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Don't Let Satan Get the Advantage

by Dan Trygg

...in order that no advantage be taken of us by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his schemes...

2 Cor. 2:11

1 Peter 5:8 reminds us, "**Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.**" Again, in Eph. 4:26,27, we are told, "Be angry, and yet do not err; do not let the sun go down on your provocation (i.e., the thing that provoked the anger), **and do not give the devil an opportunity** (lit., 'a place')." These three scriptures mentioned above are all designed to bring to our awareness that we are not simply muddling through our life and relationships on our own. **There is a spiritual world around us that (1.) has evil intent toward us; (2.) makes intelligent plans to disrupt our lives and/or to lead us into thinking, attitudes, and behaviors that are contrary to God's will for us**, and which lead us away from our relationship with Him; **(3.) is ever watchful to create, or take advantage of, opportunities to influence us.** Another verse from Eph. 2:2 adds another component to thicken the plot. There it refers to Satan as, "the prince of the power of the air, ...the spirit that is now working in the sons and daughters of disobedience." Thus, this evil spiritual world around us **(4.) is able to influence, "work within", and use people who are not in submission to God to do or express evil thoughts, attitudes, or behaviors in ways that can touch our lives.**

What all this means is that we are to be watchful, vigilant, paying attention so that we do not unwittingly get duped, defrauded, distracted or disrupted by our spiritual enemies. We do not have to be afraid or paranoid, because there are limitations on what the enemy can do to us. Most the time, the extent of this spiritual warfare is confined to "mind games". **Most of the time, the enemy's focus is simply to distract us away from abiding in Jesus.** He knows that what Jesus said is true, that apart from our relationship with Him, we can do nothing. If he can lure us away from abiding in Christ, then he renders us ineffective. **If he can lure us farther into the darkness, so that we begin to make choices to do evil, then he can use the consequences of our behaviors to take further advantage of us**, and to sow seeds of destruction and hurt that will make it more difficult to return (usually because of pride), and will often affect others, increasing the circle of his influence. **It is enough if he can distract us, but even better if he can manipulate us into being an unwitting instrument for his purposes.** A deeper level would be to convince us to consciously do his evil work. There are different levels of awareness we experience as we make choices. When the enemy draws us into his web of confusion, ...usually by utilizing some kind of emotional disruption, so that we *don't care* if we are doing evil, or so that we may even be emotionally driven to where we *want* to do evil..., then he has succeeded in momentarily causing us to lose perspective enough that we may purpose to do what he is suggesting in our heads. *At that moment*, and in *that area*, he is holding us captive to do his will. In some cases, we might "come to our senses and escape the snare of the devil" through repentance and a new awareness of truth (II Tim. 2:25,26). In other cases, we may need help from others to find freedom through a deliverance from demonic infestation.

Now, **some people get into the debate about how much of our thoughts and behavior are affected by spiritual forces of evil.** Fueling this debate is often either paranoia, on the one side, that wants to minimize the possibility of this dynamic, because it is overwhelming to them and they do not know how to possibly deal with it, if it were true. On the other side, there are those who would desire to minimize the level of influence of the spiritual world on our conscious or unconscious minds, because they are concerned that it would encourage irresponsibility, e.g., "the devil made me do it". In response, I would say that **(1.) our emotional comfort with reality does not change it.** Our fear of something, or our resistance to it, does not make it "go away", or become any less real. **(2.) We need to take seriously the teachings of scripture, whether we are comfortable with them or not.** They tell us (a.) there *are* spiritual beings that desire to lure us into choosing to believe lies and to do evil; (b.) they cannot simply "take us over", we must yield ourselves to their influence, thus preserving our autonomy and personal responsibility; (c.) the core of our vulnerability comes from *within ourselves*, our inner emptiness and desire for something "more". Temptation to sin always comes as a way to "get something" for ourselves. Therefore, if we find our satisfaction in our relationship with God, and do not "give in" to lies and deceitful lusts, the enemy cannot overcome us (cf. Neh. 8:10). **(3.) Our recognition of the spiritual warfare around and within us does nothing to change it, ...other than to possibly prepare us to effectively deal with it.** IF there is an evil system of spiritual beings seeking to influence us (and the scriptures do indicate that there is), and we suddenly become aware of that, nothing has changed except our awareness. The spiritual dynamics that were in play before still continue. It is just that we can more

easily see them now. Would it be more effective to "hide your head in the sand", simply because you do not *want* to see what is there? **(4.) The healthy response would not be to minimize this, or over emphasize it, but to attempt to explore, understand and incorporate this insight about the nature of reality into our experience.**

