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THE SPIRIT OF THE WORLD

Introduction

We are living in a fallen world and are no longer in the Garden of Eden. In this fallen world, the evil one holds sway and exercises a very powerful influence over men although the way he works is not always very obvious. It is therefore important for us to be clear about the biblical teaching on this issue.

In this message, we will examine the meaning of "the spirit of the world", how it comes about and its impact on the world. We will first look at what the Scriptures says about "the god of this world".

"The god of this world"

> **2 Corinthians 4:4**
> in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

In this verse, the evil one is described as "the god of this world". This description is rather unusual and, in one sense, unexpected because God is the creator of the world and there is only one true God.

The apostle John tells us in 1 John 5:19 that "the whole world lies in the power of the evil one". This again is a very strong expression. Even though God is sovereign, the Scriptures still describes the whole world as lying in the power of the evil one.

Why does the Scriptures describe the evil one in this way? It is because his influence in the fallen world is very pervasive and powerful. Many come under his influence and follow the direction that he sets.

Ephesians 2:2-3 portrays the evil one as "the prince of the power of the air" and warns us of his influence.

> **Ephesians 2:2-3**
> 2 in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.

3 Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh,
indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature
children of wrath, even as the rest.

In verse 2, Paul uses the term "the course of this world" to depict the general trend and direction in the world, and the ways and values of the world. He elaborates that "the course of this world" is "according to the prince of the power of the air", that is, according to the influence of the evil one. Paul tells us in this verse and in the next that such was the life that we once used to live - a life characterised by the lusts of the flesh and indulgence in the desires of the flesh and of the mind. Those who live such a life are aptly termed "sons of disobedience".

A major strategy of attack by the evil one is through the world

The Scriptures teaches us that the evil one uses the world to tempt, pressure, distract, frighten and deceive us into sin. He does so in several ways. In this message, I will briefly mention some effective tactics he often uses before delving in greater detail in subsequent messages.

Worldly desires

One tactic the evil one has used with much success is to tempt us with the attractions in this world - worldly pleasures, material wealth, status, power and fame. In Titus 2:12, Paul refers to them as "worldly desires" and in 1 John 2:16, the apostle John terms them as "the lusts of the flesh".

> **Titus 2:12**
> instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age,

> **1 John 2:16**
> For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.

Entanglements with the affairs of this life

Another tactic that the evil one uses is to entangle us with the affairs of this life. The apostle Paul warns us of this danger in 2 Timothy 2:3-4.

> **2 Timothy 2:3-4**
> 3 Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.
> 4 No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier.

Here Paul is teaching us how we can be good soldiers of Christ, and one important area is the preparedness to suffer hardship. The other area that Paul highlights is freedom from entanglement in the affairs of this life.

Entanglements can be in the form of the worries of the world. In the parable of the sower, the Lord Jesus tells us that the seed sown among the thorns depicts a life in which "the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful" (Mark 4:19). This may take place so subtly that the person being affected may not be very conscious of it. It is a tactic that the evil one has used to great effect.

Difficulties and pressures

The evil one also afflicts us with various difficulties in this world and through them seeks to pressure us into conforming to the values and perspectives that are contrary to God's kingdom. "In the world, you have tribulation", the Lord Jesus tells us in John 16:33.

In Romans 12:2, Paul exhorts us not to be conformed to this world. But the evil one seeks to coerce us to conform to the world and to the expectations of others in this world. The pressure to conform can be great and it can be difficult to take a stand and be true to the Lord.

The trials and temptations that man experiences in this fallen world are aggravated by the presence of the weakness of the flesh, which the evil one seeks to exploit. Christians are not exempt from all these.

The "spirit of the world"

In seeking to understand the nature of the problem of the world, let us consider the reality of "the spirit of the world" which affects our spiritual life negatively. Specifically, we seek to understand the following:

1. What is "the spirit of the world"?
2. How does it come about?
3. What affects the nature and intensity of the spirit of the world?

Meaning of "the spirit of the world"

My usage of the expression "the spirit of the world" may be similar in meaning to Paul's usage of this expression in 1 Corinthians 2:12, in which he contrasts "the spirit of the world" with the Spirit of God.

> **1 Corinthians 2:12**
> Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is
> from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God,

In the preceding verses, from 1 Corinthians 2:1, Paul has been comparing and contrasting the way of the world, worldly wisdom and dependence on the flesh with dependence on the Spirit and the power of the Spirit. In verse 4, he testifies that his message and preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom (that is, not according to the wisdom of the world), but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power. He is contrasting that which is of the Spirit of God with that which is of the world.

