

Spiritual Authority Over Spiritual Adversaries

Opening

The row houses on Hampton Drive, Felling, post code NE10 9EP, are not prized real estate in the north east of England. Nonetheless, 4 Hampton Drive was my beloved home for a year in spite of its reputation. It was a bit unsettling, though, when my hosts in the British Methodist Church, said “You might need to keep an eye on the back gate of your garden. Authorities are aware and all should be ok now, however your predecessor discovered it was being used as a drop point for drug transactions.”

Nothing says “welcome home” than discovering your new homeplace is a featured destination for the local drug trade. So, the nefarious activity got my attention and I kept a close eye on the back gate. Little could I have expected the most disturbing sight would not be found on the back gate, but the front gate, where I parked by Volkswagen Polo just the other side of pillar and post.

I was not immediately disturbed one autumn evening at the sight of cassette ribbon tied from one gatepost to another, blocking the entrance of my driveway. I barely noticed it before driving through it. Puzzled as I was, I simply removed one loop from the post, slackening the line so that I could park my Polo.

It was only days later that I learned the sign was neither innocent nor simply mischievous; it was truly sinister. At a ministry team meeting a few days later, I asked my fellow pastors if this was some weird kids prank. I had noticed a look of deep seriousness coming over my colleague, Susan, as I described my strange experience. She said, “Jack, you must remove that ribbon and the cassette from your home immediately. Those are the signs of spiritual enemies praying for your harm. They record curses on those tapes and place them at the houses of clergy. You must pray over every room in the Name of Jesus when you return

home today.” Yes, ma’am. Susan, I learned in that moment, was not only an Anglican pastor, but she served on the exorcism team in the Diocese of Durham.

I had been a pastor all of about 2 months when I experienced this fierce spiritual opposition. In the 16 years since, I have experienced many more moments of spiritual interference and opposition, in a variety of ways, in my life as a pastor and a Christian. When holy moments are on the horizon—baptism, ordinations, marriages, Christmas and Easter services—it’s common to find disruption, either in your outer life and circumstances, or an assault upon your thoughts.

You cannot read the Gospel of Mark—as we are doing on Sundays throughout this year—without addressing the presence of evil and the demonic. Mark’s stories disclose how pervasive the affliction of evil spirits had become in Israel. There are 13 healing stories in Mark’s Gospel; the largest number of those healings fall under the category of exorcism.

Mark wants us to see that confronting these evil spirits is a *priority* for Jesus. Jesus doesn’t aim for political change in these early days; he aims for the powers and principalities of this present darkness. And these encounters happen immediately—one of Mark’s favorite words—in Jesus’ ministry. /

So this morning I want to offer a practical theology of spiritual opposition in our lives, taking our cues from Jesus’ early exorcisms and healings. I believe there’s great significance that the calling of the first apostles happens just before these exorcisms begin. The evil spirits begin disturbing Capernaum, the apostles’ hometown, right after they answer the call of discipleship. It’s right under their feet. It becomes one of their first lessons in their apprenticeship of Jesus. If you are going to follow Jesus; if you bear his Gospel message; you will encounter opposition from the Evil One.

The Reality of Spiritual Opposition

It’s important that we make some distinctions from the outset here. Demon possession, possession by unclean or evil spirits, is **not** the same thing as suffering the affliction of sickness or disease. It’s very clear in Mark’s stories, including our story today, that there’s a

clear distinction between healing stories and exorcism stories. Attributing physical affliction in the wrong way can worsen the suffering someone endures.

Missteps await us in two directions related to our ancient Enemy. On one hand, we can dismiss the presence of Satan and demonic spirits as a primitive idea. In our technological and therapeutic world, our culture would dismiss possession as a psychological condition. Good and faithful exorcists are highly trained to discern the difference between a psychological condition and an instance of spiritual possession. In many cases they include faithful Christian therapists and psychologists; in other, rarer instances, they proceed with the prayers and rites of spiritual deliverance.

It's really a dark mystery exactly how demonic possession happens, so I won't attempt to explain the ins and outs of how this transpires. I do want to make a distinction between outright demonic possession and patterns of sin. Where possession occurs, a person or a group have deliberately pursued and welcomed dark powers for their own benefit. I have noticed that tarot cards and new age spiritualities have increased in popularity. They are more mainstream than fringe activities. These are not innocent activities; they are dangerous. What matters most here is that we don't follow the foolishness of the modern world: believing that the Devil doesn't exist. That's the first misstep.

On the other hand, we can make the misstep of giving the devil *more* emphasis than he is due. One can make the mistake of attributing *everything* that is difficult in life to the evil forces of Satan. I do believe that our Enemy can use things such as illness or sleeplessness to disrupt our inner life. But every headache isn't a spiritual attack. Our bodies are weak. It may also be one's *own* fault for burning the candle at both ends. You may not be sleeping well because you're drowning your eyes with blue light staring into a screen all evening. Let us not attribute spiritual assault to our own poor habits and choices. Don't blame Satan as an excuse to sidestep your own repentance.

Exorcism at Baptism (Renunciations)

In the middle of these extremes is the good sense of our church fathers, who fought spiritual enemies with great intensity, yet ordered their thinking and living in light of the Gospel.

John of Damascus offers these wise insights regarding the attack of the devil and demons on body and soul:

while the (freedom) to attack man has been granted to the demons, they have not the strength to over-master any one: for we have it in our power to receive or not to receive the attack.¹

You cannot be passively overrun by evil spirits. There's always a decision to be made, even when there is indecision (which is a decision). "We have it in our power to receive or not to receive the attack."

