

SPIRITUAL WARFARE AND OUR THOUGHT LIFE

Recently a worker here in the Arabian Peninsula had to be sent home for conduct unbecoming to a minister of the gospel. Whenever sinful choices lead to tragic consequences and difficult decisions, we should pause and examine our own hearts and hedges—as “there, but for the grace of God, go I.”

The details of this particular case were shocking and made me wonder again how those who love Jesus and who have given their life for Him can so betray Him, their loved ones, and themselves. The wonder is not based in judgment, but in sobriety. I am sobered that the enemy of our souls is so adept at deceiving our minds, so canny in tempting us towards what we know will destroy us and those around us.

One primary way the enemy attacks us is in our thought life. Serving among unreached peoples in locations where Satan has his throne and where he has ruled for centuries puts us in a position that threatens him and his holdings. He then lashes out, and through his cunning those lashes work to twist truth in our minds. I have been appalled at what my mind has conceived and entertained while serving in pioneer contexts. I have thought despicable and blasphemous things with reoccurring frequency. But what a relief and necessity it is to recognize that these are not my thoughts; rather, these are the vile and twisted suggestions of the enemy.

As far as defeating the devil’s attacks on our minds, it is critical that we bring these thoughts into the light, that we recognize they are not our thoughts but his invasive suggestions, that others are being similarly attacked (we are not unique or alone), and that the word of God, the blood of Jesus, and the Holy Spirit can wash our minds of the filth and folly from hell which the enemy deviously tries to make us believe is ours.

I’m not saying these attacks on the mind are unique to pioneer contexts. The devil is remarkably consistent and uncreative, primarily because his tactics are so effective against those unaware or unprepared. I’m just saying these lies of the enemy, the lies that attack the very foundations of Christlike, biblical thought, if you live for any amount of time in the places where the devil has dominated, are exacerbated and vehement.

Transparently then, I want to share some common ways the enemy tries to attack me in my mind. What liberty, joy, and hope I found when Jesus assured me that these are not my thoughts, that these thoughts do not define me, that these thoughts are NOT who I am, and that these are but wicked darts of the enemy that have no rightful place in me. My hope is that as you read how the devil has lied to me, you will recognize how subtly and stubbornly he tries to deceive you. My hope is that in realizing that he lies to all of us in similar patterns, we will have solidarity in resisting his lies and resting in our true identity in Christ.

THE LIES AGAINST SEXUAL PURITY

Infidelity, perversity, homosexuality, confused identity, child abuse, rape, promiscuity, self-gratification. Have you thought about these things? Have you had nasty dreams about them? These are not your thoughts; these are not you. These are from the pit of hell and have no part of you. When these thoughts come, pray in the Spirit, plead the blood of Jesus, read Scripture, sing out your worship, lift your voice in praise, and remind yourself: “These are not my thoughts. I will give no place to them or their suggestions.” You are not

sinful because the devil threw a dart at your mind or because he questioned your God-given identity. You are normal and under attack. Quote Jude and remind the devil that the Lord will rebuke and defeat him. Tell someone you trust about the errant thoughts, for in doing so you bring the lie out into the light and break most of its power. Don't freak out. Relax in the realization that the enemy is trying to insert his lies into your psyche and that he tries this same trick on all of us. Relax in the confidence that Jesus and His word define who you are; the Devil and his wiles do not.

THE LIES AGAINST CHRIST'S IDENTITY

Is Jesus really God? Can God really be both man and God? Is the Bible really trustworthy? Is the cross really necessary? Is there not some other way (or ways) of salvation? These along with any other doubts about the essential nature of Christ seemingly come out of nowhere and circle us seeking any opening in our armor. In his cunning the devil attacks our weakness, and in his hubris attacks our strength. Don't be surprised when the enemy launches a doubt against the very core of your faith, against a truth you have taught with passion a thousand times, against the very heart of the gospel and our Lord Jesus Christ. When these lies come flying at you, recognize their origin and keep your shield up. Don't argue with them—they are lethal, not logical. Simply stand on the promises of God, quote or read the Bible out loud, and let the washing of the water of the Word purge all the nonsense from your head.

