DAVID V. LOTT, PH.D. | TEACHING RESOURCE

IN THE COMPANY OF ANGELS

Module 6 - The Activity of Demons

Deception, Idolatry, Affliction, the Occult, and the Limits of Demonic Power

Teaching Goals

- Examine the principal activities Scripture attributes to demons and hostile spiritual powers without making the demonic realm an explanation for every form of human evil or suffering.
- Show that deception is one of the central strategies of the kingdom of darkness and that false teaching can possess a spiritual dimension as well as a human one.
- Trace the biblical relationship between idolatry and demonic powers, especially through Deuteronomy 32, Psalm 106, and 1 Corinthians 10.
- Distinguish carefully between sickness, suffering, temptation, sin, and demonic affliction so that the biblical categories are not collapsed into one another.
- Consider divination, magic, sorcery, spiritism, and related occult practices within the biblical prohibition against seeking spiritual power or knowledge apart from God.
- Preserve human moral responsibility while recognizing that Scripture describes genuine spiritual influence and opposition.
- Demonstrate that every form of demonic activity remains limited by the sovereignty of God and subordinate to the authority of Jesus Christ.

Key Biblical Texts

Genesis 3:1-7; Deuteronomy 18:9-14; 32:16-17; 1 Samuel 28:3-25; Psalm 106:34-39; Matthew 4:1-11; 8:16-17, 28-34; 12:22-30, 43-45; Mark 1:21-28; 5:1-20; 9:14-29; Luke 4:1-13, 31-36; 8:26-39; 13:10-17; 22:3, 31-32; John 8:44; 13:2, 27; Acts 5:1-4; 8:9-24; 13:6-12; 16:16-18; 19:11-20; Romans 1:18-25; 1 Corinthians 10:14-22; 2 Corinthians 2:11; 4:3-4; 11:3, 13-15; Ephesians 2:1-3; 4:26-27; 6:10-18; 1 Timothy 4:1-5; James 1:13-15; 3:13-18; 4:7; 1 Peter 5:8-9; 1 John 4:1-6; Revelation 12:9; 16:13-14.

Lesson Roadmap

1. From Identity to Activity
2. Deception: The Adversary's Characteristic Strategy
3. False Teaching and Counterfeit Spirituality
4. Idolatry and Communion with Demons
5. Temptation and the Problem of Human Responsibility
6. Demonic Affliction and Physical Suffering
7. Demonic Influence over Human Conduct
8. The Occult: Seeking Forbidden Knowledge and Power
9. Divination, Magic, and Spiritism in Scripture
10. Demonic Opposition to the Work of God

11. What Demons Cannot Do

12. The Believer's Proper Response

13. Christ's Victory Defines the Conflict

Introduction: From Identity to Activity

Module 5 established the basic biblical identity of demons as personal, intelligent, morally corrupt spiritual beings belonging to the rebellious order opposed to God. We now move from the question of what demons are to the question of what they do. This is where careful interpretation becomes especially important, because the subject has often been shaped more by folklore, personal testimony, popular deliverance teaching, or modern skepticism than by the proportions of Scripture itself.

The Bible neither minimizes demonic activity nor makes demons responsible for every manifestation of evil. It presents a world in which spiritual rebellion is real, but human beings remain morally accountable. Satan tempts, but human desire also gives birth to sin. Demons may afflict, but not every illness is demonic. False religion can involve demonic powers, but human beings also willingly exchange the truth of God for a lie. The biblical picture is therefore more complex than either denial or obsession.

A sound doctrine of demonic activity must preserve several truths simultaneously. There is a real kingdom of darkness. Its activity is purposeful. Its central methods include deception, temptation, counterfeit worship, opposition, and in some cases direct affliction. Yet its power is finite, its freedom is limited, and its final defeat is certain. The believer studies this subject not to become preoccupied with darkness, but to become more discerning about the conflict in which the people of God live.

1. Deception: The Adversary's Characteristic Strategy

The biblical story of spiritual opposition begins with deception. Genesis 3 does not portray the serpent overpowering Eve physically. He attacks the truthfulness and goodness of God's word. The question, “Indeed, has God said?” introduces a pattern that continues throughout Scripture: distort what God has spoken, create suspicion about His character, and offer an alternative interpretation of reality.

Jesus identifies the devil with falsehood in John 8:44, calling him a liar and the father of lies. Revelation 12:9 similarly describes the ancient serpent as the one who deceives the whole world. Paul fears that the Corinthians may be led astray as Eve was deceived by the serpent, and he warns that Satan can disguise himself as an angel of light. The danger, therefore, is not always an obviously evil proposition. Deception is most effective when error resembles truth closely enough to appear credible.

