

Satan's Devices

by John Wesley

John Wesley's sermon explores the various devices of Satan aimed at undermining the joy, peace, and holiness of believers, and offers guidance on how to counteract these attacks through faith and reliance on God's grace.

Scripture: Romans 14:17, 2 Corinthians 2:11, Philippians 3:12

Topics: "Spiritual Warfare", "Joy in the Lord"

Description

John Wesley addresses the cunning devices of Satan aimed at undermining the faith and joy of believers, emphasizing that the adversary seeks to create doubt about God's promises and hinder spiritual growth. He explains that while believers experience righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit, Satan attempts to dampen this joy by reminding them of their unworthiness and the greater holiness they have yet to attain. Wesley encourages Christians to hold fast to their faith and the grace of God, using their current struggles as a means to deepen their reliance on Christ and to grow in holiness. He concludes by urging believers to actively pursue spiritual growth and to rejoice in the progress they have made, rather than being discouraged by what they have yet to achieve.

Transcript

"We are not ignorant of his devices." 2 Cor. 2:11.

1. The devices whereby the subtle god of this world labours to destroy the children of God -- or at least to torment whom he cannot destroy, to perplex and hinder them in running the race which is set before them -- are numberless as the stars of heaven or the sand upon the sea-shore. But it is of one of them only that I now propose to speak, (although exerted in various ways,) whereby he endeavours to divide the gospel against itself, and by one part of it to overthrow the other.

2. The inward kingdom of heaven, which is set up in the heart of all that repent and believe the gospel, is no other than "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost." Every babe in Christ knows we are made partakers of these, the very hour that we believe in Jesus. But these are only the first-fruits of his Spirit; the harvest is not yet. Although these blessings are inconceivably great, yet we trust to see greater than these. We trust to love the Lord our God, not only as we do now, with a weak though sincere affection, but "with all our heart, with all our mind, with all our soul, and with all our strength." We look for power to "rejoice evermore, to pray without ceasing, and in everything to give thanks;" knowing, "this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning us."

3. We expect to be "made perfect in love;" in that love which casts out all painful fear, and all desire but that of glorifying him we love, and of loving and serving him more and more. We look for such an increase in the experimental knowledge and love of God our Saviour as will enable us always "to walk in the light, as he is in the light." We believe the whole mind will be in us, "which was also in Christ Jesus;" that we shall love every man so as to be ready to lay down our life for his sake; so as, by this love, to be freed from anger, and pride, and from every unkind affection. We expect to be "cleansed from all our idols," "from all filthiness," whether "of flesh or spirit;" to be "saved from all our uncleannesses," inward or outward; to be "purified as He is pure."

4. We trust in his promise who cannot lie, that the time will surely come, when, in every word and work, we shall do his blessed will on earth, as it is done in heaven; when all our conversation shall be seasoned with salt, all meet to minister grace to the hearers; when, whether we eat or drink, or whatever we do, it shall be done to the glory of God; when all our words and deeds shall be "in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks unto God, even the Father, through him."

5. Now this is the grand device of Satan, to destroy the first work of God in the soul, or at least to hinder its increase, by our expectation of that greater work. It is therefore my present design, First, to point out the several ways whereby he endeavours: this; And, secondly, to observe how we may retort these fiery darts of the wicked one, how we may rise the higher by what he intends for an occasion of our falling.

I. 1. I am, First, to point out the several ways whereby Satan endeavours to destroy the first work of God in the soul, or at least to hinder its increase by our expectation of that greater work. And, 1. He endeavours to damp our joy in the Lord by the consideration of our own vileness, sinfulness, unworthiness; added to this, that there must be a far greater change than is yet, or we cannot see the Lord. If we knew we must remain as we are even to the day of our death, we might possibly draw a kind of comfort, poor as it was, from that necessity. But as we know, we need not remain in this state, as we are assured there is a greater change to come, and that unless sin be all done away in this life we cannot see God in glory, -- that subtle adversary often damps the joy we should otherwise feel in what we have already attained, by a perverse representation of what we have not attained, and the absolute necessity of attaining it. So that we cannot rejoice in what we have, because there is more which we have not. We cannot rightly taste the goodness of God, who hath done so great things for us, because there are so much greater things which as yet he hath not done. Likewise, the deeper conviction God works in us of our present unholiness, and the more vehement desire we feel in our heart of the entire holiness he hath promised, the more are we tempted to think lightly of the present gifts of God, and to undervalue what we have already received because of what we have not received.

