

Sunday, February 12, 2006 am

SPIRITUAL IDENTITY THEFT

I have been a recent victim of online identity theft. It has proved to be a very stressful situation requiring a substantial amount of my time to stop it, rectify the damage done and take steps to prevent further attacks. The degree to which my and families identify was compromised included the seizing of and abuse of several personal online accounts, unauthorized payments and charges to various credit cards and other accounts, the acquiring of personal information and using that to intimidate us (troubling phone calls, etc) and other sinister actions. I have also canceled accounts, changed all passwords, filed police reports, posted fraud alerts, changed email and online services and formatted my computer hard-drive. And I am still not done. In addition to all this, I am changing my online computer habits.

I tell you all this not because I want to delve into my personal affairs, but because as I dealt with this situation I began thinking about how this applies to the way Satan wants to steal and destroy our “spiritual identity” with God, our brethren and others, and what we can do about it. So this morning, our lesson will deal with Spiritual Identity Theft.

I. Satan’s Damage

- a. What do we mean by “spiritual identity”?
 - i. Not exactly the same as physical identity. Our physical identity involves our fiscal reputation and is based upon our conduct and history. Thieves try to find someone with a good reputation so that they can exploit it for their own selfish criminal gains. They seek for your vulnerabilities and look for you to make a simple, careless mistake and then they run with it.
 - ii. Our “spiritual identity” as I use the term today refers to our relationship with and reputation before God and man. Satan looks for weaknesses and opportunities to take advantage of us and to destroy our relationship with God and damage our reputation with other men so that we will be ineffective in doing the Lord’s will.
- b. Satan wants to damage our relationship with God and others
 - i. He lied to Eve knowing the consequence (Genesis 3 – saying that she would not die and also accusing God of unfair behavior). This is a favorite weapon of the identity thief.
 - ii. He accused Job – noting that Job’s faithfulness was only a product of God’s “hedge around him” (Job 1:9-11, 2:4-6). I am convinced that Satan does everything within his power (which is limited), to make us look bad before God.
1 Peter 5:8 refers to him as your adversary, a legal term meaning one opposed to you in a lawsuit, and later determined to mean one who is YOUR ENEMY.
 - iii. He wants to take advantage of us and exploit us – 2 Cor. 2:11. The phrase, “take advantage” in the Greek is defined as, “to take advantage of someone, defraud...” (W.S. Dictionary). The word is used in other passages like 2 Corinthians 7:2 where Paul says, “We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have *cheated* no one” & 2 Corinthians 12:17-18 where Paul notes that neither he nor Titus *took advantage* of them.
Ephesians 6:11 – speaks of the wiles of the devil – a word which means, “crafty scheming with the intent to deceive” (Louw & Nida).
 - iv. 2 Cor. 11:3 – He is crafty, just like the identity stealer. He doesn’t come out announcing who he is or wearing a red suit with a tail and pitchfork. At times he disguises himself (2 Cor. 11:14).
 - v. He wants to devour us – 1 Peter 5:8. He doesn’t want what is best for you. He wants to destroy you. He wants to take away everything that is good in your life. That is why this verse calls him (again) YOUR ADVERSARY.
- c. How Satan steals our “spiritual identity.”
 - i. He seeks to accuse us before God – that is, anything he can do to damage you relationship with God. Simply stated, he tries to get you to sin in such a manner that you will not make it right with Him. To accomplish this he will lie, cheat, manipulate, prey on your weaknesses, and anything else it takes to draw you away from God

- ii. He attempts to deceive us so that we will live in sin – he entices you, he encourages you to lie to yourself, etc.
James 1:14-15 speaks of be drawn away by our own desires and enticed (tempted and lured into his web). If we blindly follow him, it will lead to our spiritual death.
I am reminded of seductress in Proverbs 7:6-23 where she dressed seductively and went after her foolish victim.
- iii. He looks for us to be careless and let down our guard. He wants us to act rashly where we are most vulnerable.
- iv. He also works to turn others against you and damage your reputation (gossip, slander). Consider how Jesus was crucified. It was all based upon the hatred and lies of others.
Paul had to write 2 Corinthians to defend his apostleship and ministry because of slander about him.
Satan can do much to your reputation by simply turning some of your brethren against you. Do you ever wonder why there are so many warnings in the N.T. against bitterness toward one another, gossip, envy, etc.? These are some of his favorite tools that he can use to damage the effectiveness of a godly man.
And he will do the same thing with those of the world, if it will help his cause. That is why we are instructed to walk circumspectly (Ephesians 5:15-16) and with “wisdom toward those who are outside” (Colossians 4:5).

Truly, Satan wants to steal our spiritual identity, or at least damage it for his own cause. But we can stop it from happening. So let us notice how to prevent Satan’s damage. We can relate this to what one needs to do to protect his physical identity and reputation as well.

