

The Enemies

Preparing for spiritual formation

“The devil does not sleep, nor is the flesh yet dead; therefore, you must never cease your preparation for battle, because on the right and on the left are enemies who never rest.”

So writes Thomas a' Kempis, the author of “The Imitation of Christ.” He has in mind the spiritual battle that we are engaged in every moment of every day. We have an enemy who is like a roaring lion who is looking to utterly devour us (1 Peter 5:8). Brother Thomas wants us to be aware, awake and prepared for anything at any time. It is not that we should be constantly paranoid or even overly occupied with thoughts of the enemy and his plan to destroy; the point is, as Brother Thomas says, do not sleep. However, more important is to notice Thomas' use of the plural when he refers to “enemies.” We often think in terms of an enemy when it comes to spiritual battle, but there are enemies which need to be identified and prepared for as we stay alert.

The Apostle Paul also points us to the plurality of the enemies we face in his letter to the Ephesians, “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the *rulers*, against the *authorities*, against the cosmic *powers* over this present darkness, against the spiritual *forces* of evil in the heavenly places.” (Ephesians 6:12, italics mine)

Spiritual battle is never more intense than when we become serious about spiritual formation. Therefore it is vitally important to identify the enemies which we could face each day and prepare for battle. If all we did was see the devil (noun) as our enemy, his strategy will work. He would love for us to keep him and him alone as our recognized enemy. He wants us to overlook the arsenal (enemies) overflowing from his quiver. Some of these fiery darts (Ephesians 6:16) are overlooked because they are so common. They appear to be either benign or neutral in spiritual battle when actually they are as poisonous as they come to the soul.

When America embarked on war with Iraq there was no doubt who the primary enemy was, Sadaam Hussein. Can you imagine how ill-prepared we would have been if we also did not identify, plan for, prepare for and create strategy against the arsenal that was at his disposal or possible because of Iraq's location? One enemy that was anticipated was wind storms. Their ferocious desert storms will render anyone incapacitated who is not prepared to ride it out or keep moving through it. Another enemy we readied our troops against was mustard gas. It was believed that mustard gas was in Sadaam's arsenal, so preparation was necessary.

Setting spiritual formation as the priority of your life will surely escort you to the front lines of war (Ephesians 6:10-20). Although the devil is our primary enemy, we need to become wise like serpents (Matthew 10:16) in order to win the battle and fight the good fight (2 Timothy 4:7). The forces and powers that Satan will use to defeat and destroy us are numerous. However, spiritual formation seems to bring out some special tools from the enemy's toolbox. Some of the archenemies of spiritual formation are: noise, busy-ness and complication. I addressed noise in another musing, and I intend to share some thoughts on the complicated life in a later writing. My musings in this article are around busy-ness.

Before I share my thoughts on busy-ness, it may be helpful if I spent a little time explaining what is meant by the little phrase “spiritual formation.” It is pretty clear to me what God’s intention is for His kids. He is intending something for you, did you know that? He did not save you just to get you to heaven—we would all probably be there by now if this were true. He did not save you to let you remain as you are, our grandparents Adam and Eve made sure of this. No, He has a plan for us and Paul seems to capture His plan in Romans 8:29 about as clearly and concisely as any other place in the Scriptures, “*For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.*” (Romans 8:29)

God’s aim in showering you in His grace and mercy is to conform you into the image of His Son. He really loves His Son (Matthew 3:17) and He wants His adopted kids (Romans 8:15, Ephesians 1:5) to be just like Him. Paul writes a lot about this plan of God. Read what he wrote to the Corinthian church, “*Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit*” (2 Corinthians 3:17-18). Just to show that he really meant business, Paul wrote the word “transformed.” This word is where we get our English word “metamorphosis.” Apparently the way God sees it is that He saves us as caterpillars and will not be satisfied until we are butterflies.

I have to admit, though, that my favorite text which graphically illustrates this plan of God is found in Paul’s writing to the Galatians, “... *my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you ...*” (Galatians 4:19) Carole Burnett once said that the pain of childbirth was like pulling your bottom lip up and over your head. That is not the kind of pain I go looking for, but I do wish and pray that I will one day want to be like Jesus that intensely and also want it for you in the same way.