Having said all that, let's get down to the issue at hand. **There is a difference between the *facts*, the actual events and the true intentions of peoples' hearts, and *what we perceive* of them.** This should be obvious to us, but we need to be reminded of it. **First of all, we are not omniscient.** Our perspective is limited by our own sensory input of we can actually see or hear or "sense" from one another. **Often this data is incomplete, and we have to *interpret* what we see, hear, or "sense".** Sometimes when things don't make sense to us, or the data is incomplete, ***we unconsciously "fill in the gaps" according to what we expect.*** Every one of us does this all the time with our eyes. There is a blind spot in each eye, where the optic nerve connects with the back of the eyeball. Most of us do not see a black spot in front of us all the time, where this occurs. Our brains automatically "fill in" for us, so that our picture of the world looks complete and seamless. The truth is that it is not as it appears. **That same phenomenon of "filling in the gaps" is happening all the time within our minds, on multiple levels and in every area of our awareness.** There is too much sensory data coming into our minds all the time to effectively process, so we learn to categorize it into groups that have meaning to us, and **we give priority to certain bits of data that fit in with what we have learned to expect, while other parts that seem irrelevant we conveniently "do not notice".** We see or hear them, but we automatically filter out what seems unimportant. One of the other facts associated with this is that **we tend to see what we expect to see, sometimes when it is not even there.** Magicians rely on these sensory phenomena to do their sleight of hand tricks. **The enemy is aware of how our senses work, and is able to both suggest things to us,** so that we "think" we have seen or heard something that actually was not what occurred, **or even, at times, to distort our perceptions of reality by actually supplying images or sounds** (at least they *appear* that way to us, as they did with Jesus in Lk. 4:5). There must be some limitations that keep the enemy from doing this to us all the time, or we would really have a hard time navigating through life. Nevertheless, we know it is a possibility. **So, we have four phenomena that can distort our perception of things (1.) the physical limitations of our senses; (2.) the "filling in the gaps" that our brains automatically do; (3.) the "grouping" according to perceived meaning; and (4.) the possible interjection of apparent sensory data at times by the spirit world.**

Why is this all so important? *Because the enemy would love to turn us against one another.* He suggests things to our minds to interpret the actions and words of others to us, to present them to us in a negative way. If we are not careful, we will begin to see things as we expect (based upon the enemy's suggestion, or our past experiences), and we could be dreadfully wrong. Then we can begin to fill in the gaps and our minds manufacture scenarios that may have nothing to do with reality (sometimes, at least, with the further encouragement of the enemy). We draw conclusions about people, when we truthfully do not have enough information to support our conclusions. These conclusions quickly turn into judgments about their intent and their character, and we begin to react to what we have convinced ourselves is true about them. Then, if we talk to others, we spread our conclusions, and our supporting evidence (according to us), causing those we share with to also look at the other person with preconceived ideas. The Bible makes very plain that we are not to judge one another, nor speak evil of one another. Instead, we are to be committed to building one another up, and speaking the truth to one another in love. **Believing negative things about one another not only hurts us, and causes us to distance ourselves from the other person, but it also shuts down the healthy "Body-life" interaction that enables us to help one another grow.**

What is our defense? How do we handle things when it *looks like* someone is doing something wrong, or hurtful? **If we are committed to one another, devoted to Christ and therefore to His Body, we must commit ourselves to *checking things out* and to *working things out* with one another.** Matthew 5:23,24 and 18:15-20 are two passages where Jesus Himself addressed the need to bring things to resolution, as best you can. In Matt. 18, there is a specific procedure detailed which is designed to keep the circle of offense as small as possible. **It is important also to commit ourselves to giving a good report about one another.** That does not mean we look the other way when someone sins. It means we value them enough to check things out, and attempt to work them out, so there is resolution and healing. It also means **we protect their reputation by not exposing their foibles to others who do not need to know** (I Pet. 5:8). Also, *we should not listen to others who want to pull us in to negative talk*, unless they are asking us to go *with* them to attempt to work through reconciliation. If we listen, we can be pulled into *their* unresolved anger, and take up an offense and a bitterness that does not belong to us (Heb. 12:15; Prov. 26:17).