

## Change of management

Back in the 90's, just out of internal medicine residency, I joined a practice that was a staff model health maintenance organization. It was kind of like insurance and all aspects of health care all under one roof.

Early in its history things had been rough, but by the time I joined it was actually working pretty well. I spent a couple pretty satisfying years there.

Then, we left for my husband's post grad school training and when we came back, I rejoined that practice. At that point, the management was still the same company as before, but some things had changed...things that ultimately weren't working so well.

Financial issues forced the owner to sell the practice to another organization. The new owner's goal was to change it from the HMO model to a more traditional fee for service model. It was not only a total change in management, but a total change in philosophy and total change in approach to health care delivery.

There was lots of resistance to this. There were hard feelings and major conflict...it even made the news. I don't remember the specifics of the news story but I remember my mom calling because she was concerned about my well-being.

I mean the new owners hired a security firm because they were concerned about the response of the employees...afraid it could get violent. It was weird. I ended up not staying in the practice under the new management. Management changes can really turn things upside down.

A change in management is basically what Paul is talking about in this part of his letter.

First, let's clear up a misconception. Too often when Paul talks about the sinfulness of the flesh, what people hear is that the body and its functions...especially the sexual ones...are bad and the spirit is good.

That's called dualism and it's wreaked all sorts of havoc in the name of a warped Christianity.

It isn't what Paul is talking about. Paul is talking about a change in management.

In the first part of the passage, management is this ruler of the power of the air. The spirit at work in the disobedient.

Paul never uses the term Satan or devil in his letters. Instead, you will read about the principalities and powers...the cosmic powers of darkness...the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

I went into that in more detail in my sermon the weekend of Juneteenth when I preached on racism. If you want to look back at that sermon for a fuller explanation, it's posted on the website.

All those are terms Paul uses to describe forces of evil that operate in the world. In this passage, it's the ruler of the power of the air.

The ruler of the power of the air is the old management...and it's a power that leads to death, both spiritual and physical.

A CS Lewis classic is called *The Screwtape letters*. Screwtape is a demon who works for Satan. He's writing letters to give advice to his nephew, Wormwood, who is kind of a demon in training. Wormwood has been given a subject...a patient is what he's called in the book. He is supposed to work on this patient to turn him away from Christianity and toward the power of the spirit of the air.

It's kind of a fun read and actually creates a pretty good image of the battle between the powers of evil and the power of Christ in the heart and mind of a Christian.

What it makes clear is that the methods employed by the ruler of the power of the air are often not blatant. Here's one example.

The book is set in London at the beginning of World War 2. Wormwood is trying to use the war as a way to win over his patient to the side of evil. The man, a new Christian, is wrestling with himself over what his response as a Christian should be to the war...go all in in patriotic fervor, or be a pacifist.

Here is the advice his uncle Screwtape gives him: Let him begin by treating the Patriotism or the Pacifism as a part of his religion. Then let him, under the influence of partisan spirit, come to regard it as the most important part.

It doesn't matter whether his man is an ardent patriot, ready to take on the enemy, or a total pacifist. His Christian faith may inspire either one. But when either becomes a part of his religion, and ultimately the most important part, Satan has won.

There are other examples...ways Wormwood is to try to get the man to feel toward his mother...ways he tries to twist the man's budding romance. In all the examples, Wormwood

tempts the man, not with obvious evil, but with what seems often almost right...something that can be justified by the ways of the world.

In a world under the management of the ruler of the power of the air, we justify all sorts of things.

We justify sexual exploitation as sexual freedom.

We dig our heels in on our ideological beliefs about things like abortion without being willing to talk about ways to support both the unborn and the women who bear them.

We blame the consequences of our actions on other people.

We justify an obscene gap between rich and poor with a philosophy of personal responsibility, ignoring factors in a system that work to keep people poor.

Over the centuries we have justified racist policies, sometimes even using the Bible to do it.

We justify perpetual one-upmanship and the desperate need to measure up in the name of healthy competition. And the resulting feelings of either extreme arrogance or self-loathing seem justified by what we have or haven't done.

We pursue our own gratification at the expense of relationships to those closest to us.

In the name of freedom, we refuse to do what might save another's life.

And we are often totally blind to the fact that what looks so right to us is in fact the influence of the ruler of the power of the air.

In a time when there are enemies we could be fighting together...for example a pandemic and the long-standing suffering brought about by systemic racism...we are instead expending all our energy fighting with each other.

That ruler of the power of the air...that cosmic force of evil... has to be smiling over a lot of what is going on right now.

BUT...that's not the end of the story.

And the reason it's not is because we are under new management We are under the management of a God who is rich in mercy...a God who sees all the terrible things we are a part of...and loves us anyway. Even as we yield to the death dealing powers of evil, God keeps working to make us alive in Christ.

We are under new management. The battle rages on...and in this now and not yet time before the last skirmish the old management is still hanging on...we still struggle with that power of the air. But the new management is in place. And that new management is working to make us alive...to make us more fully who we were created to be.

That change in management isn't something we earned or accomplished or can take credit for. The new management is established by the immense grace of a God who became human, was crucified, died, buried...and then rose from the dead.

As Jesus broke the bonds of death, so he broke the bonds between us and the ruler of the power of the air. He continues to work to save us...he works to rescue us from our bonds with the old management... he works to put to death that inside us that sometimes still prefers the old management.

Under the new management, something altogether different is being born. Under new management, we become the people God intended us to be. We become people who are guided by love of God and love of neighbor.

We become people who are humbly willing to give up something of our desires and our rights for the sake of another. We become people who are willing to have difficult conversations about what love of neighbor looks like in complex situations.

By grace you have been saved...you are freed from the old management...freed from the grasp of the cosmic powers of evil. But you are also saved *for* something...you are saved for good works...for love. We are saved so that our works will bring down that ruler of the power of the air and so that love will reign.