

Lesson Supplemental – Nature of Demon Possession

(Excerpts from paper authored by Danny Lee in partial fulfillment for DTS Course on World Missions, November 2017)

In Acts 19:11-20, Luke documents an occasion where a group of Jews who were not believers of Christ confronted an evil spirit in a failed attempt at exorcism. The lack of the Holy Spirit's involvement in their life allowed the evil spirit to subdue and overpower them in a manner that caused great physical wounds and humiliation. This begs the question – if they were believers and had the Holy Spirit indwelt in them, would the evil spirit still be able to overpower and subdue them?

Moreover, for a Christian who has the Holy Spirit indwelt in them, ***are they still vulnerable to demonic possession or demonic influence?***

The topic of “demon possession” can elicit a wide range of dismissive reactions, particularly in the Western world. Those who are ignorant of its reality may find the topic entertaining, thanks in large part to Hollywood movies. Those who are uneducated to its dangers may approach the topic with a careless curiosity towards experiencing the supernatural. Those who are apathetic to its presence in our modern-day culture may have simply fallen prey to normalizing evil in our life. The common thread among the range of dismissive reactions is a lack of conscious fear towards the reality of this supernatural activity.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the reality and the forms of demonic possessions. The goal is to demonstrate why Christians must adopt a conscious fear towards the nature and dangers of flirtation with the demonic, particularly as we participate in missions work in a field where demonic engagement is prevalent. For the purpose of narrowing the scope of this paper, the theological truths regarding the origins and existence of demons, including Satan, will not be argued.

Defining “Demon Possession” and its Characteristics

In our modern day culture, the term “demon possession” typically conjures up images of a foreign creature that visibly overtakes a human host through some kind of gruesome metamorphosis. Sadly, this was not what Scripture teaches regarding the reality of this supernatural phenomenon. Visible transformation is not a requisite sign of demon possession. Even the use of the word “possession” can be misleading, as it infers ownership; that the possessing spirit “owns” the possessed body. This understanding is also inaccurate.

The biblical definition of “demon possession” comes from the Greek root word for demonization, which, in its participle form, indicates control. The imagery would involve a demon or demons taking habitat in, and controlling a somewhat passive human. These demons do not own the human, they are merely intruders who have taken control due to the passive nature of the person who entertains their presence. Moreover, being possessed by demons does not always involve some form of visible supernatural manifestation of their presence. Scripture instructs us that a person who is demon possessed may simply exhibit a range of physical symptoms from mere physical impediments (Matt. 12:22-29), to physical illness (Mark 9:17-22), to having an outwardly maniacal behavior (Luke 8:26-39) that could also be characterized as a psychological disorder. Supernaturally, the ones who are possessed may not experience any physical pains at all, while they are given supernatural abilities (Acts 8:9-10; 16:16-18). Conversely, they may be tormented with supernatural strength and driven towards suicidal tendencies (Matt 8:28-34; Luke 8:26-29).

The symptoms of demon possession may be best summarized through an exposition of Mark 5:1-13. Through these passages, eight distinct symptoms of possession can be observed:

- The indwelling of an unclean spirit (v. 2)
- Possessing unusual physical strength (v. 3)
- Displaying random fits of rage (v. 4)
- Having split personality (v. 6-7)
- Resistance to spiritual matters (v. 7)
- Having supernatural knowledge (v. 7)
- Revealing an alteration of voice (v. 9)
- Displaying occult transference (v. 13)

These symptoms and the preceding Scripture references inform us that a visibly discernable supernatural presence is not a requisite symptom for a demon possessed individual. One who is demon possessed can easily be misdiagnosed with a medical condition, and its subsequent prescription will not provide true healing.

Additionally, Scripture also informs us that demon possession can vary in degrees of severity based on the degree of wickedness in the character of the demon (Matt 12:44-45), the number of demons inhabiting in the individual (Luke 8:30), or the rank of the inhabiting demon in the spiritual realm (1 Tim 4:1-3; Dan 10:9-13).

Demon possession should always be taken seriously. A milder form of possession should not be regarded with any less urgency simply because it is regarded as “mild.” Demon possession is always a dangerous phenomenon. The danger of adopting a dismissive attitude towards any form of demon possession is that it increases the likelihood of an ever-strengthening demonic influence that leads to a permanent form of demonic habitation, especially in light of our modern day consumerism and various religious sects.

In summary, Scripture is clear regarding the reality of demon possession. This reality extends beyond the narrative portrayed by the entertainment industry, which tends to downplay the dangers of this supernatural phenomenon. Demon possession is not an abstract idea. Flirtation with the demonic can lead to dire consequences. Being ignorant of this reality can leave even the faithful defenseless. Though it may be comforting to know that demons do not own their subjects, ceding control to an intruding entity would defeat the concept of ownership in any meaningful sense. The question that needs to be asked is, should Christians be concerned?

Are Christians Protected from Demon Possession?

Scripture is not explicit on whether a Christian is protected from demonic possession. Various scholars who argue against this possibility typically try to make a distinction between demonic possession and demonic influence, or simply challenge the truth of the individual’s salvation. Beyond the scholarly debate are the actual witnessing accounts from those who were exposed to this phenomenon. Among this group, Christians are not excluded.

In his work, *An Exorcist Tells His Story*, Father Gabriele Amorth, who himself has a reputation as a solid theologian, shared his insights based on over forty years of speaking with demons, and performing exorcisms. Father Amorth does not separate the victims between Christians and non-Christians, but rather, observed four distinct categories over how any individual can fall prey to demonic possession:

- Those possessed by God’s permission.
- Those who are victims of an evil spell.
- Those who harbor a grave and hardened sinful condition.
- Those who associate with evil people or places.

