

Defeating Satan's Plot to Destroy the Church

Satan hates you, and he has a terrible plan for your life. Don't give in to it.

That seems to be Paul's point in 2 Cor. 2:10-11, as he asks the church in Corinth to forgive a brother who had caused offense and then repented. Paul urges the saints to join him in forgiving and restoring the one who sinned, "so that we would not be outwitted by Satan, for we are not ignorant of his plans."

What satanic plans does Paul have in mind? The simple plot to divide with offense, then conquer through hatred and bitterness.

I've been thinking about Satan's plan quite a bit in recent weeks. In talking with pastors and elders in other churches, I've been struck by how busy the Devil has been in striving to make the church of Christ powerless.

One of his most effective schemes involves *division*. He prompts one member to offend another, then urges the offended member to ignore God's instruction for dealing with offense. If Satan can lead the offended Christian to do what comes *natural* – rather than what comes from the Spirit – the Body of Christ will be torn, and the church will lose much of its power.

It's a simple plan. And it is tragically effective.

When someone offends us, the inclination of our old, sinful nature is to hold that offense tightly.

We want to dwell on the injustice we've suffered. We want to tell others, longing for the salve of their sympathy and the encouragement of their outrage. We crave eye-for-an-eye retribution, public shaming – judgment.

What *doesn't* come natural is to seek out the offender in love.

That course of action would be costly. It would force us to give up the hope of vengeance. It would allow the offender to escape the consequence of his sin. The old Adam in us sends up a scream of offense at the very idea.

But the result of doing what comes natural is a deepening of the division which the sin against us began. That first sin set the foundation of a wall between us and our brother. By holding on to that offense, we start to lay bricks and mortar. With each new person told, with each moment spent dwelling on the offense, with each bitter recollection ... another level of the wall is built.

And the division of the Christ's church becomes more entrenched.

That is *not* what God wants for us.

Jesus prayed that His disciples might be *one* – sharing an intimate unity that reflects the unity of Himself and the Father – so that the world would know that He is real (John 17:11)! And He warned us that those who refuse to forgive those who sin against them will find themselves unforgiven by the Father.

That's a serious warning.

Yet what can we do? When someone sins against us, the offense can't be undone. Nor are our minds wired in a way that allows us to *forget* the sin.

Jesus knows all of that. And He calls us to forgive our brothers and sisters anyway. He even gave us instructions that help us see *how* we can forgive ... thus beginning the process of restoring the broken relationship.

In Luke 17:3-4, Jesus tells us to *rebuke* the one who sinned (in love! Eph. 4:15), calling him to repent of his sin. If he repents, *you must forgive*.

When we forgive the repentant one, we imitate God, who forgave us even at the cost of His Son (Eph. 4:32-5:2). And as God has forgiven us countless times for the same sin, greeting each new promise of repentance with the assurance of forgiveness, so must we forgive *without limit* – even if the sin happens seven times in a day (Luke 17:4) ... for 70 days (Matt. 18:21-22)!

But what does it mean to forgive? Well ... how has God forgiven you? "As far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us" (Ps. 103:12). And again, the Lord says, "I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins" (Isa. 43:25).

God's forgiveness comprises a *promise* to *not remember* our sins. As the omniscient One, God cannot *forget* what has been done. But He can *promise* to *not-remember* – to treat us as *if* we had never sinned. *And He does!*

That is the kind of forgiveness we must offer to the one who repents of his sin against us. We must forgive by *promising* to *not-remember* the sin. That means we won't mention the sin again – not to the offender, nor to others, nor to God, nor even to ourselves. We'll act as though it never happened.

And if they slip up, sin again, then repent again – we'll *not-remember* again!

But, of course, not everyone is willing to repent. Perhaps the brother will explain why his actions were not sinful, enabling you to overlook the offense. Or ... perhaps not. It may be that the sin remains, yet repentance is refused.

In that case, Jesus says, take witnesses and go again. Keep the matter as private as possible; but until repentance occurs and reconciliation begins, raise the stakes until the brother turns from his sin. If going with two or three others doesn't do it, take it matter to the elders. Let them seek repentance, as well.

But always, the goal must be reconciliation – restoring the relationship that's been broken by sin and offense.

That goal can – and should – be pursued from the opposite direction, as well. If you think your brother is offended by you – even if you don't know what you might have done – Jesus says to go and find out (Mat. 5:23-24). Perhaps it's just a misunderstanding. Maybe you sinned against him without knowing it. Or maybe, in a moment of weakness, you sinned intentionally against him.

Regardless: seek reconciliation. Pursue unity in Christ. Long for love to be the only thing between you and your brother, and don't rest until that's the case.

Of course, sometimes that *can't* be the case. All of your words fall on deaf ears, and so do the words of the elders.

That's ... not OK. But you can't change someone else's heart.

What you *can* do is obey Christ's command to *try* for reconciliation. "If possible, *so far as it depends on you*, live peaceably with all" (Rom. 12:18).

By thus striving for peace, we show ourselves to be sons of our Father. And, seeing that, the world will know that the power of the Son truly changes the hearts and lives of men.

Satan is real, and his terrible plan is to use you to destroy Christ's Bride.

Resist him, and he will flee, his terrible plan crumbling around him. After all, He who dwells in you is infinitely more powerful than the Enemy.

But *you* must *resist* him – by restoring your brother, as Christ restored you.

May God give us the strength to imitate His grace!