

The Religious Spirit in the Workplace

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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

As believers begin to express the life of Christ in their work lives, they need to be aware of another set of Satan's deceptions, namely, the religious spirit and spiritual strongholds. Though this is a new concept in the Faith at Work category, we need to be aware of them so we are not hindered from walking in power and freedom in our workplace calling. The workplace is the last place Satan wants to see Jesus. The business sector has a huge capacity to influence every sphere of society, so it would make sense that the enemy would do everything in his power to keep that from happening.

Dr. Peter Wagner defines the religious spirit as "an agent of Satan assigned to prevent change and maintain the status quo by using religious devices."¹ The religious spirit seeks to distort a genuine move of God through deception, control and manipulation. This spirit operates out of old religious structures and attempts to maintain the status quo, favoring tradition over a genuine, intimate relationship with God. It influences believers to live the Christian life based on works instead of grace. Similar to the Greek way of thinking, the religious spirit depends on human effort to acquire spiritual knowledge and favor from God. Dr. Wagner explains that the religious spirit's primary strategy is as follows:

The spirit of religion's primary strategy here is to promote the idea that belonging to a Christian church or doing religious things is what saves you. It succeeds if it can, for example, persuade Catholics to think that they can be saved by lighting candles to Mary, or Baptists to think that they can be saved by going to church every Sunday and by carrying a Bible, or Lutherans to think they are saved if they have been baptized and confirmed. . . . It does not allow believers to move on to receive the filling of the Holy Spirit or freedom in Christ, or to enter into God's full destiny for their lives. Paul specifically warns that the devil, by his craftiness, can corrupt *minds* and keep them from "the simplicity that is in Christ" (2 Cor. 11:3).²

In the years before the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther's greatest challenge was to root out the religious spirit. He was told by his religious teachers that there were stringent requirements for receiving the favor of God. "Remember Martin, just to pray by yourself is not enough. The church has to pray for you too. Even when the priest has asked that you be forgiven, God will not listen unless you do good works. The more gifts you give to the church and to the poor, the more trips you make

to Rome and Jerusalem, the more pleasures you give up, the better will be your chances for heaven. The best and safest way to do all this, and the one that is most God pleasing, is to give up everything and become a monk."³ The essence of Martin Luther's struggle to win God's favor still resides in many a Christian worker.

We must realize that we are not dealing with flesh and blood when we deal with the religious spirit. The religious spirit deceives believers into thinking that the only way to get God's approval is through works. It nullifies the importance of faith and grace that has been given to them through the work of the Cross.

The Religious Spirit in the New Testament

In the New Testament, the Galatians started their Christian life simply by believing and having faith in God. However, somewhere along the road, they were influenced to live their lives by focusing on rules and regulations and to live according to their own human effort. Read the apostle Paul's words as he confronted the believers in Galatia about the effect of the religious spirit on their lives:

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit *by observing the law*, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by *human effort*? Have you suffered so much for nothing-if it really was for nothing? Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you *believe* what you heard? (Gal. 3:1-5, emphasis added).

Living according to rules and regulations and by our own human efforts is a trap set by the religious spirit that we can all fall into. However, it is not the abundant life that Jesus promised (see John 10:10). In Galatians 2:20-21, Paul describes how we should live our lives: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, *I live by faith in the Son of God*, who loved me and gave himself for me. *I do not set aside the grace of God*, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!" (emphasis added).

In the Gospel of Matthew, we also read about a rich young ruler who was prevented from making a commitment to the one true God because of the religious spirit. Although he considered himself religious because he followed the laws, he had an idol in his life that prevented him from making a total or "sold-out" commitment to Jesus.

Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?"

"Why do you ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied. "There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments."

"Which ones?" the man inquired.

Jesus replied, "'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother,' and 'love your neighbor as yourself.'"

"All these I have kept," the young man said. "What do I still lack?"

Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth (Matt. 19:16-22).

The rich young ruler wanted to gain God's approval on his own terms by fulfilling the law. However, Jesus cut through the religious spirit by speaking to the heart of his issue.

When the Early Church expanded its leadership, it commissioned Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, to active ministry. "The word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people" (Acts 6:7-8). Notice how Stephen began to make an impact on his city-by performing signs and wonders. However, his work also stirred up the religious spirit, and Stephen became the first person martyred for his faith.