This helps explain why biblical spiritual warfare is so deeply concerned with truth. The believer is not merely resisting frightening manifestations; he is resisting distorted claims about God, Christ, salvation, identity, obedience, and reality itself. A lie believed can become a powerful instrument of bondage even when no spectacular supernatural event is visible.

2. False Teaching and Counterfeit Spirituality

First Timothy 4:1 gives one of the clearest connections between spiritual deception and false doctrine: some will depart from the faith by paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons. Paul does not mean that every theological error must be traced to an audible demonic voice. He does mean that false teaching can participate in a spiritual rebellion that seeks to draw people away from the truth.

Second Corinthians 11 makes the same point through the language of counterfeit appearance. False apostles disguise themselves as apostles of Christ, and Paul says this is not surprising because Satan himself disguises himself as an angel of light. Counterfeit spirituality can therefore look religious, moral, enlightened, or even Christian. Its danger lies precisely in its resemblance to what is genuine.

This is why discernment in the New Testament is doctrinal as well as experiential. First John 4 tells believers to test the spirits rather than believe every spiritual claim. The question is not whether an experience feels powerful or supernatural. The question is whether it accords with the truth God has revealed concerning Jesus Christ and the apostolic gospel.

3. Idolatry and Communion with Demons

One of the most important biblical connections in this subject is the relationship between idolatry and demonic powers. Deuteronomy 32:16-17 describes Israel provoking God with strange gods and sacrificing to demons rather than to God. Psalm 106 recalls the same tragedy, saying that Israel sacrificed sons and daughters to demons in the context of Canaanite idolatry.

Paul draws directly upon this biblical background in 1 Corinthians 10. He first insists that an idol has no true divine existence comparable to the living God. Yet he then warns that pagan sacrifices are offered to demons and that Christians must not become sharers with demons. The two truths belong together: the idol is not a genuine god, but false worship can nevertheless place human beings in fellowship with hostile spiritual powers.

This gives idolatry a depth beyond the physical object. The fundamental sin is the transfer of worship, trust, allegiance, fear, or dependence from the Creator to something within creation. Romans 1 describes humanity exchanging the glory and truth of God for images and lies. Demonic activity exploits that exchange because the kingdom of darkness seeks worship and allegiance that belong to God alone.

4. Temptation and the Problem of Human Responsibility

Scripture clearly presents Satan as a tempter. He tempts Jesus in the wilderness, seeks to sift Peter, and works to exploit opportunities created by anger and unresolved sin. Paul warns believers not to be ignorant of Satan's schemes. Yet Scripture never permits the existence of a tempter to erase human responsibility.

James 1 is essential for maintaining this balance. God does not tempt anyone with evil, and each person is tempted when carried away and enticed by his own lust. Desire conceives and gives birth to sin. The passage places responsibility squarely upon the human moral agent. External spiritual temptation may be real, but sin cannot simply be blamed upon a demon.

The mature biblical position therefore avoids two opposite mistakes. One mistake interprets every temptation psychologically and leaves no room for spiritual opposition. The other blames spiritual beings for choices Scripture attributes to the desires and decisions of the human heart. Biblical anthropology and biblical demonology must be allowed to stand together.

5. Demonic Affliction and Physical Suffering

The Gospels contain cases in which demonic activity is associated with physical symptoms. A man is unable to speak until a demon is expelled. A boy experiences violent seizures in a narrative explicitly involving an unclean spirit. Luke 13 describes a woman whom Satan had bound for eighteen years. These texts prevent us

from ruling out a spiritual dimension to physical affliction merely because such a category is uncomfortable to the modern mind.

At the same time, the Gospels also distinguish disease from demonization. Matthew 4:24, for example, can list various illnesses alongside those who are demonized. Jesus heals ordinary sickness as well as expelling demons. The distinction is crucial. Scripture itself does not teach that all sickness, disability, neurological disturbance, or mental distress is caused by demons.

The responsible teacher must therefore refuse diagnostic speculation. A biblical account in which the inspired text identifies demonic involvement gives us authority to say that demonic involvement occurred in that case. A contemporary illness does not come with an inspired explanatory label. Compassion, appropriate medical care, prayer, pastoral wisdom, and theological discernment must not be displaced by premature spiritual conclusions.