2. If he can prevail thus far, if he can damp our joy, he will soon attack our peace also. He will suggest, "Are you fit to see God? He is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity. How then can you flatter yourself, so as to imagine he beholds you with approbation? God is holy: You are unholy. What communion hath light with darkness? How is it possible that you, unclean as you are, should be in a state of acceptance with God? You see indeed the mark, the prize of your high calling; but do you not see it is afar off? How can you presume then to think that all your sins are already blotted out? How can this be, until you are brought nearer to God, until you bear more resemblance to him?" Thus will he endeavour not only to shake your peace, but even to overturn the very foundation of it; to bring you back, by insensible degrees, to the point from whence you set out first, even to seek for justification by works, or by your own righteousness, -- to make something in you the ground of your acceptance, or at least necessarily previous to it.

3. Or, if we hold fast, "Other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, even Jesus Christ;" and, "I am justified freely by God's grace, through the redemption which is in Jesus;" yet he will not cease to urge, "But the tree is known by its fruits: And have you the fruits of justification? Is that mind in you which was in Christ Jesus? Are you dead unto sin, and alive unto righteousness? Are you made conformable to the death of Christ, and do you know the power of his resurrection?" And then, comparing the small fruits we feel in our souls with the fullness of the promises, we shall be ready to conclude: "Surely God hath not said that my sins are forgiven me! Surely I have not received the remission of my sins; for what lot have I among them that are sanctified?"

4. More especially in the time of sickness and pain he will press this with all his might: "Is it not the word of Him that cannot lie, 'Without holiness no man shall see the Lord?' But you are not holy. You know it well; you know holiness is the full image of God; and how far is this above, out of your sight? You cannot attain unto it. Therefore, all your labour has been in vain. All these things you have suffered in vain. You have spent your strength for nought. You are yet in your sins, and must therefore perish at the last." And thus, if your eye be not steadily fixed on Him who hath borne all your sins, he will bring you again under that "fear of death," whereby you was so long "subject unto bondage," and, by this means, impair, if not wholly destroy, your peace as, well as joy in the Lord.

5. But his master-piece of subtlety is still behind. Not content to strike at your peace and joy, he will carry his attempts farther yet: He will level his assault against your righteousness also. He will endeavour to shake, yea, if it be possible, to destroy the holiness you have already received by your very expectation of receiving more, of attaining all the image of God.

6. The manner wherein he attempts this, may partly appear from what has been already observed. For, First, by striking at our joy in the Lord, he strikes likewise at our holiness: Seeing joy in the Holy Ghost is a precious means of promoting every holy temper; a choice instrument of God whereby he carries on much of his work in a believing soul. And it is a considerable help not only to inward, but also to outward holiness. It strengthens our hands to go on in the work of faith, and in the labour of love; manfully to "fight the good fight of faith, and to lay hold on eternal life." It is peculiarly designed of God to be a balance both against inward and outward sufferings; to "lift up the hands that hang down, and confirm the feeble knees." Consequently, whatever damps our joy in the Lord proportionably obstructs our holiness. And therefore, so far as Satan shakes our joy he hinders our holiness also.

7. The same effect will ensue, if he can, by any means, either destroy or shake our peace. For the peace of God is another precious means of advancing the image of God in us. There is scarce a greater help to holiness than this, a continual tranquility of spirit, the evenness of a mind stayed upon God, a calm repose in the blood of Jesus. And without this, it is scarce possible to "grow in grace," and in the vital "knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." For all fear (unless the tender, filial fear) freezes and benumbs the soul. It binds up all the springs of spiritual life, and stops all motion of the heart toward God. And doubt, as it were, bemires the soul, so that it sticks fast in the deep clay. Therefore, in the same proportion as either of these prevail, our growth in holiness is hindered.