THE LIES AGAINST RELATIONAL UNITY

Jealousy, competition, striving for acceptance, critical spirits, suspicion, judgmentalism, the "in-club," marriage tension, team dysfunction, division in the local church or missionary community, loneliness, exceptionalism (no one understands, no one has it as bad as I do, no one is as aware/informed as I am). The enemy loves to divide because the unity of the body of Christ threatens him. The devil loves to make mountains from molehills and to brew tempests in teapots. We fight him by refusing to allow small cuts to fester, by refusing to take offense, by being the pain swallower, by keeping short accounts, by being peacemakers, by living out the Golden Rule, by following Matthew 18 principles for conflict resolution, and by praying the mercy prayer for those who hurt us. When hurt is spreading, we absorb it rather than pass it on. We forgive rather than attack. We extend grace rather than demand it. The devil has no answer for those who live the crucified life, for those who end the conflict by accepting the nails into their own hands and the whip on their own back with love for the other. We don't bury our heads in the sand, but we do bury our hurts in the cross, and in so doing we diffuse the lies against relational unity.

THE LIES AGAINST LEADERSHIP AND AUTHORITY

Disobedience, partial obedience, refusal to submit, gossip, frustration, rebellion, pride. As pride was the original sin of the devil, even so it is still his favorite poison today. So easily he tempts us toward the Absalom spirit: "If I was in charge, I would do this...and this...and this." It starts as a critical attitude in our hearts. It then sprouts into indirectly undermining our leaders or authority through faint praise, gilded criticism, coalition building, seeking out other wounded followers to commiserate, and becoming the "safe" one to complain to, secretly feeling better about ourselves as people grumble about our mutual leader. The devil lies to us by telling us we are treated unfairly, that we know better than our leaders, and that our peers would be better served if we were in charge. The enemy is adept at making bad

seem good, at convincing us that ends justify means, and at making our rebellious attitudes and behaviors feel justified. But there is no justification for dishonoring authority, not even when our authorities are less than honorable. The truth is, we must always trust that God rules in the kingdoms of men, always trust the sovereign Lord to defend us, and always believe that when all is said and done, the safest path is the submitted path.

THE LIES AGAINST EMOTIONAL STABILITY

Fear, selfishness, suicide, murder, violence, rage, deception, depression, schizophrenia, delusion, theft, irrationality, folly. In my experience the devil uses fear as often as he uses pride. Pride tends to damage others, while fear tends to destroy ourselves along with those around us. Fear can make us irrational. It clouds our thinking. And if we succumb to it, we consider (and enact) things we would never do if in our right mind. If the devil cannot destroy our spirit and body, he attacks our mind and emotions. If subtle lies don't work, he attempts outlandish ones. When we are hungry, angry, lonely, tired, and sick (HALTS), we are more vulnerable to crazy thoughts. When we are emotionally depleted, we have less resistance to the ridiculous, and it somehow becomes more believable. We tend to recover from physical and spiritual depletion more rapidly than emotional exhaustion, and when we are emotionally empty, somehow the most horrific ideas seem strangely appealing. The devil suggests some wild act will bring relief and rest when in reality it will only bring hell. Spiritual warfare thus includes such simple things as eight hours of sleep and occasional naps, daily exercise and healthy eating, industry and a healthy work ethic alongside holidays and Sabbaths, date nights and family games, accountability groups, and counsel and counseling as needed (with no shame). It means friends you can laugh with and don't need to try to spiritually impress. It means your feet on earth while your head is in heaven and "recharge" time, whatever that means to you.

CONCLUSION

A primary theater of spiritual warfare is in our heads and thoughts. The primary weapon of the enemy is deceit. He starts with attractive little lies and half-truths, and works his way up to blatant, ridiculous, perverted nonsense. Winning the battle for truth in the mind is critical to winning the war. If we lose enough of the little skirmishes, we can believe and do any wicked thing. If we daily combat lies with light and truth, we will stand firm, by grace, unspoiled till "that day."