

DEALING WITH SPIRITUAL BONDAGE

By Andrew Wilson
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Ephesians 6:10-12, 18
Luke 13:10-16

Today we're going to talk about healing ministry as an aspect of spiritual warfare. I want to explore with you what the New Testament has to say about Satan and his influence on our physical, emotional and spiritual health. Then we'll discuss practical steps we can take to help people who are under attack by demonic forces.

In preparing these sermons on healing I was sorely tempted to overlook these subjects. Had I done so, I doubt if anyone would have complained. Most of us find the whole idea of spiritual warfare to be confusing. We recognize, if somewhat vaguely, that Satan is at least partly to blame for the evil in our world. But at the same time, we're reluctant to make those connections in our daily lives. The idea that Satan might be using maladies such as cancer or diabetes, alcoholism or depression to advance his cause seems unscientific, even medieval.

The unwritten law in the Church is that only Baptists and Pentecostals talk about Satan and the occult. Nobody likes that arrangement better than Satan himself. He's content to lurk under the radar. He knows he can have the greatest influence and do the most damage among those who don't take him seriously or don't believe in him at all.

It's hard to address this subject in a way that's balanced and helpful. I have Christian friends who dismiss the Bible's teachings about Satan on the grounds that they reflect a pre-scientific world-view that was dominated by superstitious belief. They accept psychological explanations for allegedly demonic activity: The person involved is schizophrenic. Or the story-teller is twisting the facts to make a supernatural explanation more plausible.

I also have Christian friends who live at the other extreme. They blame Satan for every rotten outcome; they see witches and warlocks lurking in every dark closet.

Last Wednesday night in our Foundations class we watched part of the movie, *Jesus Camp*. The filmmakers capture scenes from a camp in North Dakota called "Kids On Fire" where the main focus is to train children to engage in spiritual warfare. At one point, the camp's speaker, a Pentecostal children's minister named Becky Fisher, goes on a tirade against Harry Potter. "God hates witches and warlocks," she screams. "If Harry Potter had been in the Old Testament, he would have been put to *death!*" That line elicits cheers and loud applause from the audience of children and parents.

It's hard for me to defend Harry. I've always thought he was kind of wimpy, especially in comparison to his sidekicks, Ron and Hermione. But it's even harder to defend Becky Fisher, and

all those who think the road to hell is paved with books by J. K. Rowling. There's something amiss when we get more exercised about what's happening at Hogwarts than we do about what's happening at our own children's schools.

As we mature in our faith, we learn that the truth about Satan lies somewhere between the extremes. Satan is a spiritual being whose existence is confirmed both by the New Testament and by our collective experience in the Church. But Satan's power is no match for that of his creator. Satan's domain is our world, and his goal is to turn us away from worshipping and serving God. But Satan can never defeat a true disciple of Jesus.

C. S. Lewis spent a lot of time thinking about the supernatural. His most popular book, *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis explores Satan's nature, and the beguiling techniques he uses to lure us away from God's path. You may be familiar with this quote from the book's preface. It bears repeating because it exposes in simple words a truth that Satan is desperately trying to hide from us:

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

- *The Screwtape Letters*, from the preface

Lewis' admonition to take a balanced perspective on these matters has a direct application with regard to healing ministry. It's a mistake to think that Satan can't cause a person to become physically, emotionally or spiritually sick. But it's also a mistake to assume that every sickness is the work of some demon or spirit.

According to the New Testament, the Father sent Jesus to destroy the kingdom of Satan and its works and to establish God's kingdom [John 12:31; 1 John 3:8]. As I mentioned in earlier sermons, Jesus public ministry was characterized by proclamation and action. Jesus preached the good news of the kingdom of God. And he demonstrated the kingdom's power by healing the sick, raising the dead and casting out demons. Both of these elements were on display, for example, when Jesus stood in the synagogue in Capernaum at the beginning of his ministry. During his message a man who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out:

"What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!"

- Mark 1:24

In his remarkable book, *Power Healing*, Vineyard Pastor John Wimber says this about the Lord's encounter with demonic forces:

Jesus came as a divine invader to destroy demons and release men and women to eternal life, which explains why the Lord's presence caused demons to tremble and fear. Jesus' ministry was marked by continual conflict with Satan and demons for the purpose of establishing God's reign on earth.

- *Power Healing*, page101

The Bible's revelations about the origins of Satan, and the ordering of his kingdom, are sketchy at best. We know that Satan is not a god, but rather an angel who has rebelled against his creator, and who leads a host of demons, or evil spirits. But we learn a lot more from Scripture about Satan's motives and tactics, and about what we can do to protect ourselves.