8. At the same time that our wise adversary endeavours to make our conviction of the necessity of perfect love an occasion of shaking our peace by doubts and fears, he endeavours to weaken, if not destroy, our faith. Indeed these are inseparably connected, so that they must stand or fall together. So long as faith subsists we remain in peace; our heart stands fast, while it believes in the Lord. But if we let go our faith, our filial confidence in a loving, pardoning God, our peace is at an end, the very foundation on which it

stood being overthrown. And this is the only foundation of holiness, as well as of peace; consequently whatever strikes at this, strikes at the very root of all holiness: For without this faith, without an abiding sense that Christ loved me, and gave himself for me, without a continuing conviction that God for Christ's sake is merciful to me a sinner, it is impossible that I should love God: "We love him, because he first loved us;" and in proportion to the strength and clearness of our conviction that he hath loved us, and accepted us in his Son. And unless we love God, it is not possible that we should love our neighbour as ourselves; nor, consequently, that we should have any right affections, either toward God, or toward man. It evidently follows, that whatever weakens our faith, must, in the same degree obstruct our holiness: And this is not only the most effectual, but also the most compendious, way of destroying all holiness; seeing it does not affect any one Christian temper, any single grace or fruit of the Spirit, but, so far as it succeeds, tears up the very root of the whole work of God.

9. No marvel, therefore, that the ruler of the darkness of this world should here put forth all his strength. And so we find by experience. For it is far easier to conceive, than it is to express, the unspeakable violence wherewith this temptation is frequently urged on them who hunger and thirst after righteousness. When they see, in a strong and clear light, on the one hand, the desperate wickedness of their own hearts, -- on the other hand, the unspotted holiness to which they are called in Christ Jesus; on the one hand, the depth of their own corruption, of their total alienation from God, -- on the other, the height of the glory of God, that image of the Holy One, wherein they are to be renewed; there is, many times, no spirit left in them; they could almost cry out, "With God this is impossible!" They are ready to give up both faith and hope; to cast away that very confidence, whereby they are to overcome all things, and do all things, through Christ strengthening them; whereby, "after' they have done the will of God," they are to "receive the promise."

10. And if they "hold fast the beginning of their confidence steadfast unto the end," they shall undoubtedly receive the promise of God, reaching through both time and eternity. But here is another snare laid for our feet: While we earnestly pant for that part of the promise which is to be accomplished here, "for the glorious liberty of the children of God," we may be led unawares from the consideration of the glory which shall hereafter be revealed. Our eye may be insensibly turned aside from that crown which the righteous Judge hath promised to give at that day "to all that love his appearing;" and we may be drawn away from the view of that incorruptible inheritance which is reserved in heaven for us. But this also would be a loss to our souls, and an obstruction to our holiness. For to walk in the continual sight of our goal, is a needful help in our running the race that is set before us. This it was, the having "respect unto the recompense of reward," which of old time, encouraged Moses, rather "to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt." Nay, it is expressly said of a greater than he, that "for the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross, and despised the shame," till he "sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." Whence we may easily infer, how much more needful for us is the view of that joy set before us, that we may endure whatever cross the wisdom of God lays upon us, and press on through holiness to glory.

11. But while we are reaching to this, as well as to that glorious liberty which is preparatory to it, we may be in danger of falling into another snare of the devil, whereby he labours to entangle the children of God. We may take too much thought for tomorrow, so as to neglect the improvement of to-day. We may so expect perfect love, as not to use that which is already shed abroad in our hearts. There have not been wanting instances of those who have greatly suffered hereby. They were so taken up with what they were to receive hereafter, as utterly to neglect what they had already received. In expectation of having five

talents more, they buried their one talent in the earth. At least, they did not improve it as they might have done, to the glory of God and the good of their own souls.

12. Thus does the subtle adversary of God and man endeavour to make void the counsel of God, by dividing the gospel against itself, and making one part of it overthrow the other; while the first work of God in the soul is destroyed by the expectation of his perfect work. We have seen several of the ways wherein he attempts this by cutting off, as it were, the springs of holiness. But this he likewise does more directly by making that blessed hope an occasion of unholy tempers.

