

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

1. To be honest, I don't like this text. I am a coward; I don't like to fight. War is a terrible, ghastly thing. Throughout the history of humankind violence has caused unbelievable pain, suffering, loss of life and destruction of houses, crops, factories – everything.

In World War II, 50 million people lost their lives. That is the entire South African population. Whole cities have been left in ruins. Our own South African history is a history of violence, oppression and war.

War also causes spiritual destruction. Goodwill, loyalty and cooperation turn into hatred, resentment and enmity. War turns people into savages worse than animals.

Just think of the German death camps under Hitler, think of Vlakplaas or the necklace murders in our own country. Think of family violence, rape and crime. People get raped, robbed, maimed and killed.

2. Our text says that the problem is not 'flesh and blood', but spiritual powers. It is not people as such, it is spiritual powers that enslave their minds. God loves the sinners, but he hates their sin.

Of course, there are also good spiritual forces and the author speaks a lot about them in the letter, but here he concentrates on the evil ones.

We are confronted with the immense power of ideologies like nationalism, capitalism, Marxism, or apartheid. But it is our internal desire for power, for status, for enjoyment, for possessions, for money, for drugs that makes us so vulnerable.

We are bombarded day in and day out by the advertising and entertainment industries to get and enjoy what we cannot afford.

We are enslaved by fashions, by what others do, by what our peers think we must do, by football stars, movie stars, models. We want to belong, to be with it, to be popular.

Human beings are very easily carried away by anything that promises a good life, more enjoyment, more wealth, more power.

These forces are evil because they are not interested in our well-being, but only in their own benefit. They deceive us. They make promises that they cannot keep. They are like drugs that give us a brief high and then drop us into misery.

Our text says that as Christians we must take a stand against these spiritual powers.

3. If you want to fight, you have to arm yourself. But there are two kinds of weapons – material and spiritual. When you are attacked with fists, sticks, knives, guns and land mines you are faced with material weapons. You cannot fight somebody with an AK47 when you have nothing but the kirie inherited from your grandfather.

But what about spiritual weapons? Spiritual weapons range from shouting, cursing, deceiving, cracking codes on the internet, scheming, caucusing, mass rallies, sweeping up emotions, toy toying, propaganda, mass media, and so on.

4. The next question is whether you want to attack the enemy or whether you want to defend yourself. Weapons to defend yourself include shields and helmets, city walls and bunkers, high walls, electronic security systems, bullet proof vests, armoured cars, and so on.

Are there also spiritual weapons with which you can defend yourself? That is what this text is all about.

The problem is that the aggressive forces have become far too powerful for individuals or communities to protect themselves. In the olden days, a man faced a man with a shield, a sword or a spear.

Today somebody sit in America in front of a computer, zooms in on a city in China, makes a click with a mouse and then a missile shoots up high into the air and crashes precisely on the spot on the map.

The man in America who clicked the mouse has no idea of the devastation, the suffering and the heart-break that he has caused in the Chinese city.

The same is true for spiritual warfare. Our films on TV are made in Hollywood or Bollywood. Good TV programmes are constantly interrupted with advertisements that waste your time and raise your desire. You cannot cut them out.

Our children have become extremely vulnerable. Their minds are still very pliable. You can easily influence them. They sit for hours before the television screen or their cell phones – and all the rubbish streams like a waterfall into their unprotected minds while they are still young enough to be moulded. Their parents and teachers do not train them to fight back, because their parents and teachers have also become victims.

5. So what can we do? At least we can defend ourselves, our families, our communities. Our text gives us a few typically Christian weapons.

A. **Be alert.** You cannot relax when you are attacked. Psychologists say that in the evening, when you are tired and turn on the television set, you are most vulnerable.

A couch potato is somebody who is completely passive, who does not think, who is not critical, who swallows everything as it comes.

If you do that you allow yourself to be brain-washed without offering any resistance. What you see enters your mind and settles there.

B. Take a stand. Don't allow yourself to become a victim of spiritual aggression. When you see a problematic programme, switch the TV off at the end, think about it; discuss it with your family; ask what was good and what was bad, and what was outright detrimental.

Then make up your mind and discard it – very consciously. Make a commitment together: We do not want to be part of this.

C. Be strong in the power of Christ. If you think you can do this on your own, you are like somebody who fires a revolver at an intercontinental ballistic missile. It just does not work. Utilise the collective spiritual power of a Christian community – a youth group, a congregation, a retreat, a rally.

D. Truth. Don't allow yourself to be deceived. Always ask yourself – can this be true? Why do they say that – to help us or to mislead and exploit us? Can you believe those political leaders? Can you believe those advertisers? Can you believe the rubbish that reaches you through your cell phones?

C. Righteousness. Is what is being done right in the eyes of God? When an economic policy is being followed – is justice being done to the most vulnerable, to those who cannot compete, to the unemployed, to the marginalised? What harm is being done to society and to nature?

D. Proclaim the gospel of peace. God wants reconciliation. In Christ God accepts the unacceptable to transform them from within. If you want peace, you do not hit back. You suffer those with whom you disagree – not to condone evil, but to overcome evil in the love of Christ.

E. Faith. Faith means that you accept God's calling, you accept God's forgiveness, you become part of the community of believers, you entrust yourself to God's care – even if things go wrong.

F. The Word of God. This is the only offensive weapon Christians have. Proclaim the gospel of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

G. Prayer. If you want to tap the power of God's own love, you have to remain in contact with him – even more than with your cell phone.

Friends, Paul was sitting in a prison when he wrote this letter. But he was strong. And his words give us strength even after almost 2000 years. So let us be bold and take a stand against what is wrong. Amen