As Paul did not elaborate on the meaning of his usage of the expression "the spirit of the world", it is difficult to be clear what he is referring to. It seems appropriate to use it to refer to the reality in this world that I will be describing below. This reality and the discussion of this subject in this message is not dependent on the precise meaning of the expression in 1 Corinthians 2:12.

As I understand it, a negative spiritual dimension is present in the world and is manifested in all areas of life. It has a damaging influence on our spirit and dulls our spiritual appetite and distorts our values and perspective.

How does this negative spiritual dimension come about?

This reality that I am trying to communicate is complex. It began with the fall of man and has developed over the years and can be attributed to several factors:

1. The starting point is that we are living in a fallen world and are no longer in the Garden of Eden. Thus the context that we are now in is very different from the beginning when Adam and Eve first inhabited the Garden of Eden.

2. The presence and working of the evil one and evil spirits in this fallen world. They operate actively in various areas of life in this world to draw men away from God and the ways of God.

3. The negative spirit of men as a consequence of wrongful desires in their hearts and their succumbing to the destructive influences of the evil spirits.

The presence of both the evil spirits at work and the negative spirit of man contribute to the negative spiritual dimension in the fallen world. This negative spiritual dimension projects a negative moral and spiritual influence and promotes the assimilation of values and perspective contrary to God's kingdom. It is a spirit diametrically opposed to the spirit of God's kingdom. We can term as "worldly" the direction of its influence and the values and perspective it promotes.

Nature and intensity of the spirit of the world varies

The spirit of the world is not the same in all contexts throughout the world. Not only does its presence differ in intensity, the nature of its presence varies too. The reasons are:

1. The intensity and manner of working of the powers of darkness varies in different contexts and at different times even in similar contexts.

2. What is contributed by the negative spirit of the people who are present: the negative spirit of different groups of people in different situations differs in kind and gravity. There are different kinds of fleshly lusts and negative spirit which can be present in men and varying degrees of gravity of their presence in different ones.

3. The negative spirit projected is further differentiated by the differing degree of yielding to the working of the evil one in the hearts of the people present in different specific situations.

The spirit of the world projects a negative influence and it pulls us in a worldly direction. It is very difficult not to be adversely affected by it. We must therefore be alert to its presence and take care not to succumb to its negative influence.

Positive spiritual atmosphere

In contrast, a positive spiritual atmosphere exists when those who love God gather to have fellowship and to worship God. In such a context, the believers' hearts and spirits and their values, perspective and direction are generally positive, and the Spirit of God is at work in their midst.

In other words, we are neither referring merely to the Spirit of God nor merely to the spirit of man, but to the presence of a positive spiritual atmosphere. We can term this as "the spirit of God's kingdom", a spiritual dimension that is positive and consistent with what ought to be in God's kingdom. This spiritual dimension projects a positive influence. Those who are in such a context and whose hearts are receptive will benefit from its influence. The positive spiritual atmosphere that we are in can affect our spirits, values, perspectives and direction in life positively.

Pervasive presence of the spirit of the world

It is helpful for us to recognise that there is a pervasive presence of the spirit of the world in the various areas of life. It can be present in the work environment and is reflected, for example, in the spirit and attitude with which people work, in the way they pursue their ambitions and fight for promotion, the way they project themselves, and in what people often term as "office politicking". It is also present in the world of business, the world of politics, the world of art, literature, music, movies and fashion as well as in human relationships and in sports and games.

However, not all that goes on in these various areas are negative. Man is created in the image of God and, though fallen, there is still the conscience within him. In addition, the Spirit of God seeks to encourage man to do what is right and to refrain from evil, and man is still able to respond positively to God.

Let us now consider in greater detail the different areas of life where the spirit of the world can be manifested. I will begin with an area that many of us are involved in for many hours of our life - working life.

The spirit of the world in working life

Often, an ambitious, materialistic and unhealthy competitive spirit pervades the work place. I use the expression "unhealthy" here because not all competition is negative. For example, in games and sports, friendly competition is possible. Unhealthy competition is manifested in the form of jealousy, envy and rivalry, and often is of a destructive kind. It can take the form of "sabotage", that is, sabotaging colleagues, scheming and vying for promotion, financial gains, status, prestige and positions in the company or establishment.

This springs forth from an attitude and spirit that is negative and self-centred. Often, a complaining and discontented spirit is also present. In the background are the powers of darkness at work, drawing forth and promoting the negative attitude and spirit in man.

