

Passivity and Its Dangers

The Spiritual Man, Volume III, Part 9, Chapter 2

By Watchman Nee

Not every "spiritual manifestation" is from God. For this reason the apostle John warned, "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God . . ." (1 John 4:1). Many Christians today, indiscriminately embrace all spirit manifestations as though the phenomenon itself was proof of God's involvement. But what is even more injurious is that they teach other believers to fulfill a dangerous condition known as "passivity," a mediumistic principle that opens the door for demonic activity and leads to spiritual bondage. It is my belief that the following chapter from Nee's book *The Spiritual Man* is an important tool in equipping believers to try the spirits. I wish that everyone would read it!--
George Davis

"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Hosea 4-6) is certainly applicable to our day. Christians nowadays generally are lacking in two kinds of knowledge: (1) a knowledge of the conditions by which evil spirits work; and (2) a knowledge of the principle of spiritual life. Ignorance here is furnishing Satan and his evil spirits an incredible advantage and is inflicting enormous harm on the church of God. What grieves our hearts is that, even as folly is prevailing, Christians continue to boast of their familiarity with the Bible and of the abundance of their experience. They do not realize that their much so-called knowledge is mere human reasoning, quite devoid of usefulness. Humility before the Lord and eagerness in seeking the revelation of God's truths are almost unknown. While boasting in the richness of their knowledge, they themselves sink into the very quicksand from which they can neither extricate themselves nor rescue others. It is indeed a most dreadful scene.

The Law of Cause and Effect

For each and every thing God has created there is a law. All actions are governed by laws. Hence evil spirits also operate according to definite laws, one of which is that certain causes will produce certain effects. Now should anyone fulfil the conditions for the working of evil spirits (whether he fulfils them willingly, such as the witch, the medium, or the sorcerer-or unwittingly, such as the Christian), then he has definitely

given ground to them to work on him. Notice that the law of cause and effect is involved here. Fire scorches, water drowns: these are laws: none escapes scorching if he falls into fire, nor can any escape drowning if he jumps into water. Likewise everyone who meets the requirements for the operation of evil spirits will be harmed by them. Hence the same law of cause and effect is operative here. It pays no heed to whether one is a Christian or not; once the conditions are met, the evil spirits do not fail to act. just as a Christian cannot avoid being scorched or drowned if he falls into fire or water, so he cannot escape the danger of being hurt if he ignorantly supplies the prerequisites for the working of evil spirits. The fire scorches everything put into it; the water drowns all who are immersed in it; and evil spirits attack all who give them ground. One will not escape simply because he is a child of God. If he provides the enemy the opportunity, he will not hesitate to assault him. What, then, are the conditions for the working of the enemy? What facilitates this malevolent working? This is the crucial question. The Bible characterizes such conditions as "Place" (Eph. 4.27 ASV) or "opportunity" (RSV). It can additionally be denoted as "ground." It means any portion of empty space marked off in man for the evil spirits. This place or ground constitutes their foothold. The degree of invasion is determined by the degree of the foothold. The evil spirits will commence to penetrate into any man, be he "heathen" or Christian as soon as he has obtained a footing in him. Whatever affords the evil spirits an opportunity or a foothold by which to attack or invade may be termed as "ground." If ground is given, invasion is unavoidable. The particular cause brings in the particular effect. A Christian who yields ground to evil spirits and yet envisages himself to be beyond attack has been gravely deceived already by the enemy.

Now to put it simply, the ground or territory which the believer furnishes to the evil spirits is sin. Sin includes all the possible grounds. In retaining sin he retains as well the evil spirits that hide behind it. All sin yields territory to them. But there are two kinds of sin, one is positive and the other negative. Positive sins are those which a person commits: his hands perform bad acts, his eyes see evil scenes, his ears hear wicked voices, and his mouth speaks unclean words. These render opportunity to evil spirits in varying degree to take hold of the hands, eyes, ears and mouth of the saint. Whichever part of him sins, that is what invites the enemy to come and occupy it. If occupation stems from sinning, the child of God needs to forsake unrelentingly so as to recover the lost territory. Else the evil spirits will increase their hold gradually until the entire person is occupied. One reason why some who hitherto have accepted the fact of the co-death of the cross find it difficult to lay aside the sin which clings so closely is

because aside from the problem of the "flesh" they also have the problem of having been assaulted by supernatural evil powers.

