

On Guard! : defending oneself in a wicked world.
Pentecost XIII/Proper 17

Living in rural America outside large metropolises it may seem a bit of a hard sell to talk about self-defense. It may be an East coast phenomenon. Yet more than ever average Americans are taking up martial arts to protect themselves in the event of an attack. Other means of defense may prompt some of us to remember how popular MACE sprays were on key chains a generation ago.

Rather elaborate ways of non-violently removing a threat have recently developed.

How about screaming?

This is not the stuff of bad horror movies or screaming you hear when a roller coaster peaks over the top of a nerve-rattling five-story drop. Nor is it the screaming at rock concerts and ball games.

“The Scream,” a nonviolent weapon developed by the Israeli army is being used at violent demonstrations in the West Bank. When the irritating noise shows up, nobody can stand to be around it and the mob brakes up and walks away. The Israeli government is always searching for nonviolent means of controlling and dispersing crowds. Who would have guessed that screaming would be such an apropos nonviolent, military weapon? Just a little screaming and angry crowds become irritated crowds that become no more crowd at all.

“The Scream” is a vehicle-mounted sound- emitting device which has been used as a nonviolent, yet effective weapon in breaking up crowds of protesters. It puts out 10-second intervals of special low-frequency sound that targets the inner ear of those in its path. It is such an irritating sound that its targets report symptoms such as nausea or dizziness. While prolonged exposure to the device could cause auditory damage, military officials say The Scream is too unbearable for people to remain near it for long enough to suffer such damage.

This leads us into today’s text on spiritual warfare and its weaponry. Ephesians 6:10-20 is God’s manual on self-defense. The armor of God is defensive not offensive; including the sword. And there is an element of surprise here. From what do we need protecting? Is it the supernatural or the natural? Take a look with me at this passage. We’ve read it over and over again but have we understood its meaning?

We are urged to be “strong in the Lord” and in “the strength of his power.” The “armor of God” is the defensive posture we are given by God to put on as one would put on pads or guards in a sports uniform. Because it is God’s strength and God’s armor that we must use there is nothing we can do in our own cleverness, our own wisdom or our own will that is sufficient to defeat the “wiles of the devil.”

Is there evil around us that seek to undo Christians? Of course! No matter your view on what the devil is or who Satan is the scripture makes the assumption that

its readers know who the enemy is. What kind of enemy is it from which we need a defense? It is an enemy that uses humanity against itself.

In his *Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis offers an appropriate thought on this demonic enemy: "There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight."

We resist an enemy all too passively that uses our weakness against us. That's what the Israeli Army used against the mobs in the West Bank. A Scream Machine developed to nauseate and repulse. I had an experience quite similar when I attended a Bon Jovi concert prior to my move. My kids warned me but I went to be with my friend. I lasted forty minutes and then the loud noises drove me outside the stadium seating where I walked until the concert was over. I was not alone either. I credit Bon Jovi for disbursing crowds.

Yes, the enemy is clever. It is not enemies of flesh or blood that should worry us. These enemies are spiritual powers of darkness that attack, defile and render us spiritually impotent. There is nothing more "sorry" than a Christian without power, a Christian without influence, a Christian that is living a defeated life. And my dear Christian family, the devil has done his job well.

Cover your ears ... there's screaming in the streets! And the problem is that our world finds the church to be the screamer ... emitting irritating low-impact bursts of offense about every 10 seconds ... driving the crowds away.

Satan wants our confusion, our apathy, our hidden weaknesses, our shame, our self-absorption, our hyper-rationality and our hyper-emotionality to block the gospel message of reconciliation. This "adversary" is the enemy who knows "The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips, then walk out the door and deny him by their lifestyle. That's what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable." (Brennan Manning).

Truth, righteousness, faith, the gospel, the Scriptures — these are not weapons with which to go careening into crowds. They are the armor of our defense. They shore up our position as balanced and authentic followers of Christ. They defend us from our own folly and hypocrisy. It puts us on high moral ground rather than sinking sand.

The Church has learned not be the Screamer, but the Whisperer, the still, small voice of a well-defended and lived Christian life. Dwight L. Moody, founder of Chicago's Moody Bible Institute said, "Of 100 men, one will read the Bible; the 99 will read the Christian."

The armor of God bids us defend ourselves well. This makes not for an offensive church, but for an authentic and persuasive church.

Intimacy with God is the very means of donning the armor of God. Paul leads us to the ultimate weapon by finishing his inventory of the armory and launching forth into a prayer battle cry: "Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints" (v. 18).

Praying one for another for spiritual victory we will by God's very presence be able to live with an authentic passion and pursuit of Christianity that is pure and without blemish. By doing so the crowds around us may stop being so offended by the mistakes of the church. Instead of an irritating Scream, we become a loving Whisper, a whisper which is the very voice of God.

To God be the Glory! Amen!

Sources:

Lewis, C.S. *Screwtape Letters* (New York: 1st Touchstone, 1942).

On the Scream weapon: foxnews.com/story/0,2933,159127,00.html.