The Religious Spirit in the Workplace

The religious spirit discourages a genuine move of God and will thwart the activity of God under the banner of religious righteousness and dogma. It also motivates believers to live out their faith in legalistic and rigid ways. We need to be aware of how this happens in a workplace calling. Here are some characteristics of how the religious spirit manifests itself in believers in workplace situations:

- They may have difficulty praying and applying God's promises to everyday work encounters.
- They may believe that biblical truths apply only to their personal lives, families and churches, not to their jobs.
- They may focus on evangelizing coworkers, but fail to do their work with excellence.
- They may give greater priority to religious activity and events than to relationships with others at work.
- They maintain a "we" or "I" versus "them" attitude when relating to non-Christians in the workplace.
- They may refuse to join a workplace prayer group or Bible study because they feel that it is trying to replace the role of a particular local church. They don't see a need for such activity in the workplace. They feel the need to compartmentalize faith activities to their local church alone.
- They discount the idea that Christianity could transform a workplace, city or nation as "overzealous," "naïve" or even doctrinally wrong.

Religious Spirit Self-Assessment

- o You believe your faith life should remain separate from your work life.
- o You're motivated to share Christ out of duty.
- o You can't relate to non-believers because you're afraid of rejection.
- o You display a "better than they are" attitude toward nonbelievers.
- o You are viewed by others as dogmatic and rigid (not simply a person of conviction).
- o You feel compelled to be involved in religious activity and you can't relax in your faith.
- o You often feel guilty (not the same as the conviction of the Holy Spirit) for not sharing Christ with others.
- o You often engage in religious debate.
- o You need a packaged presentation in order to share the gospel.
- o When talking about spiritual matters to strangers, you tend to talk about your church or ask about their church involvement versus talking about Jesus and their personal relationship with God.
- o You have a difficult time socializing, loving or accepting those who do not believe the way you do.
- o You are motivated by your church leadership out of guilt and Christian duty instead of loving devotion to Christ.
- o You discourage change, preferring religious tradition.
- o You believe that the ministry gifts listed in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 and Ephesians 4:11 are no longer applicable today; or, if you believe they are valid, you think that they are for religious professionals, not for you.
- o You form relationships for the purpose of achieving a religious activity rather than developing community from which Christ-like ministry flows naturally.
- o Your loyalty to denominational structures is greater than your commitment to the kingdom of God and the entire Body of Christ.
- o You view government as an "evil empire" from which we must separate instead of influence for good.
- o You don't see the need to work with other Christian ministry groups in a common effort; you usually feel that your way is the primary way and everyone should join your endeavor so as to not compromise your belief or doctrine.

Spiritual Strongholds

The apostle Paul enlists the word "stronghold" to define the spiritual fortresses where Satan and his legions go for protection. These fortresses exist in the thought-patterns and ideas that govern individuals in their homes, workplaces and churches, as well as in communities and nations. Before victory can be claimed, these strongholds must be pulled down. Only then can the mighty weapons of the Word and the Spirit effectively plunder Satan's house. As Paul states,

The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ (2 Cor. 10:4-5).

Here is an example of how a stronghold can develop and affect someone's working life. "Jerry" had grown up with a father who was successful and a workaholic. Although Jerry lacked for nothing materially, he felt a lack of closeness to his parents and had difficulty sharing his feelings with others as an adult. When Jerry was still in his early teens, his father died very suddenly. His large family was left with little support, and insecurity and fear became the dominating factors in the young man's life.

Vowing to himself that he would never again suffer financial need, Jerry worked hard at his business in his adult life, putting stress on many personal and business relationships. He became very successful.

His relationship with God was seen as a model among his peers, but when examined closer, there was something that just wasn't right. He often displayed anger in stressful situations and he would shame his employees into correcting their behaviors. Jerry had little accountability beyond his clients. A pattern began to emerge that motivated Jerry to place restrictions on those around him when they failed in the financial area. Finally, Jerry's marriage disintegrated and some major crises in his business led to financial difficulties.

However, through the counsel of some trusted friends who had an understanding of spiritual strongholds, Jerry came to realize that underneath some of these symptoms, a religious stronghold of insecurity and fear had been established. To reduce his anxiety level, Jerry (and his father and grandfather before him) had worked hard to control people and circumstances.

As the Holy Spirit convicted him of sins he had committed against people in his life, Jerry sought forgiveness and made restitution. His priorities shifted to God and family first, followed by close friends and business. God began to show Jerry that he could have true intimacy with God and others when these underlying strongholds were removed. Jerry became a new person, and for the first time he experienced a degree of intimacy and freedom in his walk with God. Today, Jerry sees the hand of God restoring all aspects of his life and can testify to God's miraculous hand in many of his everyday experiences in life and work.