6. Demonic Influence over Human Conduct

The New Testament occasionally uses striking language for demonic influence upon human conduct. Luke says that Satan entered Judas, and John similarly records Satan's involvement in the betrayal of Jesus. Acts 5 describes Satan filling the heart of Ananias to lie to the Holy Spirit. These passages reveal real spiritual influence while simultaneously preserving human guilt. Judas betrays. Ananias lies. The presence of satanic influence does not transform morally responsible people into innocent instruments.

Ephesians 2 gives a broader picture. Before salvation, people walk according to the course of this world and according to the prince of the power of the air, while also living in the lusts of the flesh. Notice again the convergence of influences: the world, the spiritual adversary, and disordered human desire. Paul does not isolate one cause and make it responsible for all evil.

This pattern is pastorally important. Human behavior may exist within a spiritual environment of deception and influence, but repentance remains meaningful because human beings are not portrayed as morally irrelevant. The gospel calls people to turn from darkness to light, from idols to God, and from the dominion of Satan to God, while treating that turning as a genuine human response made possible by divine grace.

7. The Occult: Seeking Forbidden Knowledge and Power

The occult occupies a significant place in biblical warnings because it represents an attempt to obtain spiritual knowledge, guidance, protection, or power through means God has forbidden. Deuteronomy 18 places divination, witchcraft, sorcery, interpretation of omens, spiritism, and consultation with the dead among practices Israel was not to imitate from the nations.

The underlying theological issue is allegiance. Israel was to hear the word God provided rather than manipulate hidden powers or seek secret knowledge through forbidden intermediaries. Occult practice therefore stands in contrast to dependence upon divine revelation. It seeks access to the spiritual realm on human terms.

This distinction matters because curiosity can disguise the seriousness of the issue. Scripture does not present occult practices as harmless techniques that become dangerous only when performed incorrectly. They represent a forbidden orientation toward spiritual power and knowledge. The problem is not merely that such practices may expose a person to deception; the practices themselves violate the proper relationship between creature and Creator.

8. Divination, Magic, and Spiritism in Scripture

Several biblical narratives illustrate these prohibitions. Saul's consultation with the medium at Endor in 1 Samuel 28 occurs after he has rejected God's word and can no longer obtain the guidance he desires. Whatever interpretive questions surround the appearance of Samuel, the narrative does not legitimize necromancy. Saul's action is an expression of his continuing rebellion and desperation.

Acts provides several New Testament encounters with magical and divinatory practices. Simon had amazed Samaria with magic before hearing the gospel. Elymas the magician opposes Paul and Barnabas. In Philippi, a slave girl possesses a spirit of divination and brings profit to her owners until Paul commands the spirit to leave her. In Ephesus, the gospel confronts a culture deeply involved in magical practices, and new believers publicly renounce those practices by burning their costly books.

The pattern is consistent. The gospel does not absorb occult techniques and redirect them toward Christian purposes. It calls people out of them. Spiritual power in the New Testament is not controlled through formulas, secret knowledge, objects, or techniques. It belongs to God and is exercised according to His authority and purposes.

9. Demonic Opposition to the Work of God

Hostile spiritual powers oppose the advance of truth and the work of God's people. Jesus' parable of the sower depicts the evil one taking away the word sown in a person's heart. Paul speaks of the god of this age blinding the minds of unbelievers so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ. First Thessalonians 2:18 records Paul saying that Satan hindered his intended travel.

Daniel 10, examined in the previous module, provides a dramatic Old Testament picture of unseen conflict corresponding to events in the visible world. Ephesians 6 then reminds believers that their struggle ultimately reaches beyond flesh and blood to spiritual forces of wickedness.

Yet these passages should not produce a habit of attributing every delay, disagreement, closed door, or ministry difficulty directly to demonic intervention. Paul himself could interpret circumstances in different ways. Sometimes he saw satanic hindrance; elsewhere the Spirit prevented or redirected missionary plans. Discernment requires humility because similar outward circumstances may arise from very different causes.

10. What Demons Cannot Do

A theology of demonic activity is incomplete until it defines the limits of demonic power. Demons are creatures. They do not possess the attributes that belong uniquely to God. They are not omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, self-existent, or sovereign. Their knowledge is finite, their power is derivative, and their activity occurs within boundaries they cannot ultimately escape.

The temptation narratives demonstrate this limitation with particular clarity. Satan can tempt Jesus, but he cannot compel Jesus to sin. Demons can plead, resist, deceive, and afflict, but when Christ commands them they obey. Even the dramatic account of Legion ends not with a contest between approximately equal spiritual powers but with the effortless authority of Jesus.

