

Fighting the Good Fight

What does the Bible mean by "spiritual warfare"?

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I had been in church ministry for over 10 years when I was asked for the first time to be part of an exorcism.

Even now, I'm not quite sure that's the right word to describe what took place. Certainly it didn't look anything like what you see in movies. Nobody's head rotated 360 degrees; there were no freakishly low voices or unusual physical phenomena.

Just a man who used to be a missionary who found himself emotionally and relationally headed down paths he never thought he would pursue, unable to find solid ground to stand on. He felt somehow that his inner battle was not merely psychological. Through mutual friends I was asked to be one of those who gathered to pray for his deliverance.

I wasn't quite sure how to be present. I am from a Midwestern church background that certainly believed in the devil (I remember getting a stack of cards with Scripture verses to be used against certain temptations that was called an Anti-Satan Kit.) We would sometimes hear extraordinary stories of occult activity from guest speakers who served as missionaries or lived in cities like San Francisco. But in our tradition the casting out of demons did not play a common role. I pictured in my mind dramatic confrontations and bold prayer, but this event was not that way.

When the few of us gathered around this man, we asked him questions—what did he find troubling, what steps toward help had he already attempted, what help from God did he desire? We read Scripture together. We prayed, and asked God to deliver him from whatever kind of spiritual oppression or opposition that he was facing. I did not have any internal clarity about the exact nature of his problem or to what extent some kind of demonic presence was at work.

At the same time, it was clear that this was a human being troubled by forces beyond his ability to control, and the reality of every human condition—that God alone is our only hope—had become terribly clear in this moment of his life.

The ending of our prayer time was as non-dramatic as its beginning. We hugged him, planned for next steps and next meetings, and went home.

I ran into him recently at a ministry conference. Parts of his life have been healed; in some areas he carries wounds that may always remain. He feels free from the oppression that haunted him two decades ago. But what took place remains as mysterious now as it was then.

Charting Spiritual Reality

Medieval theologians used to say we have two ways to speak about God: the *via negative* (what God is not: not limited in space, not limited in knowledge, not limited in power), and the *via analogia* (what God is like: like a fortress, like a father, like a rock, like a lover).

The way of analogy is perhaps the most important way we have to speak of spiritual life. Often these analogies involve growth ("I am the vine, you are the branches"; "the fruit of the Spirit is ..."). Others cluster around the notion that the church is like a body or a family.

But perhaps the most intriguing and controversial images cluster around the notion of the life of the soul as spiritual warfare. Why was this picture of spiritual reality invoked by the writers of Scripture, and what does it mean for the way we do ministry?

Perhaps the place to begin is here: the biblical writers lived in a world where the reality of the spiritual was taken for granted; we live in a world where that belief erodes a little more each day.

The greatest book on spiritual warfare in the twentieth century was written by an Anglican intellectual who, I think, never himself used the phrase "spiritual warfare" and may well never have heard it used. C.S. Lewis's little book *The Screwtape Letters* is a classic because it shows the stakes at play over the fate of a single soul.

Lewis notes how difficult it has become for human beings to take seriously the reality of the spiritual as a fundamental dimension of the universe. Uncle Screwtape (a senior devil) writes, "Thanks to processes which we set at work in them centuries ago, [human beings] find it all but impossible to believe in the unfamiliar while the familiar is before their eyes."

Sometimes, an inability to believe in Satan reflects a larger inability to believe in a spiritual plane at all. Our culture is relentlessly materialistic. This is, as Lewis points out, part of what makes prayer difficult for modern people.

People often speak of feeling frustrated that their prayers never make it past the ceiling. Of course, if the Spirit of God is present right here right now, they don't have to make it past the ceiling—God is already on this side of the ceiling.

In what may be the most important Bible passage using the warfare image—Ephesians 6—Paul ties the need for spiritual armor to qualities related to the development of character—the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the gospel of peace, the shield of faith. The New Testament has much more to say about the discernment of right character than it does about mapping which demons are where.

Paul's primary point, which we forget to our peril, is to take seriously the God-powered development of our character, because we are spiritual beings destined for a ceaseless existence in spiritual reality.

Where Evil Resides

Because we live in a largely therapeutic culture, evil is a slowly disappearing concept. But every once in a while we are shaken by a holocaust, a genocide, or the destruction of a World Trade Center, and we remember why we need that word. The Bible reminds us that we battle "evil in the heavenly places."

Psychiatrist Scott Peck wrote of meeting with a depressed 15-year-old named Bobby, who was increasingly troubled after his 16-year-old brother killed himself with a .22 rifle.

Peck tried to probe Bobby's mind, but got nowhere. Searching for ways to establish a bond, he asked what Bobby had received from his parents for Christmas. "A gun," Bobby said. Peck was stunned. "What kind?"