I am pleased to tell you that I am Jerry. It is from first-hand experience that I can discuss the effect of spiritual strongholds that can plague our personal lives and, inevitably, our work lives.

Generational Strongholds

By reading between the lines in the first two chapters of Genesis, as well as elsewhere in the Bible, we find that God created us with seven needs: (1) dignity, (2) authority, (3) blessing and provision, (4) security, (5) purpose and meaning, (6)

freedom and boundaries, and (7) love and companionship. Whenever we seek to meet one or more of these basic needs outside God's design, we have set the stage for the development of a generational stronghold.⁴

God wants to release the full measure of His love in our lives, so that we no longer need to operate out of old strongholds. In Ephesians 3:16-18, Paul prayed that we would experience this fullness:

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

When I came into a greater understanding of the operation of spiritual strongholds, I did a thorough study of my family history. I interviewed family members to see what I could learn about the way my father and grandfather related to God and their families. I studied their work habits. I found that each of us had the same symptoms:

- a need for recognition from performance (civic projects, sports, business success)
- an emphasis on building financial security (we were workaholics)
- a lack of emotional intimacy
- a works-based relationship toward God
- a tendency to over-control people and circumstances

This was an amazing discovery for me. For the first time, I realized this stronghold had affected three generations of my family. I was being given the opportunity to break this generational stronghold through the power of Christ so that it would not get passed down any further.

Strongholds work at the subconscious level and are not easily recognized until a major crisis in a person's life forces him or her to look deeper at the root causes of the problem. I learned that one root of the religious spirit is control. Man does not want to give up control over his life, so he creates controlled systems designed to make him feel acceptable by God. Again, this is a works-based attempt to gain God's favor, which invalidates the work of the Cross. The sequence of how these strongholds develop in an individual is as follows:

1. Satanic-inspired *thoughts* are introduced into the person's mind.
2. The individual entertains these thoughts, which bring out *emotions*.
3. Giving in to these emotions eventually leads the person to take some sort of *action*.
4. Continual participation in the action causes the individual to develop a *habit*.
5. As the habit develops, a *stronghold* is built.⁵

Imagine being born with a pair of sunglasses on. You would grow up looking at the world through those sunglasses. You would never know that you could see better without the sunglasses unless someone revealed this to you. Now imagine taking those glasses off for the first time and seeing the inside of a room much brighter and clearer. Strongholds operate this way. They masquerade as if they are part of our personality, and we accept them for our whole life. However, the truth is that Jesus wants to totally renew our minds and hearts. Strongholds keep us from getting restored.

Renouncing the Religious Spirit and Spiritual Strongholds

Nearly all of us struggle to some degree with a religious spirit and spiritual strongholds. But God does not want us to continue to be ruled by them or to impose them upon anyone else. If you recognize that you are operating under the influence of a religious spirit or a stronghold, renounce it in prayer, repent for what you've done, ask God's forgiveness and the forgiveness of others, and resist the return of the spirit or stronghold. Receive God's power to forsake it, and ask Him to make you sensitive to the times when you are tempted to act in a wrong spirit. Move into freedom by asking God to fill you afresh with the power of His Holy Spirit.

When you encounter a person who is influenced by a religious spirit or a stronghold, let your first response be prayer. Ask God for wisdom and love and for Him to set the person free. If the person has offended you, forgive him or her and don't let that person's actions or attitudes keep a grip on you. Let your life be based on a genuine faith rooted in Jesus' life and example.

Most of all, continually become transformed by the renewing of your mind, as we are told to do in Romans 12:2. This is your best insurance against any spiritual influences that do not come from God. As you develop a strong relationship with God through the power of His Spirit, not only will you become empowered to bring the Kingdom to those around you at work, but also you will be able to resist Satan's sabotage.

How About You?

1. Do you see ways in which the religious spirit has affected your life? Give some examples.
2. If you find that you have allowed the religious spirit to operate in your life, you will want to renounce this through a prayer of repentance along the lines of the following prayer:

Father, I hereby renounce the spirit of religion that I have allowed to operate in my life. In the name of Jesus, I accept the grace that you have bestowed on my life through the presence and power of Jesus Christ in my life and through his shed blood on the cross. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.