This kind of positive sin which presents a working opportunity to the evil spirits is by and large understood by most Christians and consequently we shall not enlarge upon it. Let our attention now be focused on the second type, on negative sin. This is largely misunderstood. Since it is within the scope of the will, we shall discuss it in detail. The popular notion is that only the positive kind are sins; negative ones are not counted as such. The Bible nonetheless holds that not only all manner of unrighteousness which a man actively commits is sin but that "whoever knows what is right to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin" as well (James 4.17). The Word of God treats what man commits and what man omits both equally as sin. Sin gives footing or ground to the work of evil spirits. And besides the positive sin, the negative kind-that of omission-likewise provides ground for their work. The particular sin of omission which gives ground to the evil spirits is the believer's passivity. Disuse as well as misuse of any part of one's being is a sin in the sight of God. The Lord endows us with all sorts of abilities none of which are to be misused or go unused. For a person to cease engaging any part of his talent but to allow it to sink into inertia is to provide occasion for the devil and his army to exercise it for him. This is the ground for their sinister operations.

All Christians are aware of sin as a condition for the enemy's assault, but an innumerable number of them are unaware that passivity is also a sin and a condition for his assault. Once place is given, penetration becomes inevitable and sufferings naturally follow.

Passivity

What primarily precipitates the enemy's invasion among the "heathen" and among carnal Christians is willful sin; but "the primary cause of deception ... in surrendered believers may be condensed into one word, passivity; that is, a cessation of the active exercise of the will in control over spirit, soul and body, or either, as may be the case." The organ of volition ceases to choose and decide matters referred to it. "The word passivity simply describes the opposite condition to activity; and in the experience of the believer it means, briefly, (1) loss of self-control in the sense of the person himself controlling each, or all, of the departments of his personal being; and (2) loss of freewill in the sense of the person himself exercising his will as the guiding principle of

personal control, in harmony with the will of God." The passivity of a saint arises out of the non-use of his various talents. He has a mouth but refuses to talk because he hopes the Holy Spirit will speak through it. He has hands but will not engage them since he expects God to do it. He does not exercise any part of his person but waits for God to move him. He considers himself fully surrendered to God; so he no longer will use any element of his being. Thus he falls into an inertia which opens the way for deception and invasion.

Upon accepting the teaching of their union with God's will, Christians often develop a wrong concept of what this union signifies. They misconstrue it to mean to obey God passively. They think their will must be cancelled out and that they must become puppets. They maintain that they must not employ their own volition any more nor that their will should exercise control over any other segment of their body. They no longer choose, decide, or activate with their will. At first it appears to be a great victory, for amazingly "the 'strong-willed' person suddenly becomes passively yielding." (Penn-Lewis, WOTS, 73) He is as weak as water. He holds no opinion on any affair but obeys orders absolutely. He exercises neither mind, nor will, nor even conscience to distinguish between good and evil, for he is a person of perfect obedience. Only when he is moved does he move; a perfect condition (and an invitation too) for the enemy to come in.

By falling into this state of inaction the Christian now ceases from every activity. Indeed, he waits quietly all the time for some external force to activate him. And unless this force compels him to move he shall remain decidedly inert. If such a situation is permitted to continue this one will discover that sometimes when he knows he should act he cannot because the external force has not come upon him. Moreover, even when he wants to act he finds he is unable to do so. Without that outside power he cannot move a step. His will is suppressed and he is bound; he can move only after that alien force has come to move him.