13. Thus, whenever our heart is eagerly athirst for all the great and precious promises; when we pant after the fullness of God, as the hart after the water-brook; when our soul breaketh out in fervent desire, "Why are his chariot-wheels so long a-coming?" -- he will not neglect the opportunity of tempting us to murmur against God. He will use all his wisdom, and all his strength, if haply, in an unguarded hour, we may be influenced to repine at our Lord for thus delaying his coming. At least, he will labour to excite some degree of fretfulness or impatience; and, perhaps, of envy at those whom we believe to have already attained the prize of our high calling. He well knows, that, by giving way to any of these tempers, we are pulling down the very thing we would build up. By thus following after perfect holiness, we become more unholy than before. Yea, there is great danger that our last state should be worse than the first; like them of whom the Apostle speaks in those dreadful words, "It had been better they had never known the way of righteousness, than, after they had known it, to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them."

14. And from hence he hopes to reap another advantage, even to bring up an evil report of the good way. He is sensible, how few are able to distinguish (and too many are not willing so to do) between the accidental abuse, and the natural tendency, of a doctrine. These, therefore, will he continually blend together, with regard to the doctrine of Christian perfection; in order to prejudice the minds of unwary men against the glorious promises of God. And how frequently, how generally, I had almost said how universally, has he prevailed herein! For who is there that observes any of these accidental ill effects of this doctrine, and does not immediately conclude, this is its natural tendency; and does not readily cry out, "See, these are the fruits (meaning the natural, necessary fruits) of such doctrine?" Not so: They are fruits which may accidentally spring from the abuse of a great and precious truth: But the abuse of this, or any other scriptural doctrine, does by no means destroy its use. Neither can the unfaithfulness of man perverting his right way, make the promise of God of none effect No: Let God be true, and every man a liar. The word of the Lord, it shall stand. "Faithful is he that hath promised: He also will do it." Let not us then be "removed from the hope of the gospel." Rather let us observe, which was the second thing proposed: How we may retort these fiery darts of the wicked one: How we may rise the higher by what he intends for an occasion of our falling.

II. 1. And, First, does Satan endeavour to damp your joy in the Lord, by the consideration of your sinfulness; added to this, that without entire, universal holiness, no man can see the Lord? You may cast back this dart upon his own head, while through the grace of God, the more you feel of your own vileness, the more you rejoice in confident hope, that all this shall be done away. While you hold fast this hope, every evil temper you feel, though you hate it with a perfect hatred, may be a means, not of lessening your humble joy, but rather of increasing it. "This and this," may you say, "shall likewise perish from the presence of the Lord. Like as the wax melteth at the fire, so shall this melt away before his face." By this means, the greater that change is which remains to be wrought in your soul, the more may you triumph in the Lord, and rejoice in the God of your salvation, who hath done so great things for you already, and will do so much greater things than these.

2. Secondly: The more vehemently he assaults your peace with that suggestion, "God is holy; you are unholy; You are immensely distant from that holiness, without which you cannot see God: How then can you be in the favour of God? How can you fancy you are justified?" -- take the more earnest heed to hold fast that, "Not by works of righteousness which I have done, I am found in him; I am accepted in the Beloved; not having my own righteousness, (as the cause, either in whole or in part, of our justification before God,) but that which is by faith in Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith." O bind this about your neck: Write it upon the table of thy heart. Wear it as a bracelet upon thy arm, as frontlets between thine eyes: "I am 'justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ." Value and esteem, more and more, that precious truth, "By grace we are saved through faith." Admire, more and more, the free grace of God, in so loving the world as to give "his only Son, that whosoever believeth on him might not perish, but have everlasting life." So shall the sense of the sinfulness you feel, on the one hand, and of the holiness you expect, on the other, both contribute to establish your peace, and to make it flow as a river. So shall that peace flow on with an even stream, in spite of all those mountains of ungodliness, which shall become a plain in the day when the Lord cometh to take full possession of your heart. Neither will sickness, or pain, or the approach of death, occasion any doubt or fear. You know a day, an hour, a moment with God, is as a thousand years. He cannot be straitened for time, wherein to work whatever remains to be done in your soul. And God's time is always the best time. Therefore be thou careful for nothing: Only make thy request known unto Him, and that, not with doubt or fear, but thanksgiving; as being previously assured, He cannot withhold from thee any manner of thing that is good.