II. Preventing Satan’s Damage

- a. KNOW your enemy as much as you can
 - i. The first step to preventing identity theft is awareness. The more aware and up to date you are on how they work, the better prepared you are to prevent their attempts and deal with them swiftly if they do attack.
 - ii. Similarly, we need to KNOW how the devil works. And that means we must continually study God’s word. 2 Timothy 3:15 tells us that the scriptures are able to make us wise unto salvation.
A part of our gospel armor with which we are able to “stand against the wiles of the devil” (Eph. 6:11-12) includes the “preparation of gospel of peace” (15) with which our feet are shod and “the sword of the spirit, which is the Word of God” (17) with which we fight against him.
Don’t be ignorant of his devices – 2 Corinthians 2:11
- b. Be sober, vigilant –
 - i. Being aware of the tools of the identity thief will be useless if we don’t take steps to address them. And the biggest step you can take is be vigilant in all you do.
Just before reformatting my computer, the one who was helping me noticed that I said, “yes” far too often to requests to allow programs from my computer to access the internet. This was probably a part of my problem. I did things I should not have done which made me vulnerable.
 - ii. Spiritually, we have to constantly keep our eyes open. We are told that over and over.
 - 1. 1 Peter 5:8 says, “Be sober, be vigilant...”
 - 2. 1 Thessalonians 5:5-8 – we are to watch and be sober.
 - 3. DON’T let your guard down, EVER. Babylon fell because they arrogantly thought they were invincible. So while they feasted and celebrated, the enemy penetrated the city through “the back door” (actually it was the river) and defeated them that night. Daniel 5 mentions the feast and their fall.
Paul warned in 1 Corinthians 10:12, “*Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed...*”
- c. Don’t get caught where you shouldn’t be – don’t make foolish mistakes.
 - i. The identity thief will send you emails that look to be from legitimate sites seeking personal information. They will tell you that you have to go to a specific site and update your account (or you can’t use it), or they try to allure you with some tempting offer that seems too good to be true. It is when you go to these sites that they get you.
Legitimate companies warn you to STAY away from these sites. IN fact they want to know about

- them so that they can shut them down. They even give rules on their sites telling you how to spot these fake and dangerous emails and how to deal with them.
- ii. Similarly, Satan tries to allure you to places where you are more susceptible to him. There are places Christians have no business being at. And advertisers do a good job getting people there – casinos, bars, etc. Bright lights, exciting sounds and lustful pictures are all used to lure people to places that are built for sin. These places are the devil’s playground. But Christians are told to STAY away from such. 2 Timothy 2:22, “flee youthful lusts”, 1 Corinthians 6:18, “flee fornication.”
 - iii. Friends, IF YOU STAY where you know you are safe, you have nothing to fear!
- d. Put preventive measures in place.
- i. With a little bit of homework, the identity thief can usually be stopped. Computers provide software to help you spot harmful programs from installing, identify dangerous emails and keep them out of your computers. Passwords can be created that are nearly impossible to discover with malicious spy ware. Also, frequent examination of your accounts can help prevent problems as well.
 - ii. Similarly, we need to take preventative measures against Satan to keep him from ruining us.
 1. Work FIRST to be pleasing to God in all you do. Can He count on you? Matthew 6:33 says that when we seek Him first, He will take care of us.
 2. Work to have a good reputation among men – a requirement of elders. Note also 1 Peter 2:12, 3:16 note that a good reputation protects you, when accusations are made.
 3. Make yourself secure – 1 Peter 1:5-10, esp. 10. LIMIT Satan’s power against you. That means you do the right things and develop the right attributes.
 4. Do an occasional spiritual inventory – 2 Corinthians 13:5. Know where you are at and where you are most vulnerable. Work on it.
- e. IF you are damaged, do what you can to repair that damage.
- i. It takes a lot of work to repair the damage of identity theft. But it has to be done. If you ignore it, you are in for an even more difficult time in the future.
 - ii. Spiritually, if you find that your relationship is not what it ought to be with God. Take steps to repair the damage you have done. IF you find your name has been slandered, do whatever you can to make it right and clear yourself. It starts with repentance, which might involve “public restitution.” 2 Corinthians 7:11 notes some of the effort made in repentance. It includes, “*what diligence it produced ... what clearing of yourselves ...In all things you proved yourself to be clear in this matter.*” You may to also put forth efforts to ensure it doesn’t happen again And go to your brethren who have falsely accused or slandered you (cf. Matthew 5:23-24, 18:15, etc.)

Satan would love nothing more than to steal you away from God and win your soul for eternity in hell. Don’t let it happen. Know where you are, where you need to be and how to get there. Don’t let Satan defraud you. Think about it.

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