The greatest defense against the spiritual forces against us is the sacramental life of the Church. Choose the grace and help Christ offers with water, wine, bread, and oil. Receiving the sacraments of the Church with a humble, pure, and earnest heart—this is the best defense and preparation for the opposition we face.

The Church is wise in this regard because the first sacramental prayer a new believer receives is the prayer of deliverance in the baptism service. This is the prayer the priest speaks while making the sign of the cross on the candidate with holy oil. The oil and prayer are offered *immediately* after the candidate or their parents have renounced the world, the flesh, and the devil. The prayer of deliverance then follows:

Almighty God deliver you from the powers of darkness and evil, and lead you into the light and obedience of the kingdom of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.²

The sacraments of the Church are the continuation of the work our Lord began in Capernaum. The oil of exorcism guarding, defending, delivering sons and daughters from the power of darkness. The oil of healing restoring bodies, minds, and souls from all kinds

¹John Damascene, "An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith," in St. Hilary of Poitiers, John of Damascus, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. S. D. F. Salmond, vol. 9b, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1899), 20.

²ACNA Book of Common Prayer 2019, 164.

of sickness, disease, and affliction; preparing them for the ultimate healing of resurrection at the hour of their death. Spiritual opposition has never ceased, but spiritual power has never left the Church of God.

Opposition to Holiness

Ok, that's an extensive prologue on spiritual opposition to get to a practical, applied theology for us. What does all this mean for us in our time? How can we be faithful and find spiritual authority to resist the spiritual forces that rebel against God?

Well, we look to Jesus. And in these early episodes of Jesus' ministry I believe we have all we need to follow Jesus and proclaim his gospel. Let's distill spiritual authority to three qualities our Lord displays in his victory over evil spirits:

- Dependence on the Father's power
- Obedience with self-denial
- Vigilant prayer

Spiritual Authority over Darkness: It's Not What You Think

I'll be brief in my summary of these three qualities. Here's an important note though: Mark arranged his story so that we see Jesus' defeat of evil spirits *after* his baptism *after* he receives the Spirit's anointing *after resisting Satan's temptation* in the wilderness. Jesus faces a personal spiritual attack immediately after his baptism. Then Jesus confronts the lesser demons in power *after* he prevailed over the Prince of Demons, Satan, in the wilderness.

It's only within that sequence baptism—temptation—signs and wonders that we understand real spiritual authority. Spiritual attack comes swiftly and suddenly for those walking the way of holiness. Here's how Jesus walks faithfully in the presence of spiritual enemies.

Dependence

First of all, we see that Jesus depends on power that he receives from the Father. At the River Jordan, the Father says, “This is my Son in whom I’m well-pleased.” At the Jordan, the Father sends the Spirit to anoint Jesus with his power. Jesus does not rely on his individual strength in divine combat. He **receives** power from the eternal relationship with his Father; from the Father’s anointing with the Holy Spirit. We remember in John’s Gospel that Jesus himself said, “I do nothing of my own authority.” “Truly, truly, I say to you,” our Lord explained, “the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.”³

When Christ confronts the demons, they say to him, “We know who you are—the Holy One of God.” *The demons recognized Jesus’ holiness. In the spiritual realm, they recognized the glory and power which Jesus **received** from the Father.*

If we bear any authority against spiritual adversaries, it will not come from our own strength or passion, but the strength of our dependence on God. Remember when St Paul tried to remove a messenger of Satan sent to harass him with a thorn in the flesh. The Lord replied, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

If you want to know why strongholds persist, it’s because we run from weakness. We trust our own strength, we don’t trust the power of God in weakness.

Obedience with Self-Denial

This leads us to the second quality of Jesus’ spiritual authority: obedience in self-denial. Jesus denied himself of basic necessities in the wilderness for 40 days. Resisting Satan’s threefold temptation, our Lord leaves the wilderness, arriving in Capernaum with the victory of God. That’s why we see these stark confrontations with evil spirits. Mark shows us that Jesus carries a spiritual authority *and momentum* after enduring tremendous weakness.

³John 5.19

Spiritual authority against the kingdom of darkness doesn't come by rejecting suffering and weakness, but choosing obedience and self-denial.

This, for me, is the measure between real and false spiritual authority; between a faithful disciple and a charlatan. Charlatans want power and spectacle; the servants of Christ want obedience even when it requires great suffering and sacrifice.

Vigilant Prayer

The final quality of Jesus' spiritual authority is vigilant prayer. There is a rhythm in Jesus' active life; he does the work of his Father, he seeks desolate places to pray. His authority does not only come from a singular moment of divine power—receiving the Holy Spirit's anointing in the Jordan River. Jesus **renews** his strength, constantly seeking the presence of his Father in prayer.

If you doubt the existence of evil spirits, just increase your commitment to prayer. Try to listen for the voice of God in silence. The enemy will turn up the volume in your mind. If he can harass you with thoughts and distractions so that you become discouraged in prayer, he has achieved his goal.

The intensity of that spiritual assault in silence is a sign of the tremendous potency of prayer in the work of God. Vigilant prayer, seeking the face of God, taking shelter in the Almighty, these are habits that foster spiritual authority.

Conclusion

If we are going to withstand our spiritual adversaries, we cannot seek power as our culture esteems power. Spiritual strongholds do not fall when we come with our ego, ambition, or even our strongest spiritual passion. We will be ready for all assaults of the Enemy when we choose radical dependence, radical obedience, and vigilant prayer. This is the way of holiness, the way of spiritual authority revealed by Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns at the right hand of the Father in the communion of the Holy Spirit. Amen.