

James Goll: We Need to Expose the Religious and Political Spirit

The religious and political spirits are alive and well in the world today. We see their influence, but we Christians often cannot discern what is really going on. We cast blame right and left on a human level, failing to expose the demonic influences around us. We may even be part of the problem. Yet with the Spirit of Jesus Christ living inside us, we have both a responsibility to address these demonic influences and the ability to do so. Jesus is still in the captive-freeing business today, right where you live.

It was no surprise when Jesus stood up in His hometown synagogue on the Sabbath day to read the above passage from the prophet Isaiah—but nobody expected Him to make it personal: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me ...” (Luke 4:18a).

Isaiah had prophesied about a Messiah who was to come in the distant future. Now, here was Jesus, essentially announcing to the dumbstruck congregation, “I am that Messiah.” In case they didn’t quite understand, He added, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21b).

Using Isaiah’s words, He broadcast His Messianic job description. The townspeople must have wondered what He was talking about. What did He mean, “deliverance for the captives,” “recovery of sight to the blind,” and “set at liberty those who are oppressed”? What kind of bondage did He intend to break? “Recovery of sight” sounded like more than physical healing for blind people. And was this some kind of a political statement? Anyway, wasn’t this just that guy Jesus, the son of Joseph the local carpenter?

To the people, it didn’t make any sense.

Discernment and Deliverance

Only with God-given discernment can we tell apart the good and evil influences that surround us. We often come up against what I call “demonic influences”. This influence is a spiritual force that twists and taints and pollutes God’s ways. It is like a spider web, and people get stuck in it. Writhing in their captivity, they act out of a “web mentality”.

As passionate believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, we are called to be “worshippers of God and deliverers of men.” As we worship God and surrender ourselves to Him, He meets us with freedom. As we ask the Holy Spirit to cast His light on the hindrances that keep us from receiving and discerning His revelation and acting upon it, He answers our prayers and sets us free, and we are empowered to give away what we have received.

Let us now look at two of the major demonic influences working in the world today and how to counteract them.

The Religious Spirit

One of the greatest hindrances you will encounter in your Christian walk is “the religious spirit.” Religious spirits endeavor to interfere with the free flow of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers. They can be hard to discern precisely because they are religious; they are pious, even hyper-spiritual. Their influence can pervade a person’s life and church like yeast pervades a lump of dough. That’s why Jesus said, “‘Take heed and beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees’” (Matt. 16:6b).

In New Testament times, the Pharisees and Sadducees were the professional religionists. The Pharisees were the watchdogs of religious purity, chastising any Jewish person who transgressed even slightly, promoting the perfectionistic performance of their strict interpretation of the requirements

of the law of Moses. The Pharisees and Sadducees did not agree with each other in the details of what constituted true religion, and they competed with each other in zeal. Each was “having a form of godliness, but denying its power.” (2 Timothy 3:5a).

Generally, the religious spirit promotes a works-based or performance-based lifestyle. Although the cross of Jesus has made performance-based religion a thing of the past, the religious spirit likes to keep it alive so that people will labor under a triple burden of guilt, fear and pride. Every person on earth rightfully seeks a sense of acceptance, but the religious spirit keeps the ultimate acceptance—God’s—just out of reach.

Remember, the motivation of a religious spirit demands that you and I need to earn brownie points with God. By His death and resurrection, Christ Jesus has secured our acceptance with the Father once and for all as we place our faith in Him.

Yet when we live and breathe in an environment tainted by the religious spirit, it is difficult for us to discern that we’re being affected by that demonic influence. It can be easier to spot the religious spirit in someone else, and to judge them, than it is to recognize it in ourselves. As quick as I may be to perceive a religious spirit coming at me through another person, I am not as quick to recognize the same spirit when I look in the mirror.

Be discerning though and look out for five telltale attitudes: 1) legalism, 2) criticism, 3) debate, 4) opinion, and 5) judgment. Let’s apply that measure to ourselves and take the log out of our own eyes instead of pointing out the splinters in others’ eyes. (See, for example, Matt. 7:4-5.)

Watch out for the big three earmarks of the religious spirit: 1) guilt, 2) fear and 3) pride. A proud demeanor often masks the fearful, insecure soul of someone who is trying

desperately to make the grade. Yet looking for security within oneself just perpetuates the anxiety, because self-centered security is such a poor substitute for God-centered security.

In contrast, we need God's grace to shine where we are weak. That will make more of an impact for the kingdom than my perfectionism ever would, and it may result in deliverance for other people, too (see 2 Cor. 12:9).

The Political Spirit

The religious spirit is often allied with the political spirit. This coalition has occurred in every age and in every culture. It can be seen in the case of the Pharisees, who joined with political forces to achieve their purpose of discrediting and eliminating Jesus. Look what happened even at the start of Jesus' ministry: "Then the Pharisees went out and immediately took counsel with the Herodians against Him, how to kill Him" (Mark 3:6). Three years later, when Jesus was arrested and taken into custody, He was passed back and forth between the religious and political leaders.

Jesus understood what was happening, but He did not resist, choosing to let the evil seem to prevail because God's greater purposes were at work for the salvation of the world. "He gave [Herod] no answer. The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. Then Herod with his soldiers despised Him, and mocked Him" (Luke 23:9–11a). Jesus' disciples did not understand what was going on; to them, the situation seemed like a disaster, and they did not discern the demonic forces at play. When a political spirit is running the show, you cannot recognize its hidden agendas with your natural senses. They have to be spiritually discerned.

The political spirit is an invisible demonic mastermind that strategizes ways to thwart God's plans; to achieve its corrupt goals, it enters into alliances with religious spirits and institutions often backed by mammon. The political spirit will

always try to buy off, corrupt, manipulate and dominate leaders and groups of people. It mesmerizes people into false loyalties while issuing demands of uniformity through the pressures of fear, shame and control.

In addition to the circumstances surrounding Jesus's arrest and crucifixion, we see numerous examples throughout history of the coalition of the political spirit and the religious spirit. We can discern the same influences today in many levels of conflict, from wars of political rhetoric to terrorist activities.

While we should fulfill our civic responsibilities and keep a level head while participating in our representative government, the best thing we can do is to pray and intercede in order to break the power of the demonic political spirit that causes divisions, animosity and strife. "For our fight is not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, and against spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12).

Reaching for a Higher Realm

Being able to identify elusive demonic influences is only the beginning. What will you do with what you discern? Should you become some kind of whistle-blower? And how can you resist the pull of evil yourself while helping to deliver others from deception?

Walking in the "opposite spirit" combats all demonic influences, including the religious and the political spirit. Since walking in the opposite spirit entails walking closely with the Spirit of Jesus, you can count on Him to show you the way. As you advance along this way, the demonic spirits of this world will have less in common with you, to the degree that you can eventually say, as Jesus did, "The ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over Me" (John 14:30).

May the Holy Spirit grant light to each of us. May we not point the finger in judgment, but rather let the Holy Spirit clean house in our own lives so we can exercise clear discernment. May the Spirit bring us into such a thorough understanding of the ways of God that we will have nothing in common with the powers of darkness. Yes, the Lord Himself is our refuge from all such demonic influences (see Ps. 91:9–10, 14–15).

Prayer of a Discerning Heart

Heavenly Father, in Jesus' name, as an ambassador of Christ, I believe the Holy Spirit has anointed me to be a worshipper of God and a deliverer of men. Anoint me with a higher level of discernment so I can know the motivation of the spirit behind an activity. By the grace of God, I believe that I am receiving an increase of Your revelatory ways in my life. For Your kingdom's sake, amen!