

SPIRITUAL WARFARE AND OUR CRUCIFIED LIFE

Some see demons everywhere; some see them nowhere. To some, spiritual warfare is code for everything unpleasant, while to others, it is a curiosity from far away or long ago that has no impact on our daily life. In the Live Dead movement, we have committed to living the crucified life, and probably every one of us made that commitment not knowing what it really means on a daily basis, nor how it interacts with spiritual warfare. Recently, I received this question from a friend and colleague who is living and serving among the unreached: When is it our flesh being crucified and when is it a blatant spiritual attack, and what do we do?

It's a pertinent and timely question as we tend to err in opposite directions. Either we blame everything (including our folly and flesh) on demons, or we blithely and naively discount the very real, sinister attacks of the demonic. Both errors can be fatal.

THE "BOTH/AND" OPTION (2 CORINTHIANS 12:7-10)

To begin, we must realize that sometimes spiritual attack is how our flesh is crucified. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 12:7 (NASB) "to keep me from exalting myself, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself!"

There is always opportunity in difficulty, so let us not waste any attack of the enemy. Let us pray and believe that "messengers of Satan" will be used by God to work His likeness into us; as His grace is sufficient, His power is made perfect in weakness (v. 9).

What do we do in these situations? What do we do when God allows a spiritual attack so that our flesh might be crucified and the character of Jesus revealed in and through us? Paul answers this for us: "I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in distresses, in persecutions, in difficulties, in behalf of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong"(vv. 9-10). It is marvelous how being content with what ails you, being glad for who and what God allows to crucify you, both takes the sting of the process out and puts joy in, breaking the enemies power to discourage us.

SO, WHAT DO WE DO?

1. Recognize God has allowed it.
2. Remember His grace is sufficient.
3. Rejoice in being weak.
4. Resolutely be content.

THE "FLESH BEING CRUCIFIED" OPTION

Cross-cultural ministry quickly exposes our arrogance and our insecurity—the twin faces of pride. Pride is deep within all of us; none of us are innocent or immune to the poisonous proclivity we have to love (or hate) ourselves more than we do others. Thus, there are times when we must pass through difficulty because we sinned, erred, misjudged, disobeyed, or acted stubborn, willful, or self-deceived. When we are wrong, the flesh must be crucified, and there are numerous ways we can be wrong in thought, word, or deed. When correction then comes

(from circumstance, consequences, colleagues, leaders, family, or friends), this is not spiritual warfare; this is just the flesh being crucified. Paul rebuking Peter was not spiritual warfare (Gal. 2:11).

I hesitate to say that the errors of Christian others are spiritual warfare. Satan can certainly speak through disciples (Matt. 16:23) and we need to recognize that, having Satan behind us as we keep our brother or sister before us. But we should be cautious to identify every flesh act of others as spiritual warfare. Leaders fail us, colleagues betray us, family disappoint us, disciples forsake us, and in numerous ways our faith friends wound us. This is not automatically spiritual warfare; often it's just the reality of the forgiven fallen still being fallen and forgiven. Lest we rush to judge, we are counted in their number. Today in your flesh you hurt me. Tomorrow I return the disfavor. Let us be gracious to one another, let us forgive as we have been forgiven.

I do not think the daily damage we Christians do to one another is spiritual warfare, but it can morph into it if we do not forgive. This is the whole point Paul makes in 2 Corinthians 2:5–11. Others sin (act in the flesh), and it hurts us. We sorrow, and so do they. We forgive in the presence of Christ “so that no advantage would be taken of us by Satan, for we are not ignorant of his schemes” (v. 11). It becomes spiritual warfare when we do not forgive, for we give the enemy a foothold in the course of our normal human hurts, and then anger, bitterness, deceit, hate, and all kinds of evil can run amuck. We cannot underemphasize how important daily forgiveness is to ensuring that our relational interactions do not become a breeding ground for the devil's schemes, lies, and accusations. Our friend Eli Gautreaux puts it this way: “Satan is watching intently and incessantly for opportunities to divide, pouncing instantly through any door we crack open, rejoicing at our stupidity, sneering and mocking our willingness to hand him such an easy ‘win.’ He laughs at the quenching of the Spirit among us due to our lack of mercy and meekness with one another. And he revels in all the sideways energy given to brotherly division instead of kingdom advance.” Relational conflict is not spiritual warfare in and of itself, but if we do not live both constantly repenting and forgiving, the enemy can quickly seduce us into fighting one another.

There is also the option that God uses others to crucify our flesh when we have not sinned or erred, nor have they. Another level of Christlike maturity is simply needed in us that God might get more glory and we might bear more fruit. John 15:2 tells us that branches (who have not necessarily done wrong) are pruned by God's loving hand so that we might do and be more for Him. Is this spiritual warfare? No. Is it crucifixion of the flesh? Not really, for sometimes we grow from glory to glory, from good to better.

SO, WHAT DO WE DO?

1. Repent and forgive quickly, early, and often.
2. Refuse to give the devil a foothold in any conflict.
3. Receive pruning with hope of more fruit to come.