Because Christians are identified with Christ, who is Satan's great enemy, Christians are targeted by Satan and all who live under his authority. As Paul explains in Ephesians, Christians need the kind of armor that only God can provide so they can withstand Satan's attacks:

For 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.

- Ephesians 6:12

The Lord's promise to us is that when we place our trust in him, and walk according to his Spirit, we have nothing to fear. Whether we're facing ridicule and persecution from others, or some kind of supernatural opposition, Christ will provide us with everything we need to prevail.

Today's gospel reading tells the story of a woman who has been crippled for eighteen years. Her spine is bent so badly that she can't stand properly. Jesus heals her, which is what Jesus always does when he encounters the sick. As he lays his hands on her back, her spine straightens, and she begins to praise God.

There are two details in the story that I'd like us to focus on. First, unlike most of the people that Jesus heals, this woman doesn't come to Jesus. He spots her in the crowd while he's teaching in the synagogue and he tells her to come forward.

Second, after Jesus heals her he makes it clear that the woman's spine problem was caused by Satan. After the synagogue leader gives him grief for having healed on the Sabbath, Jesus says this to the congregation:

"...[S]hould not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free... from what bound her?"

- Luke 13:16

I know Christians who are deeply conflicted in their response to stories like this one. They believe that Jesus had supernatural healing power, given to him by the Father, so they have no problem believing that Jesus healed the woman's spine. But they're bothered by Jesus' unscientific diagnosis of the problem.

I choose to believe the Lord. I choose to believe that Satan was ultimately responsible for the woman's crooked spine, and that the healing that took place was spiritual as well as physical in nature. Does that mean that all people with crooked spines, or any other degenerative bone problem, have been bound by Satan? No. Does that mean that *every* act of divine healing involves exorcism? Again, no. We need to remember Lewis' admonition: It's a mistake to mythologize Satan and his minions. And it's also a mistake to assume that every sick person has a demon that needs to be cast out.

To illustrate the point that physical sickness is sometimes caused by a demon, John Wimber cites a fascinating example from medical science. This case was written up by William Wilson, a physician at Duke Medical Center in Durham, North Carolina. I'm reading from a paper that Wilson read in 1975 at a meeting of the Christian Medical Association at the University of Notre Dame:

This thirty-two-year-old, twice-married female was brought in because of falling spells which had been treated with all kinds of anticonvulsant medication. She was examined on the neurosurgical service and after all examinations, including EEG [and] brain scan...were negative, she was transferred to the psychiatric service. Her mental status examination was unremarkable and all of the staff commented that she seemed normal until she had her first "spell."

While standing at the door of the day room she was violently thrown to the floor, bruising her arm severely. She was picked up and carried to her room, all the while resisting violently. When the author [Dr. Wilson] arrived, eight persons were restraining her as she thrashed about on the bed. Her facial expression was one of anger and hate. ...During the ensuing weeks, the patient was treated psychotherapeutically and it was learned that there was considerable turmoil in her childhood home... She was a "high liver" and after her separation and divorce, she was threatened with rejection by her parents. She remarried and her second husband was a "nice" but unexciting man... When her husband demanded that she give up her friends and her parties, she started having the "spells."

...Seclusion in the closed section brought her... combative behavior to an end but she would have spells in which she became mute, especially when religious matters were discussed. More dramatically, when the names Jesus or Christ were mentioned she would immediately go into a trance. On one occasion, while in a coma, in desperation, a

demon was exorcised and her spells ceased. She subsequently accepted Christ as her Savior and has been well since.

- *Power Healing* by John Wimber, pages 113-114

Admittedly, that's a weird story. Yet, when you consider the details in the light of Scripture, it isn't hard to understand. The afflicted woman had lived a hard life. Relationships within her family during her childhood were troubled. Her lifestyle choices as a young adult left her vulnerable to demonic influence. Her divorce and subsequent rejection by her parents weakened her spirit even more. Eventually a demon found a port of entry and took up residence inside her. At that point, from a medical perspective, her situation was hopeless. It was only through the prayers of a Christian friend that the woman was delivered from bondage.