The spirit of the world can also be seen in the way people approach and do things. For example, we sometimes see people manifesting an arrogant and aggressive spirit in their relentless pursuit of self-centred goals, even when they know it is at the expense of other people or detrimental to their welfare. Many are prepared to compromise moral principles in the pursuit of their ambitions and the attaining of work targets.

What I have described is a context of worldly values and perspective, fleshly pursuits and preoccupations. Sadly, many believers have been drawn into it, often without their realising it.

This scenario is very real in working life in varying degrees of intensity. It helps to explain why many Christians may be fervent while they are still in school, but gradually drift away from the faith when they enter the working world.

Some may say that this takes place because these believers fail to build a strong foundation in the Lord in their younger days. There is truth in this line of thinking. But one may ask why these believers who lack a strong foundation in the Lord could carry on reasonably in their faith in their younger days but suffer shipwreck of their faith after entering working life. A factor that helps us understand this phenomenon is that the negative influence of the spirit of the world is not as strong during their

younger days compared with its strength in the working world. The intensity and nature of it is different.

The negative spirit of the world may infiltrate the lives of believers. There may be no warning bells; it seems so natural and harmless. We see others entering into its flow and we follow suit. It may not seem obviously wrong to us and it may even seem a normal way of living our lives. It appears to be the way to succeed or survive in this world, and we may have the feeling that there is no other way. If we were to take a contrary stand, we would be regarded as fools and as not being practical and realistic.

Thus, the spirit of the world can seep into our lives and affect our spirit, our direction in life, our perspective and our values. As a result, we allow worldly ambitions to enter our hearts and we begin to compromise our principles on what is right and wrong, as well as the way we go about doing things. Our priorities and concentration in life begin to shift away from the Lord.

Various areas of our personal lives can be adversely affected, including our relationship and time with the Lord. We may lose our spiritual appetite and become preoccupied with the wrong things. As our time with the Lord suffers, we are not as able to receive and appreciate the truths of the Scriptures as we were able to in the past.

Both our prayer life and Bible reading can be affected. We lose our eagerness, our taste for prayer and the spiritual enjoyment of our time with God. Such times become less meaningful to us and they become neglected. Even when we do spend time with the Lord, its meaningfulness and the intensity of our prayer life are no longer the same because our hearts and spirits have been drawn in a contrary direction and the Spirit of God is grieved.

In addition, our worship of God, the general sense of fellowship and the closeness of our walk with Him and our dependence on Him become affected. All these are the result of our spirit, values, perspective and sense of direction being adversely affected by the spirit of the world.

The spirit of the world in business

In the world of business, making money and maximising profit margins are often the primary considerations. As a result, moral values and principles may be compromised or even thrown overboard if they stand in the way of achieving financial success.

Here, success is measured in terms of the size of the enterprise, turnover and profits, not by the moral principles upheld by the company. This is complicated by stiff competition and business rivalry and this would be even worse when the very survival of the business is threatened. In such an environment, people can resort to measures that are contrary to positive moral values and principles. What counts is

whether the company makes money and how much it makes. The spirit of covetousness is often actively at work in such a context. That is why it is difficult to be a good Christian businessman, especially in certain kinds of business.

A Christian employee in such a context has to be very vigilant if he is to keep himself unstained by the negative spirit, perspective, values and ways of doing things that compromise his moral values and principles.

He may come under strong pressure and expectations from his superior and colleagues to conform. His superior may want him to do things in a certain way or adopt certain measures that trouble his conscience. And it can be very difficult for him to take a stand because everybody is doing it. If he resists, he may be regarded by his superior or colleagues as a fool or a troublemaker. He may lose out in terms of promotion or other benefits and his employment may even be terminated.

Can a conscientious employee who is also a serious Christian continue to be faithful to the Lord in such an environment without conforming to the worldly expectations of those around him? Yes, he can, but he has to be very clear-minded about the dangers in this world and be convicted of the Christian principles he should uphold. He should earnestly seek the Lord's wisdom and strengthening to abide by such principles. He must also be prepared to have his services terminated because of his stand. Even if his services are not terminated, he may have to consider looking for alternative employment rather than remain in that particular context. This approach is needful if we want to maintain the spirit of true discipleship while living in this fallen world.

In the midst of all this, the evil one is at work behind the scene, encouraging unscrupulous and unethical practices, promoting negative values, and taking advantage of the weaknesses and fleshly desires of man. He wants believers to move in that direction. We must therefore be alert not to fall prey to his wily schemes.

The spirit of the world in politics

Just as in the business world, the spirit of the world is also very active in the world of politics. In politics, being in power is generally regarded as of primary importance. Many would resort to unscrupulous and ruthless ways and means to gain power and remain in it.