The Believers Folly

The evil spirits take advantage of one's inactive state to accomplish their wiles, while he himself persists in esteeming such inertia as real obedience to God and perfect union with His will. He does not realize that God never demands passivity; it is the powers of darkness which have propelled him into this state. Furthermore, God wants

His own to exercise their wills actively to co-operate with Him. This is what is implied in such Scriptures verses as: "if any man's will is to do his will, he shall know. . ." (John 7.17) and "ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you." (John 15.7). God never disregards our volition.

We human beings enjoy a free will. God never encroaches on that will. While He does expect us to obey Him, He nevertheless respects our personality (note: the word "personality" as employed in this book has always had in view the person of man, not his character). He wishes us to desire what He desires. He will not usurp our desiring and reduce our volition to deathly inactivity. He needs our most positive co-operation. His pleasure is in the created one reaching his summit, that is, perfect freedom of will. In creation God ordains man to an unfettered will; in redemption He recovers that will. Since He did not create man to obey mechanically, how could He expect redeemed man to be a robot -acting under His remote control direction? The greatness of God is certainly manifested in His not requiring us to turn into wood and stone that we might be obedient. His way is to make us obey Him willingly through the working of His Spirit in our spirit. He refuses to will in place of us.

In a word, the law that governs the working of God and the working of Satan in man is exactly the same. God delights in seeing man have free will, so He creates him with such a capacity. It means that humanity has the power to choose and decide all matters concerned. Though God is the Lord of the entire universe, yet is He willing to be restricted by a non-encroachment on man's free will. He never forces man to be loyal to Him. And Satan likewise is unable to usurp any part of man without the latter's consent granted either knowingly or unknowingly. Both God and the devil require man to be persuaded before operating in him. When man "desires" good, God will accomplish it; but when he "desires" evil, the wicked spirit will fulfil it. This is what we see in the Garden of Eden.

Before regeneration man's volition was enslaved to Satan and therefore not free. But in a regenerated and overcoming Christian the volition is free and therefore able to choose what is of God. Naturally Satan will not let go, so he devises sundry ways to recapture him. He is fully cognisant that he shall never secure permission openly; hence he uses wiles to obtain the necessary consent. Now mark this well: Satan must gain the believer's permission but the latter will never yield it to Satan; the devil is therefore compelled to resort to deception in order to extract this consent from him.

The evil spirits cannot enter without the acquiescence of man's will and they can penetrate only as far as his will approves.

If the believer knows the principle of spiritual life as well as the conditions for the working of evil spirits he will not fall into such danger. It is because he is unconscious both of the advantage the adversary secures through inertia and of the necessity (in spiritual life) of an active will co-operating with God that he allows his volition to be passive. What we must remember always is that God never substitutes His will for man's. Man himself must be responsible for what he does. God does not decide for him.

If the evil spirits do not operate in some passive persons, then most likely the passivity of these individuals in fact amounts to nothing more than laziness or inactivity. Usually those who are inactive in this way (that is, without the working of the evil spirit) can become active at any time. However, if they plunge into such a passivity as to be occupied, then they will be unable to be active even if their will should desire it. Here then is the antithesis between the working of God and the working of Satan. Though God wants man to be yielded completely to Him, He also wants him to use every talent he possesses in co-operation with the Holy Spirit. Satan, on the other hand, demands total cessation of man's will and actions that his evil spirits may operate in his stead. The contrast is truly sobering: God calls man to choose actively, consciously and willingly to do His will so that his spirit, soul, and body may be free; Satan coerces him to be his passive slave and captive: God appoints man to be autonomous, free to be his own master; Satan forces man to be his puppet, a marionette altogether manipulated by him: God never requires man to cease his activities before He can work; Satan bids man to be utterly passive and inactive: God asks man to work together with Him consciously; Satan charges man to obey him passively. It is true that God does require man to cease from his every sinful activity without which he cannot co-operate with the Holy Spirit; but Satan compels him to cease all his activities, including the functioning of his soul, so that his minions can act in place of man. Man is thus reduced to a mere piece of machinery without any conscious responsibility.