Among these categories of victims, Father Amorth has witnessed some to be Christians to include two of his fellow saints by God’s permission, another who was blameless in his ways but victimized by someone else’s acts of sorcery, and also various others who entertained the services of witch doctors, or normalized acts of sexual immorality in their life.

This observation that Christians are not immune can be further validated by the various testimonies in Kenneth Taylor’s collection, *Demon Experiences in Many Lands*. In this work, Taylor compiled twenty-eight cases of demonization, plus an interview with three demonology experts in an attempt to bring awareness of demonization back to the church. A few notable cases among his collection as they relate to Christians include:

- A missionary in Nigeria who assisted in casting out demons and was visited by said demons in his hut that very night.
- A Christian in India became possessed after he attended a Hindu festival inside a Hindu temple.
- A Christian in India who, out of loyalty to the Christian faith, broke another person’s idol and became possessed by the demon inside that idol.

- A Christian couple in Mexico was threatened by a demon in a possessed man and was later visited by said demon in the exact manner of the threat.
- A missionary in Bolivia encounters demons from a group who performs séances.
- A Christian in Ethiopia who was freed from demon possession, was repossessed again due to his loose living lifestyle.
- A Zealous Christian in Laos who challenged a Buddhist monk was cursed by the monk, consequently, became possessed by an evil spirit who played tricks on her mind.
- Strange experiences in Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer's classroom at Dallas Theological Seminary when they were studying the topic of demonology.

It is clear from the experiences of Father Amorth and the collection of case studies by Taylor that Christians are equally vulnerable to both demonic possessions and having demons in their presence. Demons may be afraid of Christ, but they are not afraid of Christians. This understanding can be further validated by the writings of some of the early Church Fathers, to include Cyprian, Origen, and Hermas, who clearly holds the position that Christians can be controlled and inhabited by a demon.

What Can Christians Do to Protect Themselves?

Many works presented by many authors identifies the Scripture's role through prayer in overcoming demon possession in Christians and in others. This includes some of the authors mentioned in this paper. This truth will not be challenged or argued. However, in this writer's view, if Christians can be possessed by the works of another through acts of sorcery, there are no protections against this event, only remedy. If a Christian can innocently walk through a Hindu temple and bring a demon into his life, again, there are no protections against this event, only remedy. Christians would be better served by adopting a fearful reverence for this reality that we are not completely immune from demon possession.

Adopting this fearful reverence means to be well educated in understanding the boundaries for this supernatural occurrence. This would include not only a firm understanding of Scripture and the role of prayer on this topic, but also having a practical means towards remedy. A good template for practical steps towards remedy for demon possession could include the following rephrased summary of steps offered by Clinton E. Arnold:

1. Give Attention to the area that has brought the demon into your life.
2. Determine to resist the demon by revisiting your identity in Christ.
3. Directly addressing the areas where the demons are attacking.
4. If necessary, deal directly and firmly with the demonic spirit.
5. Work on our spiritual foundation to Christ to reduce spiritual vulnerability.
6. Pray and solicit prayer support.
7. Expect Christ to give victory.

Impact on Missions / Final Thoughts

Christians are called to missions. This much is certain (Matt. 28:19-20). The question is not so much over whether Christians should participate with God in missions work, but rather, whether a Christian is properly prepared to participate with God in missions work. In Taylor's compilation of case studies, demonic activities were experienced in regions all over the world. It is in these same exact regions where the world mission field exists.

In many regions of the world – some more so than others, proclaiming the gospel of Christ in missions work will include exposure to the demonic. When a Christian opt to go to a land where demonic activities are prevalent for the purpose of missions, and they are ill-equip or ill-informed about the reality of demon possession, they put themselves at risk of adopting a demon into their lives. Furthermore, though certain regions are known to be hotbeds of demonic activities, demons often do not openly make themselves known. Those demons that do exposed themselves do not promote themselves to be harmful entities while they invite Christians to welcome their company. As a Christian prepares for missions work, adopting and securing a firm fearful reverence for the dangers of demonic activity should be part of the preparation curriculum. This includes not only recognizing the reality that demon possession can occur upon all individuals, but also the remedy steps should the demonic is experienced.

Conclusion

Demons are real, and demonic experiences are not to be taken dismissively. For Christians, particularly those who are actively and obediently engaged in the Great Commission work in missions, recognizing this reality and understanding the boundaries of demonic activities is a lifesaving necessity. Whether at home or abroad, Christians would be wise to adopt a fearful reverence for the dangers of the demonic and take any necessary steps to avoid entertaining the presence of demons in their life.

Reflection and Devotionals

World views greatly affect the extent to which a person (will) believe that spiritual beings are affecting persons or events.

1. What is your current world view on spiritual warfare? On demonic influence? On demonic possession?
2. Read Job 1-2. How would you explain what happened to Job if you didn't know about the events in heaven (i.e.. if you were Job's three friends)?
3. Read Romans 6-7. How do you distinguish between tensions resulting from spiritual maturity (sanctification) and that of spiritual warfare or spiritual influence?
4. How would you distinguish between spiritual influence and mental disorder?
5. Evaluate your life habits and see if you may have inadvertently welcomed the influence of mild demons in your life. Take this action through prayer and seek the Holy Spirit's leading for protection or for the removal of such influence in your life.

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