The book of Job, although not a demon-possession narrative, provides another important theological principle: the adversary's activity remains subject to divine limits. Scripture never presents God and Satan as opposite but comparable deities locked in an uncertain struggle. Biblical spiritual warfare is not dualism. There is one sovereign Creator and there are rebellious creatures.

11. The Believer's Proper Response

The New Testament response to spiritual opposition is strikingly sober. Believers are told to resist the devil, remain alert, stand firm in the faith, forgive so that Satan gains no advantage, refuse to give the devil an opportunity, test spiritual claims, put on the armor of God, pray, and hold fast to the truth. The emphasis falls upon faithful Christian living rather than fascination with hidden spiritual information.

Ephesians 6 is especially important because Paul describes formidable spiritual opposition and then gives ordinary-looking instructions: truth, righteousness, readiness grounded in the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, the Word of God, and prayer. These are not ordinary in the sense of being weak. They are God's appointed resources for life in the conflict.

James 4:7 captures the order well: submit to God, resist the devil, and he will flee. Submission precedes resistance. Spiritual warfare is not autonomous human confrontation with supernatural beings; it is steadfast allegiance to God expressed through obedience, truth, faith, and dependence upon Him.

12. Christ's Victory Defines the Conflict

The ministry of Jesus reveals that the kingdom of God has entered the territory claimed by the kingdom of darkness. His exorcisms are signs of authority, but His victory reaches its climax in the cross and resurrection. What appears outwardly to be the triumph of hostile powers becomes the means by which Christ disarms rulers and authorities and triumphs over them.

This changes the entire tone of Christian demonology. The believer does not face an unresolved cosmic contest whose outcome remains uncertain. The decisive victory belongs to Christ. The church still lives in the period between victory accomplished and victory consummated, which means conflict remains real, temptation remains serious, and vigilance remains necessary. But the enemy's present activity occurs beneath the sentence of a judgment already secured by the work of Christ.

For that reason, the goal of this study is neither fear nor curiosity. It is discernment. The more clearly we understand the methods attributed to the kingdom of darkness, the more clearly we can recognize why the New Testament repeatedly directs believers toward truth, holiness, faith, prayer, love, sober-mindedness, and confidence in Christ.

Scripture, Interpretation, and Theological Conclusion

What Scripture Explicitly Establishes

Hostile spiritual powers deceive, tempt, promote falsehood, oppose the work of God, and participate in idolatrous and occult systems. In specific biblical cases they also afflict human beings physically or exercise extraordinary influence over behavior. Scripture nevertheless distinguishes demonic affliction from ordinary illness and preserves human moral responsibility in the presence of spiritual influence.

What Scripture Strongly Suggests

Demonic strategy ordinarily works through distortion of truth, counterfeit worship, corrupted desire, false teaching, fear, and resistance to God's purposes rather than through spectacular manifestations alone. The biblical emphasis suggests that some of the most consequential spiritual warfare occurs wherever truth and falsehood, worship and idolatry, obedience and rebellion confront one another.

What Should Be Held More Tentatively

Specific claims that a contemporary illness, emotional disorder, personal temptation, political event, geographic region, ministry setback, or recurring sin is caused by a particular demon require evidence Scripture does not normally provide us. Likewise, techniques that claim to identify hidden demons by name, rank, territory, family history, or specialized revelation should not be elevated to biblical doctrine without clear textual warrant.

Theological Conclusion

Demonic activity is real, but it operates within the larger rebellion of creation against its Creator and within boundaries established by God. The kingdom of darkness works through lies, counterfeit worship, temptation, opposition, and at times direct affliction, yet it cannot overthrow divine sovereignty or invalidate human responsibility. Christian spiritual warfare therefore consists fundamentally in living faithfully under the lordship of Jesus Christ, whose victory has already determined the final outcome.

Key Truths to Remember

Deception is a central strategy of the kingdom of darkness. False teaching may possess a spiritual dimension even when communicated through human teachers. Scripture connects idolatry with demonic powers without treating idols themselves as genuine gods. Demons may tempt and influence, but human beings remain morally responsible. Some biblical illnesses involve demonic affliction, but Scripture does not teach that all sickness is demonic. Occult practices are rejected because they seek spiritual knowledge or power apart from God's appointed means. Demonic power is real but finite. The believer's primary response is truth, faith, holiness, prayer, discernment, resistance, and submission to God.

Class Discussion

1. Why is deception a more fundamental category of demonic activity than spectacular manifestations?

2. How does Genesis 3 establish a pattern that continues in later biblical descriptions of spiritual deception?

3. What does 1 Timothy 4 mean when it speaks of “doctrines of demons,” and what should we avoid reading into that phrase?