One lesson that emerges from that story is that we shouldn't be hasty in deciding whether a person has been possessed by a demon. It's pretty clear that Dr. Wilson was a Christian. Yet it was only after he had conducted exhaustive tests on his patient that he reached the conclusion that she needed exorcism. We need to remember that most people who are under attack by Satan don't need exorcism. Instead, they need that armor that Paul speaks about in Ephesians: "the belt of truth... the breastplate of righteousness... the shield of faith... the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Ephesians 6:14-17).

I want to end today with some practical advice on how to deal with spiritual bondage. If these go by too quickly, or if you want to read the Bible verses that provide the foundation for these ideas, go to our web site and click on "Past Messages." We'll post this message early in the week.

Number 1 – Never forget that you live in enemy territory.

I used to take students hiking in and around the Bob Marshall Wilderness in Montana. "The Bob," as it's known, is the largest region of wilderness in America outside of Alaska. It's also the only region outside of Alaska with a significant concentration of grizzly bears.

There are certain guidelines you can follow to lessen the odds of having an unpleasant encounter with a grizzly. We pounded those guidelines into our kids' heads, and believe me, they followed them religiously. (We actually did see grizzlies on three occasions, but never up close and personal.)

The Apostle Peter warned believers that "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). We need to remember that we live in enemy territory and take the necessary precautions to avoid getting eaten alive.

[Matthew 12:43-45; Mark 3:11; Luke 4:36; Acts 8:7; Revelation 16:13]

Number 2 – Satan attacks us in three ways: by tempting us, by tripping us up, and by getting a grip on of our bodies or our personalities.

Most temptation comes to us as a consequence of our sin. But there are other examples in the Bible of temptation that comes straight from Satan himself. One example that of Jesus, when he was tempted in the wilderness. Another is that of Ananias, who was tempted to lie about his finances. [Matthew 4:1-11; Acts 5:3]

Satan's goal is to keep people from coming to the Lord or from advancing God's kingdom in other ways. We seldom know for sure if and when Satan is behind things like sicknesses or accidents. But the Bible provides examples of people who were tripped up by Satan and thereby prevented from doing God's work. In Acts chapter 16 we read about the slave girl who had a spirit of divination who distracted the people when Paul began to preach. [Also: Daniel 10:1-15; Acts 13:6-10]

We've already touched on the subject of demon possession. A better word to describe this phenomenon would be demonization because demons don't actually take full possession of people. It would be more accurate to say that they take advantage of weaknesses and sometimes gain a foothold inside people. This allows them to introduce physical ailments or to influence people's personalities.

People who are experienced in exorcism report certain patterns that are instructive for us. There are several behaviors that seem to result in a vulnerability to demonization. Not surprisingly, one of them is participation in occult activity. Other behaviors include sexual sin, drug or alcohol abuse. People who struggle with anger, resentment and feelings of self-loathing are also vulnerable to demonization.

Number 3 – Prayer is the most powerful weapon in our arsenal.

When Satan attacks, our first instinct should be to pray. We should pray for ourselves, that the Lord would strengthen our spirits and defend us. And we should pray for others, especially those who don't know the Lord and who therefore are especially vulnerable to false doctrine.

Number 4 – There's safety in numbers.

Our second instinct, when we're under attack, should be to gather together with other Christians. Christ has given the Church authority to heal the sick and do battle with spiritual forces of evil. When the Church stands together, united in our love for God and one another, the Lord confirms that authority and sends special blessings through the Holy Spirit.

Number 5 – Don't live in fear.

Fear takes hold of us when we stop trusting God. Fear weakens our judgment and wears us out. Whenever we feel afraid, we should remember, first and foremost, that Christ rose from the dead, and that he's walking with us every step of our journey. Because Christ lives, our victory is sure. Evil is not going to have the final word. God is going to set things right – in his time, and in his way.

Number 6 – Satan's days are numbered.

Satan thinks his kingdom is forever. He thinks he's going to win the great struggle for our sinful race. But the great deceiver is himself deceived. The seeds of Satan's destruction were sown the day that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Therefore we pray those words that Christ taught us: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

I'm going to ask you to close your eyes. In many churches, including the Roman Catholic Church, and the Presbyterian Church, baptized members are sometimes invited to renounce Satan and reaffirm their commitment to Christ.

As I ask you these five questions, I invite you to answer them in the silence of your heart.

- *Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?...*
- *Do you renounce the evil powers of this world, which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?...*
- *Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?...*
- *Do you renounce evil and its power in the world, which defy God's righteousness and love?...*
- *Do you renounce the ways of sin that separate you from the love of God?...*

Holy God, arm us for battle, and give us the victory through Jesus Christ. Amen.