

NOT FLESH AND BLOOD

Want your Christian friends to look at you like you're from Mars? Next time you pray together, pray against Satan, or mention demons. For many, this will put you in the same camp as the Bible-thumping fundamentalists. When someone trots out a prayer against dark spiritual forces we involuntarily recall the excesses of those who see pitchforks behind every ache, pain or lost parking space.

C. S. Lewis said this of the range of attitudes about the satanic:

There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about... devils. One is to disbelieve their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. [The devils] themselves are equally pleased by both errors, and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.

Many of us follow a third paradigm which has elements of both extremes: *We believe* Satan exists, but *act* as if he didn't.

Throughout the bulk of its history the Church has taken the Biblical instruction on the matter at face value. This came to an end around the time of the Enlightenment. According to a survey in *First Things*, "the last great theologian of the Western tradition for whom the Devil was at the very center of reflection was Martin Luther." With the rise of materialist reductionism, many Christians put demons on the shelf with goblins, dragons and unicorns.

The Bible, though, speaks clearly of the existence of demons and Satan. In the Gospels, Jesus was tempted in the desert by the Devil. In the parable of the Sower Jesus names Satan as God's enemy who steals the seed of the Gospel. In the parable of the Wheat and the Weeds, Satan sows weeds, the sons of the evil one, in God's field. Much of Jesus' ministry, in driving out demons, was on the spiritual front lines. Jesus instructed his disciples to pray for delivery from the evil one, and he himself asked God, "not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one" (Jn 17:15).

The rest of the New Testament paints just as clear a picture of the attacks believers face: Satan blinds the eyes of unbelievers (2 Cor 4:4) and misleads believers (2 Cor 10:3-5); he accuses the brethren (Rev 12:10); he prowls about, bringing direct persecution to Christians (1 Pet 5:8-9; 12-13); and he seeks division within the church (Eph 4:26). In the clearest passage on spiritual warfare Paul writes, “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph 6:12). Scripture describes a real enemy who seeks to tear down God’s kingdom and its people.

The Bible is clear enough that we can’t easily claim this as the ignorance of primitive first-century Palestine. Whether or not we think Paul was merely a product of his times, the epistles are in harmony with the Gospels. Do we really believe Jesus was wrong about this? As a physicist, I am loath to believe in anything which can’t be measured. However, if I take the inspiration of Scripture seriously, I must also take spiritual warfare seriously. Certainly the Heidelberg catechism does (see Lord’s Days 32 and 52), as does Calvin, who writes,

The Lord offers to us arms for repelling every kind of attack. It remains for us to apply them to use, and not leave them hanging on the wall. To quicken our vigilance, he reminds us that we must not only engage in open warfare, but that we have a crafty and insidious foe to encounter, who frequently lies in ambush....

If Scripture is right about the battle going on for and against the kingdom, we ought to train ourselves both in spiritual warfare and, more importantly, in discernment. As a first step, consider the following three things which we can all do now and which present little risk of abuse or excess, but tremendous value if the spiritual battle is real.

First, we can pray against the enemy. In a recent congregational prayer Pastor Fluit prayed against the evil one. Aside from that, when was the last time you heard someone pray about Satan? At the end of the “spiritual armor” passage Paul instructs the Ephesians to “pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints” (6:18). As pointed out above, the Lord’s prayer calls us to pray against Satan. If we are unsure whether the “god

of this world” is at work, we have only to tell God. If we pray with care and sensitivity, aware that most of us are inexpert at identifying the enemy’s work, we risk nothing more than sidelong glances from fellow Christians—and surely we are willing to stake our reputations to follow the pattern of Scripture!

Second, we can show more grace to our fellow believers when they aggravate us or seem to oppose the movement of the Spirit—for the Bible suggests that even the wisest of us can each be misled or provoked by Satan at times. Paul modeled this when he was quick to avoid division with the Corinthians: “If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. *For we are not unaware of his schemes*” (2 Cor 2:10-11). Calvin counseled,

Let us remember when the injurious treatment of others provokes us to revenge [that this is no bodily struggle]. Our natural disposition would lead us to direct all our exertions against the men themselves; but this foolish desire will be restrained by the consideration that the men who annoy us are nothing more than darts thrown by the hand of Satan... To *wrestle with flesh and blood* will not only be useless, but highly pernicious. We must go straight to the enemy, who attacks and wounds us from his concealment—who slays before he appears.

We needn’t see Satan hiding behind every adversary; we should just be quick to forgive.

Third, let us respond to Satan as Jesus did when tempted in the desert, with the word of God. (This will likely mean committing verses to memory.) This will remind us that although Satan has some freedom to harass the Church, “the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world” (1 Jn 4:4). Of believers, 1 Jn 5:18 says, “the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him.” Ultimately, we rejoice that the victory belongs to Jesus: “...having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Col 2:15). When we celebrate this victory in heaven, let us not look back and recall that we stood on the sidelines.