Busy-ness is a mortal enemy to spiritual formation. When we are busy we leave little time for God’s plan. And a funny thing happens when we are busy, we become busy on the inside. Vital to spiritual formation is time and calm. As Americans, we do not “do” calm very well and we like to fill time with as much activity as we can. Oh, we often complain that we are too busy and lament not having enough time, but our schedules and choices betray us and expose reality.

Do you ever wonder why we keep so busy? Maybe it is because our choices force us to stay busy. Bigger houses, more toys, the latest gadgets and just plain keeping up with the Joneses requires a lot of time—at least if you want to do it right. Maybe it is owing to us not wanting to “waste time” and desiring to be productive with our time. If spiritual formation does not really matter much, it will feel like wasting time. After all, what matters is soccer games, baseball games, karate lessons, shopping, eating out and the like, right? Being involved in church activities and serving on various ministry committees matters, right? Or do you think that maybe busy-ness lets us avoid the work and pain of looking into our souls and looking squarely at God? The truth is that getting a caterpillar ready for flight involves much work and can be quite painful. Probably all of these explanations and many others contain more truth than we would like to admit.

All of this makes me think of Mary and Martha. You can read about these sisters in Luke 10:38-42, but what draws my attention to them now is what Jesus said to Martha when she complained that her sister was not busy enough. Martha's complaint, on the surface, seems justifiable. Martha was "serving" and her intention was, so it seems, to make sure Jesus was well cared for while He was in their home. Mary on the other hand, appearing to be lazy and wasting time, just sat with Jesus.

After asking Jesus to tell her sister to get off her rump and help (Luke 10:40, interpretation mine ☺), Martha must have been shocked to hear Jesus' response. He said, "*Martha, dear Martha, you're fussing far too much and getting yourself worked up over nothing. One thing only is essential, and Mary has chosen it—it's the main course, and won't be taken from her.*" (Luke 10:41-42, *The Message*).

With those words Jesus exposed the drive of Martha for what it was and embraced the spirit of Mary for what it was. Martha was busy on the outside and busy on the inside. Peterson, in *The Message*, characterizes Martha as "*fussing far too much and getting worked up.*" What he beautifully puts into our vernacular comes from two Greek words which can also be translated "anxious" and "troubled"—busy on the inside and busy on the outside.

I cannot leave Martha without mentioning one more thing. I find it very intriguing that we are told that Martha was "distracted with much *servicing*" (Luke 10:40). The word translated "serving" is where we get our word "deacon." A deacon is one who serves, and the service rendered by a deacon is highly extolled in the Bible. Jesus even told us that the greatest shall be a servant (Matthew 23:11). Being a deaconess, however, when applied to Martha is negative and not elevated as a Christ-like virtue. As a matter of fact, this is the only place in the New Testament where I could find this word being used in a negative context. Why?

That answer is found in the same verse, her serving "distracted" her. Here is a word which, in its original Greek form, means to be drawn in different ways at the same time. When you are drawn in different ways at the same time, even doing good service, then good service morphs into the enemy—busy-ness. The lesson here is one we in the church need to learn in the worst way. Staying busy in the church is not necessarily God-honoring. This is especially true when that busy-ness is keeping us from or distracting us from sitting at the feet of Jesus. As a pastor, I would rather have few programs and events in the church and know that we are spending our energy and time in spiritual formation—individually and with each other sitting at the feet of Jesus, seeking to be like Jesus and aching for Him to be formed in us.

Mary, though, in spite of the dirty looks and deep sighs which must have been apparent from her sister, resisted the draw and pressure of busy-ness. How could she do that? It is pretty simple, isn't it? She wanted Jesus. She wanted to be with Jesus, sit at His feet and interact with Him. After all, who knew how long He was going to stay at their home? It makes good sense to me. If Jesus came to my house I would hope that I would want to spend every moment I could with Him. Jesus not only IS at my house, He is with me all the time. Oh Lord, give me Mary's heart!

Mary's heart is worth emulating. Those who take spiritual formation seriously want a heart like Mary's. Do you want to have Jesus formed in you? Then become very familiar with His feet,

say no to busy-ness and accept the weird stares and misunderstandings from those around you.
Fight for a schedule that is not packed and which has Jesus in it regularly and consistently.
Finally pray that God would grant you a willing heart to sustain you as you seek Him.