It is a terrible circumstance that Christians do not know the fact of God's living in them and the principle of His working in them. They think He wants them to be like pawns on a chessboard that He may maneuver them around as He pleases. They feel they must be absolutely passive, possessing no power to choose or decide, but just to be

managed insensibly by God. They forget that when God first created man He made him with a free will. God obviously is not pleased if man wills things other than Himself, but neither is He pleased if man were to obey Him mechanically and unconsciously. He is satisfied when a person wills what He wills, and never wants him to become a will-less person. Many matters must be executed by believers themselves; God will not do these for them. It is taught that we must hand everything over to God and let Him do it instead of us-that we must not lift our hands nor move our feet that we must be so surrendered to the indwelling Holy Spirit that He can arrange everything in lieu of ourselves-that we must let God move us. We grant there is some truth in such teaching but the error therein mixed is perhaps more potent than is the truth. (We shall speak more on this point in the next chapter.)

The Dangers

A Christian in his ignorance may be deceived by the powers of darkness, may unwittingly tumble into the trap of Satan, and fulfil the conditions for his working. Let us observe the order of this process, for it is highly important: (1) ignorance, (2) deception, (3) passivity, and (4) entrenchment. Ignorance is the primary cause of this process. Satan can deceive because the saint is unfamiliar both with the demand of the Holy Spirit and the principle of satanic working. Were Christians to apprise themselves of how to co-operate with God and what His procedure of working is, they would never accept Satan's deception. But once deceived, they surmise that for God to live and work through them means for them to remain passive; and so they accept as being from God many supernatural manifestations from evil spirits. The deception grows deeper, finally resulting in an entrenchment of alarming proportions.

It is a vicious cycle: each time ground is given, the evil spirits are encouraged to come in; upon entering, they manifest themselves through sundry activities; and if the believer misinterprets these activities, not knowing that they originate with the devil, he will cede even more place to the evil spirits since he has believed already in their lies. This cycle goes round and round, daily augmenting the degree of penetration. Once he descends into passivity by furnishing a foothold to evil spirits, the dangers can easily multiply.

After one has slipped into inertia and ceases to choose for himself, he will passively succumb to whatever circumstance comes to him. He assumes that it is God Who now

is deciding everything for him; all that is therefore required of him is but to passively submit. Whatever happens to him is given and arranged by God; it is His will, hence he must silently accept all things. Shortly afterwards the believer loses all power of choice in his daily life; he can neither decide nor initiate anything which falls within his duty. In addition, he is afraid to express his opinions and is even more unwilling to divulge his preference. And so others must choose and determine for him. Such a victim of the enemy is like seaweed adrift in the ocean waves. He very much hopes that others will decide for him or that his environment will be such that only one alternative is open for him to follow, thus relieving him from the responsibility of having to make a decision. He seems to be happy when forced to do anything, for this keeps him from anxiety which would arise from indecision. He would rather be driven by circumstance than be free to choose his circumstance since making a choice is so trying for him.

In such a condition of inertia, to decide a small matter becomes a tremendous chore! The victim looks for help every where. He feels quite embarrassed because he does not know how to cope with his daily affairs. He seems hardly to understand what people say to him. Painful is it for him to recall anything; agonizing is it to make a decision; terrifying, to consider any task. His inert will is impotent to bear such a heavy responsibility. Because of its gross weakness he is compelled to wait for assistance through environment or through men. If he is helped by any particular person he rejoices in receiving such help, yet resents beholding the capture of his will. Who can tally up the hours consumed in waiting for outside aid? Are we suggesting that such a passive believer does not like to work? Not at all; for when compelled by an external force he is able to work; but just have the compulsion terminate and he will halt right in the middle of his labor, feeling himself insufficient in strength to carry on. Innumerable unfinished jobs form the sad testimonials of a passive will.

