

Good & Beautiful & Kind

Chapter 2 ~ The Unseen Enemy

When we think of sin, we can think in terms of...

- Sin done by us.
- Sin done against us.
- Sin done around us.

It's this third category of sin that Rich discusses in this chapter, which also affects and shapes us even if not done by us or directly against us. Additionally, there's something deeper, more insidious going on, something we can't see (though we can see the effects of it); it's what Paul describes in Ephesians 6, *"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."* (Ephesians 6:12). FYI...we can shorthand this to *"the powers and principalities"*, as Rich does, which refers to *"...spiritual forces...behind the actions of people and groups of people (including nations, churches, and institutions...whose agenda runs counter to the way of God."* (page 25).

- *How does this idea of outside forces strike you? What do you think, how do you feel, about having "...an unseen enemy whose sole purpose is to cut us off from love."?* (page 26)
- *How do you account for the evil, brokenness, rupturedness, fracturedness we observe in the world? What ideas and language do you go to in order to explain it?*
- *What do you think of Rich's definition/description: "Powers and principalities are spiritual forces that become hostile, taking root in individuals, ideologies, and institutions, with the goal of deception, division, and depersonalization." (page 28, and please pause to appreciate the alliteration 😊)*

Please take note on page 29 that among others places where powers and principalities can be pervasive includes churches and denominations. Evil can be very subtle and be present in unexpected places. Additionally, as Rich points out, powers and principalities aren't inherently or automatically "evil", rather anything can become evil when in rebellion to God and/or due to an *"...idolatrous lust for power and money."* (page 30)

Behind evil is an Evil One (this is the testimony of Scripture). As C.S. Lewis pointed out (see page 31) the two big mistakes we can make is to deny/not believe this truth or overly fixate on it. Friends, mainline Protestants (such as Methodists) tend to gravitate towards the former. Why? Because we like to think of ourselves as too smart, too sophisticated, too enlightened to believe such things...and yet the evil persists. If you can account for that some other way, let's hear it.

I like how Rich put this, *"...love must be grounded in reality, nurtured in unity, and protected through the compassionate valuing of a person's worth and dignity."* (page 32). So we confront

deception with truth; division with unity; and depersonalization by recognizing the image of God in each person. Rich suggests, as we consider how deception, division, and depersonalization affect each of us, let's ask ourselves, *"Is there something here that is fragmenting my life or my relationships? To what must I pay attention to draw closer to Christ?"* (page 32)

When I think of "deception" I think of the false narratives we have absorbed by living in the culture that we do, which leads us to believe untrue things about ourselves, about others, about life. It also makes me think of Dallas Willard's Big Four Questions...

1. What is reality?
2. What is the "good life" or Who is "well off"?
3. Who is a truly good person?
4. How does one become a good person?

The fallen powers and principalities would answer those questions one way (and do so through messaging we hear all the time), while Jesus would answer them another way. Who are we believing?

- *Rich uses the example of Major League Baseball in the 90s (sorry Matt) as an example of how deception can take something neutral or even good (like efficiency, productivity, performance) and corrupt it. What examples of deception, and its corrosive effects, can you think of?*

The section on division makes me think of "conflict entrepreneurs"--individuals and/or organizations who intentionally exploit, inflame, or prolong divisions/arguments to gain power, attention or financial gain. (You can Google it...it's very likely that you're influenced by some of them.) Friends, people are getting rich off division and conflict. But we must remember that those people are not "the enemy", though they are playing right into the Enemy's hands.

- *Who are you tempted to make an enemy out of? Who or what is encouraging that? How might you fight against that?*

"Depersonalization is an act of desacralization. When we depersonalize, we stop seeing individuals as sacred creations of God...[each possessing] unique stories, pains, and gifts." (page 36) Not only do we end up devaluing others, we give a foothold to our base instincts. In other words, when we dehumanize others, we dehumanize ourselves. When we make an "it" out of someone, we become an "it" ourselves. It creates a tragically downward spiral. *"...the great temptation is to see not people but socially constructed amalgamations of entire people groups."* (page 36) We must fight this for all of our sakes.

- *A question from Rich, "How have you been possessed by the powers and their values of deception, division, and depersonalization?" (page 38)*

“The church, since its inception, has lived with a dual identity. It has done wonderful things: establishing hospitals, serving the poor, working to abolish slavery, and inspiring people to live into a transcendent reality...But at the same time—sometimes even in the same actions—the church has led violent crusades, embraced racism, perpetuated abuse, and aligned herself in compromising manners with political powers severely damaging Christian witness.” (page 39) We need to be aware of our ability, individually and collectively, to contribute good and bad in the world. Ideally, such awareness produces humility in us. We can do a lot of harm in the name of Jesus if we’re not careful. Rich offers us this question...