Some enter politics to satisfy their personal desire for power, authority, fame and glory. Some see it also as a means to acquire immense material wealth. This results in abuse of power and corruption. Yet, there are others who enter politics motivated by noble goals. They desire to effect changes for the welfare of society or to prevent power going into the wrong hands. However, in the midst of the complex power struggles, moral values and principles can easily be compromised on the ground that the ends justify the means. The deficiencies of the human heart and the presence of mixed motives make the whole scenario even more complicated. Although the stated

goals may sound good and lofty, sometimes, the means and the processes involved can be so terrible that they cause some of those involved to shrink back in bewilderment and disillusionment. And in the midst of it all, the evil one is actively at work.

Thus it can be very difficult for a Christian to be a good politician like the prophet Daniel, especially in contexts of instability, upheavals and power struggles. The issues and situations involved can be very complex and the Christian can come under tremendous pressure to compromise on principles of truth and proper conduct.

The spirit of the world among students

The spirit of the world is also present among students although the intensity is generally not so great. It may take the form of jealousy and unhealthy rivalry arising from the desire to outperform other students in studies. This can lead to negative traits, attitude and spirit, including the unwillingness to co-operate for fear that others will do better than them. And I have heard accounts of students hiding library books to prevent other students from using them for their projects or to prepare for their examinations.

It is easy for students to be influenced by the spirit of the world in the direction of an unhealthy desire for recognition and status. We witness this both in and outside the classroom.

The spirit of the world in the arts

I now wish to go on to another area of life that easily affects us - the spirit of the world in the world of art, literature, music, movies and fashion.

Literature and music have much potential for good. However, the negative influence of the spirit of the world in these areas is very pervasive. Many, including Christians, can be very adversely affected without realising it.

In the arts, the evil one often takes advantage of the popular notion of the "freedom of expression", that is, freedom to express oneself, and encourages people to cast aside their inhibitions. We often hear of people justifying what they do by saying that they are simply being honest and expressing their "true selves", what is inside them and how they actually feel. But do such notions give them the licence to express publicly various forms of sensuality, promiscuity and even gross immorality?

Such manifestations are common among those involved in the pop music and pop culture of the west and are evident in many parts of the world, especially in the lifestyles of musicians, singers, models, actors and actresses. They are often done unashamedly and openly. In some instances, these are accompanied by widespread taking of drugs, especially where the law does not come down hard on such indulgences. Such behaviour is common when a person is governed by emotions,

fleshly inclinations and what is pleasurable rather than by principles of truth, by what is right and wrong and what is appropriate.

If a person can do or produce something that strikes a chord with others, he can become popular, famous and rich and have a large following, regardless of his personal character and lifestyle and the moral meaning of what he is doing. For example, many pop stars can draw a large crowd and a horde of fans. Their fans will yell and cry at their concerts and even feel they are prepared to die for their idols. In such pop concerts, you will witness the release of the floodgates of fleshly emotions, sensuality and mindless behaviour. To an uninvolved, sober, sensible third-party, whether a Christian or a non-Christian, this may seem very foolish, frivolous and even ridiculous.

Christians must exercise care not to be adversely affected by the spirit of the world, not only in the forms that can more readily be recognised as negative, but in what is less obvious. This includes what the world may regard as "good" poetry and "good" literature. The world may heap praises on these works and accord recognition to them, but there could be the presence of the spirit of the world manifested in subtle forms. There are also literary works well regarded by the world where the spirit of the world is manifested to a significant degree, where the content can be sensual and promiscuous, and where other wrong values are promoted.

There are those who advocate the view that it is the job of the true artist to capture, portray and communicate the reality of human aspirations, desires and emotions without 'moralising'. In the process, raw manifestations of the lusts of the flesh may be portrayed and communicated and the fleshly desires of the readers or viewers are kindled.

Some of us may be familiar with what is known as the "Romantic Period" in literature. Various writers of the Romantic Period are highly regarded in literary circles because of their literary skills and talent. However, a careful reading of the works of some of these writers reveals elements of the spirit of the world that can adversely affect our spirit, values, perspective, and spiritual appetites.

"Free spirits"
In addition to the improper outward conduct we see manifested in the world of the arts, the evil one also promotes a negative, fleshly spirit in the hearts and spirits of people. We see an example of this in those who regard themselves as "free spirits".

The term "free spirit" may sound very good, especially from a spiritual perspective. Indeed, there is a sense of it that is very meaningful, when it refers to true freedom or freedom of the spirit, where our spirit is not under oppression and not hindered in our growth and ministry.