"A .22."

More stunned. "How did it make you feel, getting the same kind of gun your brother killed himself with?"

"It wasn't the same kind of gun." Peck felt better.

"It was the same gun."

Bobby had been given, as a Christmas present, by his parents, the gun his brother used to kill himself.

When Peck met with the parents, what was most striking was their deliberate refusal to acknowledge any wrongdoing on their part. They would not tolerate any concern for their son, or any attempt to look at moral reality.

Two decades later and after his conversion to Christianity, Peck wrote about this encounter: "One thing has changed in twenty years. I now know Bobby's parents were evil. I did not know it then. I felt their evil but had no vocabulary for it. My supervisors were not able to help me name what I was facing. The name did not exist in our professional vocabulary. As scientists rather than priests, we were not supposed to think in such terms."

Interestingly enough, although Peck often worked with convicted prisoners, he rarely found evil there. Evil, he finally decided, is not primarily indicated simply by sinful acts. Rather, it is the refusal to tolerate one's sense of sinfulness: "The central defect of evil is not the sin but the refusal to acknowledge it." This definition is reflective of Jesus' far greater severity in dealing with religious leaders than with prostitutes and tax collectors.

I also find it frightening as a religious leader.

Evil exists. Evil is real. One of the hallmarks of evil is that it seeks to convince its victims that it exists "out there." Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote that it was while he was in prison that "Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties, but right through every human heart, and

through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. Even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained; and even in the best of all hearts, there remains a small corner of evil."

One of the worst features of some popular Christian fictional treatments of spiritual warfare is that they encourage our tendency to think of "us" as good and "them" as bad. They misplace Solzhenitsyn's line as though it divides us from other people rather than dividing us from our best selves.

I'm not sure ministry can ever have the urgency it requires if it is not aware of evil, both externally and internally. We are seeing a wonderful growth of interest in the church's commitment to justice. But the pursuit of justice cannot be carried out by purely human means. Theologians like Walter Wink have suggested that when Paul says we wrestle "not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world," those powers may well include economic systems and political systems that remain stubbornly resistant to righteousness and justice.

The first time I went to Ethiopia I saw children who had been maimed or blinded by their parents because their only economic hope for survival was a child desperate enough to evoke pity in people like me who had money. Attempts to "do justice" will always founder unless we're able to remember that the ultimate enemy of humanity is not simply poverty or illiteracy or ill health; it is much worse than that and as apt to strike healthy, well-read, rich people as anyone.

This doesn't mean we need to pay more attention to the demonic. We must not give to the evil one too much attention, nor too little. In some stories—Star Wars and Les Mis come to mind—the good guy and the bad buy get almost equal screen time.

Not in the Bible. There are dozens of references to God in the Scriptures for every reference to the figure of Satan. This reflects a sometimes forgotten theological truth that the devil is by no means God's counterpart. He is a creature, not the Creator. If anything, his divine counterpart would be the archangel Michael.

Spiritual, Emotional, or Physical?

Boundaries between spiritual, emotional, and physical health are both overlapping and murky.

Sometimes, God brings deliverance to a human being in a single dramatic moment. Ninety-five year old Louie Zamperini was at our church recently, and spoke of how God used all the suffering of his life for good in ways he could not have predicted. (When asked by a Japanese official a few years ago whether any good had come out of his brutal suffering as a POW in WWII, Louie said "Yes, it prepared me for 53 years of married life.") After the war, Louie's life spiraled down in a vortex of rage, fear, and alcoholism that he could not control. When he surrendered his life to Christ at a Billy Graham crusade, he was delivered from these in an instant. No more nightmares. No more temptation to drink. Rage was replaced by forgiveness.

But God does not always deliver in this way.

Sometimes people in our churches may be drawn to an explanation for their problems that could provide them with an instant solution that removes the need for hard, difficult inner work on their part. If my problem is an external force, then I may indulge the illusion that I will not have to spend disciplined energy with God's help on the cultivation of new habits.

The attempt to diminish human responsibility by blaming supernatural evil is as old as the garden: "what is this that you have done?"

If my problem is an external spiritual force, I may be let off the hook instead of having to face my own responsibility. The attempt to diminish human responsibility by blaming supernatural evil is as old as the garden: "What is this that you have done?"

"The serpent deceived me, and I ate." It did not work then, or thereafter in Scripture. Spiritual warfare is spoken of in a way that heightens human vulnerability, but it does not diminish human responsibility.

The relationship between spiritual warfare and emotional health becomes particularly important in the area of pastoral care. One of the first responsibilities of a good clinician is assessment and diagnosis. One of the gifts the Spirit has given to the church is the "discernment of spirits"; the ability to distinguish between God's spirit and other, alien spirits. Outside the New Testament, thinkers like Ignatius have written with great wisdom that has lasted for centuries. In particular, Ignatius insisted that the most basic rule of discernment is whether the movements of a spirit incline toward the fruit of the spirit (love, joy, peace, and so on) or away from them.