- *What or who am I really serving with my time, belief, money, passion, and opinion? (page 39) We know the “right” answer, but what is the truthful answer? It may be more mixed than we’d like to admit.*

Rich stresses that an important part of truth telling is naming things accurately. Over the past 4+ years at CUMC we repeatedly come back to the idea of “false narratives”...stories, messages, ideas that may sound good and right on the surface, and are so prolific that we’ve basically absorbed them. But are they TRUE? Not only do we need to acknowledge that false narratives exist and have influenced/impacted us. We need to specifically name them and the impact they have on us. For the sake of example, we’ve all picked up false narratives about masculinity and femininity. But what is TRUE? Additionally, how have those false narratives affected how we view ourselves and others? We could ask similar questions regarding a host of false narratives.

Or, as Martin Luther King, Jr. named, *“...the triple evils of racism, economic exploitation, and militarism.”* Those are pretty specific. But what’s the false narrative that undergirds those evils? We need to name that too.

- *What specific deceptions, divisions, depersonalization can you name?*

As was noted in our last series, righteousness is the same thing as justice. Practicing justice pushes back the powers and principalities. And sin needs to be named and confronted on both an individual and collective level.

- *Do you find yourself focused more on your own personal piety or systemic injustice? (Both are important.) If you find yourself more focused on one over the other, what might you be trying to avoid with the one you focus less on?*

“The powers and principalities are often fueled by violence and are willing to resort to it to expand and protect their reach.” (page 43) Friends, our commitment to peace must reckon with how we exercise power in all our relationships—our close interpersonal relationships, and in our relationships with institutions. To say it another way, most of the problems we observe in our relationships and our world come down to a misuse of power. We need to take ownership of our complicity and responsibility in that.

- *What are some ways in which you misuse power? What are some ways you can use power in positive, constructive, healthy ways? (see the section on “peace” on page 43 to get some ideas).*

“Our faith is in the faithfulness of Jesus...We overcome the powers not through trust in our abilities but through confidence in God’s power. This is why prayer is such a powerful response to the powers. When we pray—alone or in community—we avail ourselves to God’s empowerment to live in the way of Jesus. By faith we open space for the Spirit to form our lives. By faith, we set our eyes on the One who will set all things right. By faith, we anticipate a world filled with the glory of God.” (page 44, emphasis added) Prayer is one of the primary ways we exercise faith and are formed in the way of Jesus. It is also our primary gift/tool against the powers and principalities.

- *How much is prayer a go-to response for you? (To the evils/injustices to the world; to the various fragmentations you encounter; to the relational challenges you face; to the personal sins that hound you.)*
- *How do you utilize prayer in your life to help you become the person God made you to be?*

The Church’s primary responsibility is to announce and bear witness to the Gospel. That is, we proclaim as our main message that Jesus is the rightful King, and His Kingdom is present and available to all. Additionally, we are to live out that reality individually and communally. In other words, we announce and demonstrate the message of salvation in and through Jesus. In so doing we put the powers and principalities in their place.

- *In the section entitled “Salvation” (pages 44-45) Rich quotes South African professor and bishop Peter Storey. What do you think of Storey’s comments?*
- *How do you think we (CUMC) are doing at our primary directive of announcing and demonstrating the Gospel of the Kingdom? Can you offer specific examples to back up your opinion?*

When we speak of the Word of God, we are first and foremost speaking of Jesus, the incarnate Word (logos) of God (see John 1:1-3, 14). Practically, then, we are to find our identity, belonging, and purpose in Jesus, and be formed, shaped, molded by Jesus.

- *What comes to your mind when you hear the phrase “the Word of God”?*

“All through Jesus’s life, He was disarming the powers...And the powers are defeated, though it still looks as if they are victorious in the world.” (page 46) Through the cross/crucifixion Jesus triumphed over the powers. “[The powers] are defeated through suffering love...The powers are defeated through the sacrificial love of God. That was true on the cross. It is true for us.” (page 47) This is the way of life we are called to follow...this is the life of faith in Jesus. “...we place our hope: not in something we do, but in something God has already done.” (page 48)

- *How are you/we doing in living out the reality that the powers are already conquered? Do you/we emulate (i.e. trust) the way of the powers and principalities or the way of Jesus? What does that look like?*

While the powers are conquered, they are still at work. As Rich points out, we are still wounded and wounding people. (see page 48). Christ has conquered (this is our foundation), yet we still need to be healed and made whole (this is the process/journey we are on in life).

Soul Training Exercise ~ Get To Know Somebody...the more different from you the better

In this chapter Rich spoke about the fruit of the powers and principalities—deception, division, and depersonalization. This week’s exercise is to push back against those a bit, specifically division and depersonalization, through the love and power of Christ.

The invitation is to get to know somebody—anyone...a neighbor, coworker, a fellow church member...whoever. As we get to know people we humanize them. Additionally, any human-made divisions that may exist erode as we draw closer to them. For the purpose of this exercise, the more different they are from you, the better. The goal is to see them as fellow image-bearers of God...i.e. to focus on our similarities rather than any differences.

Practically, a good way to get to know someone is simply by asking them questions about themselves. There is a whole story in this other person that makes them who they are. Getting to know them and their story not only humanizes them, it humanizes us.