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“Honing the Spiritual Warrior Within You”

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Good morning to all of you.

I want to start off by just making it clear for the record, my pronouns are the ones God has given me.

I marvel at the influence of Satan. He has managed to rile up our entire society in discussions about something as obvious as our identity. Am I male or female or something in-between? Am I straight, gay, bisexual, or transgender? Am I an elite or among the oppressed?

This debate, of course, is just the latest tactic of God’s enemy in the ongoing spiritual war between God and Satan—and between Satan and you. Satan’s measure of success is whether or not he can incapacitate or destroy you. That is part of his strategy for getting revenge against God.

Do you sometimes find yourself struggling with anxiety, depression, self-doubt, confusion, greed, jealousy, lust, drugs or alcohol, selfish ambition?

That’s not God’s design for you. That’s Satan’s design for you, attacking you where you are most vulnerable. That’s part of the spiritual war. And that, whether you like it or not—whether you *embrace* it or not—makes you a spiritual warrior. In fact, you are a participant in that spiritual war every moment of every day of your life.

And that means you have to make some incredibly important choices about your life, doesn’t it?

What is your identity?

The first of those choices goes back to the debate about identity. Who are you?

The answer is simple: you are a spiritual warrior.

Those of the Eastern Mystic tradition take the concept of spiritual warrior very seriously—perhaps more seriously than we Christians do. To them, a spiritual warrior is one who fights against self-ignorance. That battle is waged to facilitate self-awareness and achieving self-actualization. That makes sense given that Eastern Mysticism is all about personal enlightenment and unity with the universe. It is all about self—enriching and ennobling self.

To us Christians, though, a true spiritual warrior is one who seeks God’s wisdom and strength, and harmony with Him. It is not about self; it is about devotion and service to Him and to Him alone.

If we can agree that every one of us is a spiritual warrior, that raises another important question.

Who are you fighting for?

I know that some of you here today are really wrestling with that question. There are only two possible answers—you either fight for God or you fight for Satan. Americans rarely think that they are part of Satan's army, but if you are not serving God, who else can you serve? Americans prefer shades of grey to black and white, but the answer to this question is black and white—it's either God or it's Satan.

Now, the elephant in the room is that we are on the campus of a Christian university and you are enrolled as a student at that university. Some of you may be offended to hear me even suggest that perhaps you or any of your classmates would take Satan's side.

Rest assured, I believe that a large majority of us in this room want to be on God's side. But desires aside, I also know that some of our friends and colleagues at ACU are still wrestling with the commitment required to be part of the army of the Lord. For some, it is an overt struggle. For a greater number, that internal conflict is more private and covert. Let me explain.

Some in the ACU family are here primarily to earn a degree. Some are here mainly to play ball. Others are here mostly for reasons like having fun, finding a spouse, getting away from home for a few years, finding happiness, preparing for a dream job, or perhaps to explore and determine their identity.

Let me say, if you find that characterization offensive, it's not meant to be. If you consider it to be harsh, judgmental, unfair, insensitive, uniformed, or just plain wrong, here is my defense.

Every moment of everyday, you are a spiritual warrior, engaged in the spiritual battle between God and Satan. You are either fighting for God or fighting against Him. If your real reason for being at ACU is anything other than proudly and unapologetically preparing yourself to learn and do all you can to advance the kingdom of God, then you have been seduced by the Prince of Darkness—probably unconsciously—to support his effort at overthrowing the Creator of the universe.

Your support of the enemy may be unintentional. It might be unrealized. It could be naïve. That support might be as innocuous as simply seeking a safe space or a timeout from the pressures of reality to chill for a while. It may be a barely-conscious decision to stay on the sidelines for limited time, staying neutral until you feel you are ready to commit.

Unfortunately, this is a war where there are no sidelines, where there is no opportunity to sit or rest or observe. Choosing the sidelines is abandoning God. It is an act of rebellion against God.

But let me speak to the majority of you who have declared a side, and that side is with God.

Your identity is spiritual warrior.

You are fighting for the glory of God.

But then we must ask why you are at ACU. What is the value of investing your personal resources for a few years of your life on this campus and absorbing all that the school offers?

My view is that your quest for a worldview-driven, Christian education, pragmatically speaking, is less about education and more about preparation for warfare. I submit to you that this is your spiritual boot camp. When you are done here, it'll be off to the frontlines of the war for the duration of your time on earth. You are here to be equipped for battle.

Weapons for the War

That raises the next question—what weapons will you use in the war? What is the arsenal at your disposal and that you will be trained to use?

This is important because warfare is about strategy, tactics, and resources. You are a resource in the hands of God. And these weapons are your resource that will decide your capacity and personal fate on the battlefield.