How inconvenient must this state of inaction be! A believer has to rely on multiplied notes to help him remember; he has to talk aloud to concentrate; he has to devise hundreds of "crutches" to assist him along in life. His senses gradually grow dull until finally he unconsciously develops many idiosyncrasies and queer habits such as not looking straight while talking, bending while walking, exercising little or no mind in any undertaking, either attending too much to physical needs or excessively suppressing bodily requirements, and so forth.

In his foolishness the Christian does not perceive that all these symptoms flow from passivity and invasion but instead believes that they are merely his natural weaknesses. He comforts himself with the thought that these are not too surprising since he is not as gifted or well-endowed as others. He fails to discern the lies of the evil spirits and allows himself to be further deceived. He dare not undertake any task nor do any work because he is so afraid, so nervous, so inarticulate, so dull in mind, or so weak in body. He has never examined why other believers fare so differently. People less talented than he can do far more. And even he himself was much better before. How then can he attribute these symptoms to heredity, natural temperament, and so forth? Know that these are caused by the evil spirits whether one perceives it or not.

Being well acquainted with the believer's current condition, the powers of darkness will foment many troubles in his environment to disturb him. Because his will is passive already and powerless to work, the evil spirits usually win maneuver him into a situation where the exercise of volition is necessary so as to embarrass him and subject him to derision. During such a time, the victim is being harassed by the evil spirits as they please, just like a caged bird that is teased at will by naughty boys. They instigate many difficulties that these may wear out the saint. How distressing that he has not the strength to protest and resist. His circumstances wax worse. He has the authority to deal with the evil spirits, yet he cannot utter a word. The powers of darkness have gained the upper hand, all because their victim has fallen from ignorance to deception, from deception to passivity, and from passivity to the sufferings of deep entrenchment. Nevertheless, he has not yet discerned that such a situation has not been given by God; and so he continues on in his passive acceptance.

When the Christian has sunk into such a state he unconsciously may even rely upon the help of the evil spirits. He cannot will anything by himself, hence looks for outside forces to help him. He is troubled often by the evil spirits, yet he innocently expects these same spirits to come to his aid. This is the reason why they desire to make him passive. Holding in their hands the various talents that a believer possesses, they are able to express themselves whenever these talents are exercised. They like to do the willing in place of the person. And the evil spirits certainly are not going to hesitate to exert themselves wherever they are so welcomed. They delight in enticing a person to

follow outside revelation blindly without using either thought or will; they therefore often impart a host of strange and supernatural phenomena to men.

The Christian, unaware of the principle of God's working, assumes he is being obedient to God when actually he is a prey to deception. Let us be advised of this verse in Romans 6: "Do you not know that if you yield yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey ... ?" (v.16) If we offer ourselves in name to God but in actual practice are yielding to the evil spirits we cannot escape being the latter's slave. True, we are deceived; even so, we have yielded openly to the false one and are consequently responsible. The Christian should realise that if he does not commune with God in accordance with the proper conditions for divine fellowship but instead fulfils the requirements for the working of the evil spirits, he will then be enslaved by them. We ought to review one final time this process culminating in entrenchment. As a person is coveting the physical sensations of God's presence and other similar experiences (as earlier described in Parts Three and Seven) he may be deceived by evil spirits and accorded many counterfeit workings. He naively accepts these as from God and accordingly gets himself into a state of passivity. He concludes that he must not make any move, for is it not God Who will move him? He terminates all actions, believing God will act in place of him. But God never does so because He wants man to co-operate actively with Him. However, the believer unwittingly has fulfilled the conditions for the operations of the evil spirits and they do not hesitate to step in and act. Man himself does not act, neither does God act, so the evil spirits act for him. Let the Christian mark this well that once he has perceived- the will of God in his spirit's intuition his whole being needs to be employed actively in executing God's will. He should not be passive.