However, "free spirit" as used by the world has a very different meaning. It is contrary to the positive sense of freedom in the spirit. Such "free spirits" do what

they feel like, motivated primarily by worldly enjoyment and what is pleasurable. Also, they do not feel inhibited by social norms and expectations. Their lives are often characterised by unrestrained, fleshly indulgence. They may even violate the laws of the land if they think they can get away with it.

Such people may be under the deception that they are enjoying freedom when in reality they are in very grave danger of entering into bondage to their fleshly appetites and bondage to the evil one. As they move further and further in this direction, they may find themselves coming increasingly under the stranglehold of the evil one and the spirit of the world rather than enjoying true freedom.

While we have highlighted actors, actresses, pop singers and writers as those who are directly involved in the spirit of the world, we too can become a part of it, for example, when we "consume" their products, that is, their movies, television programmes, music or literature. I use the term "consume" because as we watch those movies, listen to those songs and music or read those literature that have negative meaning and content, we may sub-consciously absorb them and our spirit, spiritual appetite and receptivity can be adversely affected. There is also an influence and pull towards adopting their lifestyle, attitudes and ways.

The issues that we have been considering in this message are very real. Dangers abound for the Christian who desires to live well for the Lord. Yet we do not have to be unduly perturbed or fearful about becoming victims. We can humbly ask the Lord to help us recognise their existence and to strengthen us so that we will not come under their influence.

The spirit of the world in sports and games

Sadly, the spirit of the world is present even in the world of sports and games. Sports and games can be and should be a healthy form of exercise, recreation and friendly competition. That's the way they are meant to be. Just think of the term "sportsmanship". What comes to mind? Certainly not an unhealthy competitive spirit.

However, the evil one promotes an unhealthy, competitive spirit where winning is all-important. This is fuelled by the fleshly craving for popularity, recognition and fame. In some contexts, the consuming desire to win is greatly enhanced by the big money that comes with it. Nowadays, one can become a multi-millionaire just through winning in sports. This can encourage intense rivalry and the win-at-all-costs spirit and attitude.

Many different problems can arise from the intense and unhealthy competitive spirit among sportsmen. We read of sportsmen consuming prohibited performance-enhancing drugs that are detrimental to their health. In many of these cases, their actions are tantamount to cheating. Often, as long as they can get away with it, they will do it.

Other forms of unhealthy manifestations may surface when they lose an event. They may become very miserable, very upset or very angry. Even spectators can be so caught up with it that they may beat up rival supporters and provoke a riot, damaging public and private property and even causing deaths and serious injuries. Such occurrences are reminiscent of some soccer matches.

True sportsmanship is generally recognised as good, right and fundamental to sports, but it can fade into the background when winning is everything. Sometimes, sportsmen may still maintain an outward show of sportsmanship and pay lip service to it even when there is no such reality within their hearts.

Poor sportsmanship exists even in the school contexts, when there is a strong desire to win. But generally it is in a milder form.

Thus, Christians who are involved in competitive sports and games must be prayerful and alert and not succumb to such negative spirit and influences, which can also include the expectations and pressures from other interested parties such as team mates, coaches and teachers.

Finally, even as spectators, we can become sub-consciously affected by a negative spirit. Cheering our teams is all right, but we can be carried away by it if there exists an unhealthy competitive spirit of wanting our team to win. We may even participate in unhealthy practices like jeering and booing the opposing team.

Concluding remarks

The negative effects and influences of the spirit of the world present in this fallen world can be much more pervasive and damaging to the lives of people than generally recognised.

They are damaging to both non-believers and believers alike. To non-believers, they can feed as well as draw out what is of the flesh and also hinder their spiritual receptivity and their coming to the Lord. For believers, it can draw us in the wrong direction and cause us to have wrong concentration and priorities. It can also have significant adverse effects on our spirit, our relationship with God and our spiritual appetite and receptivity.

Sometimes, the effects are easy to recognise, but at times, not so. Thus, we need to be very prayerful and careful as we go about our lives in this fallen world. But although these issues are very real, we should not withdraw and adopt a hermit's mentality. This is not the will of the Lord for us as He has put us in this world to learn, grow and to be positive witnesses for Him (John 17).

Instead, we need to understand what it means to be a child of God, to be a citizen of God's kingdom, a citizen of heaven, and what ought to be our values and perspective. We also ought to ask ourselves these questions: What motivates us?

What are our true goals? What ought to be our ambition? And finally, we must learn not to be adversely affected by the ways, the values and perspective of the fallen world and the spirit of the world that is promoted by the evil one, the god of this world.

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