The apostle Paul was one of the early Special Forces warriors of the Christian Church. He is an example of a terrorist who switched sides in the midst of the war. He went from terrorizing followers of Christ to leading them in the daily war against Satan.

Paul is a model spiritual warrior. Based on training and personal experience, He spoke extensively and knowledgably about your weapons. These are the weapons you must be exposed to and master before you leave ACU. You would be well advised to become familiar with Ephesians 6, where he provides a weapons tutorial.

Paul starts by describing what he called the “belt of truth.” Paul sought to be an agent of cultural transformation based on spreading truth. Does that sound familiar—say, ACU’s motto of “transforming culture with truth”?

One must know the truth to spread it, so your time on campus must be related to an intense and urgent search for truth. That will lead you to God, who is the embodiment and source of all truth. And that, in turn, will lead you to His words in the Bible.

In fact, this search for truth is the very reason why ACU is unshakably committed to helping you to develop a biblical worldview, so that every decision you make is in harmony with the principles and commands of God. When you know and represent truth, you are capable of taking every thought captive for Christ. You will be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

You cannot hope to be an agent of transformation until you have allowed God to transform you. You’ve heard it said that “hurt people, hurt people.” In like manner, “transformed people, transform people.”

But knowing and adopting truth is a necessary but insufficient condition to be an effective spiritual warrior. Paul then tells us you must also put on the body armor of God’s righteousness. He calls you to be a model of doing what’s right.

In other words, to be a great warrior for the kingdom, you must be obedient to God’s principles and commands. A biblical worldview helps you to know what those principles and commands are, and how they fit together like a puzzle to prepare you for usefulness in service to the king. But a worldview is not just about belief; it is biblical beliefs consistently translated into and demonstrated through your lifestyle.

Your righteous behavior is a showcase for how God transforms human lives. Talk is cheap, but tangible proof of your talk is unassailable. It not only pleases God, it stirs those around you. Consistent obedience elevates you to a level of battle most Americans never reach. It promotes you to the elite forces of Heaven.

But to be a worthy adversary of Satan, you need more. Paul then describes the shoes of peace. That sounds odd, but he is describing a resource that will carry you through the war, namely, the peace of God that surpasses all human understanding. Being reconciled, through Christ, to the Commander in

Chief alleviates anxiety about your worthiness to serve or His trust in you as a warrior. Wear the Good News like a pair of comfortable shoes.

War is not to be trifled with, and not to be underestimated. It is a game played for keeps. It is a challenging experience even if you are properly prepared. It is a horrifying experience if you are not properly armed for the battle.

To fight that battle appropriately, you must be sure that you are doing what's right, for the right side, and for the right reasons. That demands deep confidence in God, which comes from a grace-driven relationship with Him. The confidence produced through that relationship will give you the necessary strength and commitment to wage war.

Paul described this to his audience in Rome when he explained that once we irrevocably choose God's side, He gives us the confidence we need to fight for Him. The fight will still be difficult, but the peace of God will sustain us, providing endurance. That endurance strengthens our character and resolve, and propels us forward in His strength. Paul details that in Romans 5.

But Paul does not stop there. He continues to describe our armory, next talking about the shield of faith. This is about the support we receive from God's Holy Spirit that enables us to deflect the attacks of Satan and his demons.

As spiritual warriors, God does not want us to be unprepared. He promises that we will face trials, temptations, persecution, and hardships. That's what the war is. It is not easy. It is relentless. It is often brutal. But through a profound faith in God's love, purposes, and protection, we can push forward in His strength to accomplishing mighty things for the kingdom.

Remember, this war is not about you. But you are offered the privilege to participate, and you even get to choose your side. In fact, we know how the war will end, so it almost feels like cheating, choosing the winning side before the conclusion of the war. But there will be immense challenges en route to victory, so God is preparing you in advance.

Your next piece of battle gear is the helmet of salvation. Devote yourself to the cause of Christ and you will be saved—not on earth but in eternity. This is the ultimate protection against fear, doubt, imperfection, and self-destruction.

Every boot camp seeks to break down the individual to get them to acknowledge that they are ill-prepared to do what they are being asked to accomplish. It is only through a transformational relationship with Christ that you have access to His power, which is the only power that can withstand the attacks of God's enemy.

With body armor, a shield, shoes and a helmet in place, you are almost ready to enter the battle zone. But those are all defensive weapons. How can you win a war if you have no offensive weapons, nothing to push back with? You can't.

So, another element of our equipment is the sword of the Spirit, a weapon that cuts through the darkness with the light of God's Word. Our sword is the practical tool of truth, the Bible. If you possess a biblical worldview, you can wisely share elements of that truth in any given battle situation in which you are placed.