THE “BLATANT SPIRITUAL ATTACK” OPTION

The most obvious way we recognize blatant spiritual attack is when it is obviously perverse, un-biblical, or anti-Christ. A healthy view of spiritual warfare is a humble view. We are not really the end goal of Satan's fury. We are very small players in a very big war. Satan is furious at our Lord Jesus and seeks to hurt and wound our Lord and His mission by deviously

wounding His children and servants. Therefore, blatant spiritual warfare will seek to attack Jesus and His global glory by wounding or confusing us. It will be perverse, it will not primarily originate with men (good or bad), and it will be anti-Christ.

A perverse dream when you have been walking in purity, that is spiritual warfare. Demons terrifying your children in the night, that is spiritual warfare. Thoughts in your head doubting the goodness of God, the deity of the Lord Jesus, the inspiration of Scripture, God made flesh, God in three persons, Jesus dying on the cross, the resurrection, the imminent return of Christ, the lostness of the unrepentant, that is spiritual warfare. Sustained sickness, sleeplessness, “accidents,” or improbable dangers, that is spiritual warfare. Spiritual warfare primarily originates outside of men (especially outside those in the household of faith) and comes against us directly from the devil and/or his minions. Thus, we let Jesus fight His battles and defend His own honor.

By this, I don't mean that we're passive observers in spiritual conflict. We are after all to put on our armor for OUR battle against rulers, powers, world forces of darkness, and the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places (Eph. 6:12). In full armor we are to resist the evil every day and to stand firm, extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one, and pray in the Spirit with all perseverance (vv. 13–14, 16, 18). We have a part to play, an active one. My point is, the Lord does the heavy lifting as spiritual attack is primarily against Him through us. The devil knows he can't really damage the Almighty, so he attacks the Lord by trying to destroy the Lord's children. The wisest thing we can do is let the Lord defend us, let Him lead the counterattack against evil as we follow in His train.

It's somewhat pompous for us to prance around the demonic. This is why Michael referred the devil to the Lord saying, “The Lord rebuke you” (Jude 9). Far better to let Jesus lead the fight, for with one breath of His mouth, He can clear the field of all enemies. Satan and his insufferable associates are not afraid of you and I, but they are terrified of the presence of Jesus. We battle spiritually by prayer, worship, standing our ground, resisting the enemy, and celebrating the presence of Jesus right where and when the battle rages fiercest. Blatant spiritual warfare originates directly through the devil and demons, and we directly refer them and their evil back to Jesus. We do this by “pleading the blood of Jesus.” Pleading the blood means that when the devil or demons attack us (thought, word, or deed), we simply remind him/them that we are protected. We submit to God and resist the devil (James 4:7) as God gives grace and we stay lowly. The devil flees from us only when we are in the presence of God, filled by God with His might. Again, the devil is terrified of the presence of Jesus; he is in no way terrified of us. We have been saved by the sacrificial death and glorious resurrection of Christ. We have been transferred from the kingdom of darkness to that of light (Col. 1:13). We now have an advocate (1 John 2:1), and any questions or accusations are to be directly taken to Jesus. We don't dignify the attacks of Satan with elongated discourse. We plead the blood and refer the devil to Jesus. Jesus is sufficient for these things; He is our champion. We would be fools not to fight from behind Him. Let Jesus advance and strike the devil and demons down. Let us follow close behind Him as faithful armorbearers finishing off those the Mighty Warrior has disarmed (Col. 2:15).

One of the most important spiritual tools we give our children is the understanding of how to “plead the blood of Jesus.” The enemy is no fool, and he attacks our vulnerable places and people, which often means our little people. Resisting the devil and standing firm against him starts in the home and must include our children. Be sure to teach them that they are under the protection of Jesus, and that no matter how scary something is they can have confidence

that every evil thing is terrified of Jesus and that Jesus will scare the scary away. We do this in two primary ways: First, we pray in the Spirit in front of our children—in worship, in praise, in our abiding times, in family devotions, and in times of duress. Model for them how the Spirit prays through us and how we don't resist the devil with an academic response, but a spiritual one. We stand on the promise of the word of God. We let the Spirit pray through us with groanings and utterances of deep speaking to deep. Second, we teach our children what it means to pray authoritatively in Jesus' name (His authority) and defensively by "staying under the blood" (His protection). They don't need to cower or converse when the enemy threatens or assaults them. They can confidently say, "I am under the blood, the precious blood, and you have no right to talk to me or even be near me. In Jesus' name, leave!"

SO, WHAT DO WE DO?

1. Release rebuking to the Lord Jesus.
2. Remind the devil that you are under the blood of Jesus.
3. Resist the devil, submit to God, stand your ground, plead the blood, and pray in the Spirit.
4. Refuse to regularly attribute the devil's activity to redeemed humans.

CONCLUSION

Spiritual warfare is a great opportunity for our flesh to be crucified. The flesh being crucified is a daily operation (1 Cor. 15:31) as we march our hearts to the cross morning, noon, and evening. Sometimes the flesh is crucified because we sinned and need correction. Sometimes it's just so we grow and bear more fruit. Sometimes it's because others sinned, and God is using it as an opportunity for us to grow in His likeness and extend His grace in the earth. Spiritual warfare is an obviously perverse and twisted anti-Christ assault. Since the real objection is to Jesus, not us, we resist the devil, stand our ground, stay under the blood, refer the devil immediately to Christ, and faithfully swing our little daggers as Jesus flashes forth with the immeasurable power of His divine Excalibur.