4. How can Paul say both that an idol is nothing and that pagan sacrifices involve demons?

5. Why is James 1 essential to a balanced doctrine of temptation?

6. What do the Gospel accounts teach us about the relationship between demonic affliction and physical illness?

7. Why is it irresponsible to assume that a contemporary medical or psychological condition is demonic merely because a biblical case involved similar outward symptoms?

8. What common theological issue unites divination, sorcery, necromancy, and other occult practices?

9. What can we learn from Acts about the gospel's relationship to magical and divinatory practices?

10. Why should Christians be cautious about labeling every ministry obstacle as satanic opposition?

11. What attributes belonging to God do demons not possess?

12. Why does Ephesians 6 emphasize truth, righteousness, faith, the gospel, salvation, Scripture, and prayer rather than specialized techniques for confronting demons?

13. How should the accomplished victory of Christ affect the believer's attitude toward spiritual conflict?

Closing Summary

The activity of demons is broader and more subtle than the spectacular cases that naturally attract attention. Scripture places deception near the center of the conflict. Hostile powers distort truth, encourage false worship, exploit temptation, oppose the work of God, and participate in systems that promise spiritual knowledge or power apart from Him. In some cases they also afflict human beings directly.

But the Bible refuses to make demons an excuse for human sin or an explanation for every form of suffering. Human desire remains morally significant. Ordinary disease remains real. False teachers remain accountable for what they teach. People who practice idolatry or the occult remain responsible for the allegiance they give. Spiritual influence and human responsibility coexist in the biblical account.

The proper Christian response is therefore neither denial nor obsession. It is discernment grounded in truth, submission to God, resistance to evil, faithful prayer, and confidence in the authority of Jesus Christ. Module 7 will take up the more difficult pastoral and theological questions surrounding demonization: what the biblical language actually means, how the Gospel cases should be understood, whether Scripture distinguishes degrees of demonic influence, and how the question relates specifically to the believer's union with Christ and the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Teacher's Companion

Suggested 60-minute pacing:

- 5 minutes - Review Module 5 and move from the identity of demons to their activity
- 7 minutes - Deception and counterfeit spirituality
- 7 minutes - Idolatry and demonic communion
- 7 minutes - Temptation and human responsibility
- 8 minutes - Affliction, sickness, and careful biblical distinctions
- 7 minutes - Occult practices, divination, magic, and spiritism
- 6 minutes - Opposition to the work of God
- 5 minutes - Limits of demonic power
- 5 minutes - The believer's response in Ephesians 6 and James 4
- 3 minutes - Christ's victory and closing synthesis

Teacher Guardrails

- Keep deception and falsehood near the center of the discussion. Scripture often emphasizes these more than spectacular manifestations.
- Do not attribute every doctrinal disagreement to demons. First Timothy 4 establishes a spiritual dimension to false teaching without relieving human teachers of responsibility.
- When discussing idolatry, preserve Paul's distinction: idols are not true gods, yet idolatrous worship may involve fellowship with demons.
- Do not allow spiritual temptation to erase James 1 and the biblical doctrine of disordered human desire.
- Make the Gospel distinction between sickness and demonization explicit. This is essential for responsible pastoral teaching.
- Do not diagnose contemporary physical or mental conditions as demonic on the basis of superficial similarity to a biblical narrative.

- Treat occult practices seriously without sensationalism. The core issue is forbidden spiritual allegiance and the pursuit of knowledge or power apart from God.
- Do not teach formulas, secret techniques, objects, or specialized knowledge as though they provide spiritual authority. The New Testament directs believers toward Christ, truth, faith, holiness, Scripture, prayer, and obedience.
- When students raise personal experiences, listen respectfully but allow Scripture rather than experience to establish doctrine.
- End with Christ's supremacy. A class on demonic activity should increase discernment and confidence in Christ, not anxiety about demons.

For Further Study

This module develops the material that naturally follows the foundational demonology of Module 5: deception, false teaching, idolatry, temptation, affliction, occult practices, spiritual opposition, and the limits of demonic power. It intentionally stops short of resolving the more specific questions surrounding demonization and the believer. Those questions require their own exegetical treatment because terminology, Gospel narratives, pastoral practice, and later Christian traditions are frequently blended together.

Module 7 should therefore examine demonization directly. It can distinguish the biblical language from the popular expression “demon possession,” survey the major Gospel cases, ask what degree of control the texts actually describe, examine whether a believer can be demonized, and place the entire question within the doctrines of union with Christ, the indwelling Holy Spirit, spiritual warfare, and Christian assurance.