The words of God, being truth, are capable of shattering the constant lies and deceptions of the enemy. In a world that is confused and chaotic, and where the enemy fervently seeks to instill anarchy that eliminates God's order, it is God's wisdom that sustains order, meaning, and purpose—and hope.

Incredibly, God trusts you to fight on His behalf, armed with His truth. There can be no greater privilege—but with that privilege comes great responsibility. That responsibility is developing a thorough knowledge of His words and the boldness to share them and apply them in every relevant situation, no matter the cost.

Paul adds one additional component to your war effort: praying in the Spirit. No soldier on the battlefield will last long if he is cut off from his commander. There must be constant communication. Effective communication is two-way conversation.

That is how we must pray. Empty your heart and soul to the Lord, but also fiercely listen to and accept His response. This is an act of submission and trust. As James reminds us, “the earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results.”

ACU Is Your Spiritual Boot Camp

So, if ACU is your boot camp, how can you maximize your time of preparation for the front lines of the spiritual war? Yes, study hard, do well, get good grades, do all things with excellence, but what else? Keeping your eye on the prize, the bigger outcomes at stake, here are six things to consider as you carry out your remaining days in boot camp.

First, resolve your identity issues. Simply put, you are disciple of Jesus, and will be deployed by the kingdom of God as a spiritual warrior. Growing up in New York City, we had a common expression: “you don’t have to like it, you just have to deal with it.”

Listen—if being a spiritual warrior was not on your agenda, get over it. The God who created you and loves you is preparing you for this future. You don’t have to like it—but, it sure helps if you do. Accept the role. Get into it. It’s an incredible adventure.

Second, clarify your calling and gifts. God, your Father in Heaven, never sets you up for failure; He always gives you exactly what you need to accomplish your divine assignment. So, understand how He is calling you to serve. Then identify and hone your spiritual gifts and tangible skills in order to ace the assignment. You enter His army as a raw, unrefined talent. This place, your spiritual boot camp, provides you an opportunity to sharpen those skills for a useful, eternal purpose.

Third, master the arsenal God has provided to equip you to fight the good fight. Take your worldview training seriously. Get a firm grip on your purpose. Develop valuable, godly habits. Become a spiritual giant. Establish yourself as a reliable, go-to soldier in the Lord’s army—not for your glory and pleasure, but for His. There is no greater calling and there is no more fulfilling role.

Fourth, get tight with the Holy Spirit. This is God within you, God working through you. The deeper your relationship with the Spirit, the greater the works He can do through you. It is the presence of the Holy Spirit in you that makes you holy—that is, not perfect but set apart for the things of God. Give the Holy Spirit free reign in your life and you will reap the benefits.

Fifth, please know that this commitment and your investment in training for spiritual war will inevitably generate constant and stiff resistance. Count on it. Anticipate it. Be ready. And be confident that God does not give a faithful soldier more than that warrior can handle. Fight in His strength, not yours, and rest assured that nothing can withstand the strength of God.

Finally, buckle up and enjoy the ride. There will be times of blissful victory. There will be times of pain and suffering. But ultimate victory is yours, according to God—and, as the embodiment and definer of truth, you can believe Him.

So, enjoy the process. Experience the amazing blessing of being counted worthy to serve and sometimes suffer for His name and to share in His glory. Realize that He will transform the world through you if you remain ready and committed. And remember that no matter what happens on the battlefield today, when the war is over, you win!

Lesson from a Modern-Day Warrior

Let me close with a quote from retired four-star Admiral William McRaven. He served for more than three decades on SEAL Teams 1, 3, 4, and 6. This man understands how combat works. Here is his advice to those who want their life to count, who want to make a difference in the world.

"You wanna change the world? Start off by making your bed. If you make your bed every morning, you will have accomplished the first task of the day and it will encourage you to do another task.

"Making the bed will also reinforce the fact that the little things in life matter. If you can't do the little things right, you'll never be able to do the big things right.

"I've been a Navy SEAL for 36 years. Basic SEAL training? It is six months of being constantly harassed by professionally trained warriors who seek to find the weak of mind and body and eliminate them from ever being a Navy SEAL.

"All you have to do to quit is ring the bell and you'll never have to wake up at 5 in the morning. Ring the bell and you'll no longer have to do the freezing cold swims, the runs, the obstacle courses, the PT, and you will no longer have to endure the hardships of training.

"If you want to change the world, don't ever, EVER, ring the bell."

Friends, play to win! Make the most of your spiritual boot camp here at ACU so you may graduate with honors in spiritual warfare and be prepared to be a victorious warrior with Christ.

May God bless you as you serve Him.