overcome Satan during His Temptation (Matt. 4:4, 7, 10). (2) *Identify spiritual weapons by contrast*: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:21). Evil deeds are used by the forces of darkness and good works are used by the forces of light. Weapons of righteousness (love, faith, humility, truth, gospel) are usually counterbalanced with weapons of unrighteousness (hate, fear, pride, lies, false gospels). (3) *Identify spiritual weapons by inference or direct statement*: with their faithful testimony martyrs in the Tribulation will overcome Satan (Rev. 12:11). (4) *Identify spiritual weapons by common sense and experience*. This is grounded in the nature of warfare, whether physical or spiritual. A partial list of offensive spiritual weapons: (1) love (Matt. 5:44), (2) all of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23), (3) good works (Luke 6:27; Rom. 12:20–21), (4) a blessing (Luke 6:28a; 1 Peter 3:9), (5) prayer (Luke 6:28b), (6) turn the other cheek (6:29a), (7) give even more to thieves (6:29b) and not demand stolen goods back (6:30b), (8) command (Matt. 4:7, 10), (9) insult (Matt. 23:17), (10) reproof (Matt. 18:15), (11) rebuke (Luke 17:3), (12) public rebuke (1 Tim. 5:20), (13) discipline (Rev. 3:19), (14) advice (Rev. 3:17–18), (15) admonition and warning (1 Thess. 5:14), (16) imprecatory prayer (Jer. 18:19–23), (17) turning over to Satan (1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:20), and the Word of God (Heb. 4:12). You overcome if you elicit conversion, conviction, guilt, fear, correction, obedience, submission, apology, restitution, or love.

USE OF EXPOSURE, REBUKE, INSULTS, AND WARNINGS AS SPIRITUAL WEAPONS

There are seven levels of opposition to Jesus’ ministry in the Gospels: (1) observation (Mark 2:16, 18, 23–28), (2) scrutiny (Mark 3:1–5), (3) conspiracy (Mark 3:6), (4) slander (Matt. 12:22–24), (5) accusation (Matt. 15:1–2), (6) manipulation (Matt. 22:15, 34, 41–46; Mark 10:1–12, and 7) destruction (Matt. 23). See Gary Friesen, *Decision Making & the Will of God*, 418–419. These levels of opposition show us how Jesus engaged the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians in spiritual warfare: (1) Discuss as they discuss; escalate as they escalate; increase your hostility as they increase their hostility. (2) Never back down. Cite the appropriate principle, verse, truth, or doctrine to explain your views and actions. Confront them, teach them—and fight them if necessary. (3) Your objective is to teach, correct, and persuade your enemies of your point of view. Some important techniques of spiritual warfare may be extracted from Jesus’ rebuke of the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23: (1) Discredit spiritual enemies in public (Matt. 23:1). (2) Expose their wicked ways (23:2–7; “have neglected the weightier provisions of the law” 23:23) and then teach both enemies and onlookers the right way (23:8–12; 17–22, 23). (3) Warnings of judgment are powerful spiritual weapons, such as “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees” (23:13, 14, 15, 16, 23, 25, 27, 29); “you shall receive greater condemnation” (23:14). Use them to instill fear and doubts in your enemies. (4) Insults and rebuke are also powerful spiritual weapons; use them to discredit and demolish the authority of your enemies. Make sure the insults are true (in keeping with reality) or you will be judged for judging falsely: “hypocrites” (23:13, 14, 15, 23, 25), “blind guides” (23:16, 24), “fools and blind men” (23:17), “you blind Pharisee” (23:26), “whitewashed tombs” (23:27), “you serpents, you brood of vipers” (23:33). (5) Humor, hyperbole, ridicule, and sarcasm are powerful spiritual weapons (23:24, 25–26). (6) Stating their true spiritual status is another powerful spiritual weapon: “you do not enter in [to the kingdom of heaven] yourselves” (23:13), “you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves” (23:15), “inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence” (23:25), “you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (23:28), “you are sons of those who murdered the prophets” (23:31), “how shall you escape the sentence of hell?” (23:33). (7) Prophecy is a powerful spiritual weapon: “I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city” (23:34). Or “all these things shall come upon this generation” (23:36). Or “Behold, your house is being left to you desolate!” (23:38).

OVERVIEW OF MATTHEW 23

(1) Israel’s leaders have rejected Jesus. (2) Jesus now rejects this generation of unbelieving Jews. (3) They will not participate in the blessings of the messianic Kingdom (23:37–38). (4) They will experience the fifth cycle of discipline (23:38; cf. Lev 26:14–39). (5) Jesus will return to offer the promised millennial Kingdom again in the future (23:39). (6) This chapter is the climax of the preceding confrontations (21:23–22:46). (7) Jesus pronounces seven scathing indictments of the scribes and Pharisees, each introduced with a “Woe!” A woe (*ouai* in Greek) is a promise of misery (the opposite is a beatitude or promise of happiness). (8) These seven woes point out the failure of the scribes and Pharisees to correctly interpret and submit to the Scriptures.

INVERTED PARALLELISM OF THE SEVEN WOES

- A Rejection of the Kingdom by the Scribes and Pharisees (13)
- B Effect on Others: the Scribes and Pharisees Do More Harm than Good (15)
 - C Misguided Use of Scripture Affects the Conduct of the Scribes and Pharisees (16–22)
 - D Failure of the Scribes and Pharisees to Understand Scripture (23–24) CENTER
 - C’ Misguided Use of Scripture Affects the Inner Character of the Scribes and Pharisees (25–26) POINT OF TURNING
- B’ Effect on Others: the Reason the Scribes and Pharisees Do More Harm than Good (27–28)
- A’ Rejection of the Heralds of the Kingdom by the Scribes and Pharisees (29–36)

(Note: I am indebted to Dr. Tom Constable of Dallas Theological Seminary for the substance of this chiasm. See his *Notes on Matthew*, 2008 Edition, page 300.