Because my doctoral program in clinical psychology was housed in a seminary, the diagnosis issue was unusually prominent. There were disagreements over when a diagnosis of demonic involvement was appropriate. The potential for harm in someone's life—particularly a child—if a "discerner" mistakenly intuits the presence of a demon is very real. A team of theologians and clinicians developed a series of guidelines around the discernment of spirits that may be helpful for churches:

- Since discernment does not confer infallibility, it ought to be subject to the wise, informed, and responsible members of the Christian community.
- No one should ever be subject to exorcism without informed consent.
- Because mental illness often involves a preoccupation with sex and religion (think of mania and messianic complexes), no exorcism should be performed unless the person has been assessed and diagnosed by skilled clinicians. A friend of mine had a father who suffered for years from bi-polar disorder. It often involved bizarre behavior with religious overtones; he was often told he needed deliverance from demonic possession. When the effectiveness of lithium to treat bipolar disorder was discovered, he was restored to mental health. But his faith had taken a beating because of years of spiritual misdiagnosis.
- For a Christian clinician to seek to help in human healing without relying on prayer is a form of malpractice. "Healing" is just as much a metaphor when it comes to human behavior as warfare is. Sin requires forgiveness, not catharsis. Jesus warned about a

person being delivered from one spirit only to have seven more re-occupy. The human heart will ultimately be governed by a power greater than a human heart.

Deliver Us From Evil

Even though what we call "the Lord's prayer" is familiar to Christians, there are parts of it we rarely dwell on. For instance, what it really means when Jesus says, "Deliver us from the evil one." New Testament scholar Dale Bruner notes that Jesus uses an almost violent verb translated "deliver." It means to snatch; it's what a hand does when it seizes an object in considerable danger. The idea here is that the devil is constantly luring us into pits, snares of moral destruction, and being saved from them is beyond mere human willpower. Only God's watching and snatching and saving can rescue us. Deliverance indeed.

Occasionally I'll have folks say to me that, since I'm a pastor, the devil must be particularly after me. I'm not so sure. I don't think God reckons greatness in his kingdom in ways that always sync up with human religious titles or institutions. And it always seems to me to be just a little narcissistic about anyone putting themselves in a category so spiritually powerful that they warrant special diabolical attention.

And yet ...

I have known times of intense spiritual ministry to be immediately and strangely followed by intense temptation.

I have known times when it seems like great spiritual work is being done, to be almost intertwined when problems and opposition seem to intensify.

I believe that there is great resistance to the good work of God, and that resistance can come from both within and without.

I know that any time someone says to me "I pray for you every day," I feel something beyond gratitude.

One thing is clear: Jesus pairs deliverance from the evil one with "Lead us not into temptation." The primary path of deliverance involves loving and knowing God.

"The human heart will ultimately be governed by a power greater than the human heart."

In the old days when money used to grow on trees (or at least get printed on paper that came from trees), people who were experts at spotting counterfeit bills didn't spend their time studying counterfeit bills; they spent their time studying the real thing so closely that the imposter became obvious. The evil one is called an "angel of light" because of the ease with which we will rationalize giving in to temptation. Our safety lies, not primarily in knowing the enemy better, but in knowing our Father better.

One final weapon

For all the seriousness of this topic, there is a strange thread of something like joy that runs in great writings about it. Thomas More said that the devil, "that prowde spirite," cannot endure to be mocked.

Luther wrote that the best way to drive out the devil, if he will not yield to Scripture, is to jeer and flout him, for he cannot bear scorn. G. K. Chesterton said that one law of hell is that no one can laugh at themselves; the devil fell because of gravity.

It is perhaps the inversion of one of the great observations of ancient Israel: the joy of the Lord is our strength. Those of us in church leadership read or hear with sad frequency of one of our sisters or brothers ending up in a moral ditch. A mentor of mine noted once that when that happens, as a general rule, the person has been living without a deep sense of soul satisfaction for a long time, which is what made them vulnerable. I asked him how often someone who does live with a deep sense of soul satisfaction in God and their life ends up in a moral ditch.

Never, he said.

Always it is the unsatisfied soul that finds sin to look good. It is the pastor who feels that God cannot be trusted to make him happy in his actual life situation who will feel it necessary to do that which promises some fulfillment.

Oddly enough, unspiritual as it sounds, when we are happy in our work, joyful in our homes, content in our marriages, satisfied in our play, loved in our relationships, grateful to God in and during our daily routine, in ways we may not even understand, the Father is answering our prayer. We are being delivered from the evil one.

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