

**We Wrestle not Against Flesh and Blood**

I was in the ninth grade at Lakeland Jr. High School in my home town of Lakeland, Florida. It was after lunch in the next to the last class of the day. The teacher had stepped out of the room. Character often reveals itself when authority is absent. It was a full class, but as I look back only three people stand out: Laura Phelps, Terry Spruill, and Walter Kent.

Laura was my new brother-in-law's first cousin. My big sister had married and taken a new name and I felt as though the parameters of our family had now expanded and so, Donny's (my brother-in-law) family is now mine to watch out for, defend and champion if needed. Walter was my buddy as far back as the fourth grade. Terry was the school bully who was always in a scrap. I knew he fought a lot, but until that fateful day in Math class, I did not know he was a champion golden gloves boxer.

With the teacher absent, Terry began to talk loudly and was throwing insults out very generally at first. Then he directed his off-color conversation toward Laura. It was vulgar, ungentlemanly and I had quite enough. So, I turned in my seat and said, "Shut-up, Spruill!" He got quiet, just long enough to size up his challenge and then fired back, "Why don't you make me, Pope?" The proverbial gauntlet had been thrown down. So I stood to my feet, walked back and struck him. My weak blow was just enough to really anger him. Terry stood to his feet, raised his fist in a boxer's pose as I responded in kind to this face off. We stood there glaring into each other's eyes. For a moment, it seemed time was frozen. I knew this was not the same fun that my brother and cousins had in the back yard with boxing gloves; we were bare fisted and he was not smiling.

The frozen moment in time was interrupted by my friend, Walter saying, "Get him, Pope!" I turned to look at Walter with a smile and that set me up for a wallop, the likes of which, until that moment, I had never remotely experienced. I gave Walter a wide smile that perfectly laid my lip over my eye tooth and gave Spruill a target he could not resist. I remember hearing the blow inflicted and feeling my feet come off the floor, then landing on the chairs behind me. I experienced a slight black-out, but I quickly came to my senses seeing my opponent now smiling down at me. I stood up with my head still swimming, squared off, faced my enemy - and then the teacher came in. I have to admit, that was a welcomed sight! We were immediately escorted to the principle's office. On the way there I became aware of my wound. My eye tooth had very nearly been driven through my lip. Terry went into the inner sanctum of the principle's office for an old fashioned paddling (which he was used to) and my parents were called to come take me to the doctor.

Dr. Hugh Johnson sewed up my lip and I was too embarrassed to come right back to school the next day even though I knew I had to face the inevitable. When I came back to school, lip still swollen with stitches hanging out, Terry Spruill met me at the curb with three of his friends (what a nice welcoming committee)! I really didn't know what to expect. Terry said, "Pope, I hear you

wanted to finish this thing off!” I don’t know where he heard that. Then before I could answer he said, “I’m sorry I sucker-punched (to hit a guy when he’s not looking) you. And if it’s alright with you, I’d like to call it quits.” I was more than happy to call it quits. I had made my stand, he apologized and we really didn’t see much more of each other as he went to one high school and I went to another the next school year. I was blessed some years later when I was preaching a revival meeting for Dr. Buffington at Calvary Baptist in Lakeland, Florida to see Terry again and I was able to invite him to church and put a witness in for Jesus.

As I look back at this event, a summation of three truths were brought home to me:

### **I. My battle was not with flesh and blood.**

Terry needed Jesus. I was already a born again believer. For Terry to be vulgar and act unchristian was his nature. He needed Jesus. Even if I had been a golden gloves champ and had physically bested him, that was not the best way to win him to Christ. The Bible says, *“For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places”* (Ephesians 6:12). My first line of dealing with Terry should have been a confrontation with the Gospel. Could I have not tried this, “Terry, may I have a quiet word with you, man-to-man with one else around?” Then I should have asked, “I hear more than insults being hurled across the room; I hear a cry that’s longing for something more. Terry, may I have the privilege of telling you about the One who changed my life, giving me heaven instead of hell and giving me so much more than I could ever deserve even here on earth for both time and eternity?”

Even if Terry rejected the Gospel I offered, in the America I was reared in, there was enough fear of God in the atmosphere that I am certain my witness could have changed the environment from vulgarity to silence. Jesus said, *“Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted?...Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid”* (Matthew 5: 13, 14). Salt was used as preservative in the ancient world. Jesus was saying our influence is a preservation of all that could be right in the world through His grace. Our Lord was also saying, we are the light to illumine the darkness. The reason I feel reasonably sure Terry would have responded favorably is because ten years later when I saw Terry again and witnessed to him, he humbly dropped his head and listened to what I had to say. Ten years can harden a man who has been ignoring God. Perhaps if Terry had seen a peer living the Christ-life in front of him when we were in jr. high, he may have responded even quicker with ten years less of a cold, Christ-less environment that had surrounded him previously.

### **II. Don’t underestimate your foe.**

How thankful I am for the opportunity years later to give a witness to Terry. Yes, I wish I had done so in the ninth grade; he and I would have both been better off. I did, however learn some valuable lessons about a fight. I learned that day in Lakeland Jr. High the value of preparation! Boxers train hour after to hour to punch effectively and defend even more effectively. I did not know that

day I was standing up against a trained and somewhat experienced boxer. Had I been trained, had I kept my guard up, had I not looked away, physically speaking, that fight could have turned out differently.

Spiritually speaking, we need to be trained in the Word of God. The Bible says in I Peter 3:15, *“But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear.”* The only way we can give an answer is to know the answers. The answers are found in the Bible. *“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth”* (II Timothy 2:15). We will rightly apply the Scriptures and not be ashamed or embarrassed if we labor in His Word with the skill of a dedicated student of the Bible.

### **III. I was finally prepared.**

Advance to my third year of college. I was totally dedicated to Christ and was now attending school in Indiana, just outside Chicago. I was the captain of a bus route on the south side of Chicago in an area called the Hegewisch. On Sunday afternoons, I would sometimes go soul winning in the Hammond area as well. Both areas had local gangs by the names of “Bishops” and the “Lords.” Don’t let the religious words fool you; these guys were not Sunday School boys. These young men were hardened by street fights, fellows who lived and breathed violence. I approached a group of guys with the Gospel and before I could get much said, I was surrounded by the gang and a leather jacket was thrown over my head as they came in for “the kill.” I remember peace overwhelming me as the jacket was calmly removed and the screaming voices were silenced. When I looked up, two guys whom I had previously won to Jesus had stepped up and said, “Don’t mess with him; listen to what he has to say!” The entire atmosphere changed and the gang listened intently as I told them the Gospel that had changed their fellow gang members who had accepted the Lord. I don’t remember how many got saved that day, but I do remember on another occasion breaking up a basketball gang in south Chicago and talking to the players and those all about the court and witnessing about fifty pray the sinner’s prayer with me.

I witnessed the truth of I Corinthians 1:18: “For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.” There is power in the Gospel! Let us know it and be prepared to use it! Oh the difference it can make in our community and world in which we live when we operate in the Spirit rather than the flesh!

-Pastor Pope-