3. Thirdly: The more you are tempted to give up your shield, to cast away your faith, your confidence in his love, so much the more take heed that you hold fast that whereunto you have attained; so much the more labour to stir up the gift of God which is in you. Never let that slip, "I have 'an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous;' and, 'The life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.'" Be this thy glory and crown of rejoicing. And see that no one take thy crown. Hold that fast: "I know that my Redeemer liveth, and shall stand at the latter day upon the earth;" and, "I now 'have redemption in his blood, even the forgiveness of sins.'" Thus, being filled with all peace and joy in believing, press on, in the peace and joy of faith to the renewal of thy whole soul in the image of him that created thee! Meanwhile, cry continually to God that thou mayest see that prize of thy high calling, not as Satan represents it, in a horrid dreadful shape, but in its genuine native beauty; not as something that must be, or thou wilt go to hell, but as what may be, to lead thee to heaven. Look upon it as the most desirable gift which is in all the stores of the rich mercies of God. Beholding it in this true point of light, thou wilt hunger after it more and more; thy whole soul will be athirst for God, and for this glorious conformity to his likeness; and having received a good hope of this, and strong consolation through grace, thou wilt no more be weary or faint in thy mind, but wilt follow on till thou attainest.

4. In the same power of faith, press on to glory. Indeed this is the same prospect still. God hath joined from the beginning pardon, holiness, heaven. And why should man put them asunder? O beware of this! Let not one link of the golden chain be broken. "God, for Christ's sake hath forgiven me. He is now renewing me in his own image. Shortly he will make me meet for himself, and take me to stand before his face. I, whom he hath justified through the blood of his Son, being thoroughly sanctified by his Spirit, shall quickly ascend to the 'New Jerusalem, the city of the living God.' Yet a little while, and I shall 'come to the general assembly and church of the first-born, and to God the Judge of all, and to Jesus the Mediator of the New Covenant.' How soon will these shadows flee away, and the day of eternity dawn upon me! How soon shall I drink of 'the river of the water of life, going out of the throne of God and of the Lamb! There all his servants shall

praise him, and shall see his face, and his name shall be upon their foreheads. And no night shall be there; and they have no need of a candle or the light of the sun. For the Lord God enlighteneth them, and they shall reign for ever and ever."

5. And if you thus "taste of the good word, and of the powers of the world to come," you will not murmur against God, because you are not yet "meet for the inheritance of the saints in light." Instead of repining at your not being wholly delivered, you will praise God for thus far delivering you. You will magnify God for what he hath done, and take it as an earnest of what he will do. You will not fret against him, because you are not yet renewed, but bless him because you shall be; and because "now is your salvation" from all sin "nearer than when you" first "believed." Instead of uselessly tormenting yourself because the time is not fully come, you will calmly and quietly wait for it, knowing that it "will come, and will not tarry." You may, therefore, the more cheerfully endure, as yet, the burden of sin that still remains in you, because it will not always remain. Yet a little while, and it shall be clean gone. Only "tarry thou the Lord's leisure:" Be strong, and "he shall comfort thy heart;" and put thou thy trust in the Lord!

6. And if you see any who appear (so far as man can judge, but God alone searcheth the hearts) to be already partakers of their hope, already "made perfect in love;" far from envying the grace of God in them, let it rejoice and comfort your heart. Glorify God for their sake! "If one member is honoured," shall not "all the members rejoice with it?" Instead of jealousy or evil surmising concerning them, praise God for the consolation! Rejoice in having a fresh proof of the faithfulness of God in fulfilling all his promises; and stir yourself up the more, to "apprehend that for which you also are apprehended of Christ Jesus!"

7. In order to this, redeem the time. Improve the present moment. Buy up every opportunity of growing in grace, or of doing good. Let not the thought of receiving more grace to-morrow, make you negligent of to-day. You have one talent now: If you expect five more, so much the rather improve that you have. And the more you expect to receive hereafter, the more labour for God now. Sufficient for the day is the grace thereof. God is now pouring his benefits upon you: Now approve yourself a faithful steward of the present grace of God. Whatever may be to-morrow, give all diligence to-day, to "add to your faith courage, temperance, patience, brotherly-kindness," and the fear of God, till you attain that pure and perfect love! Let these things be now "in you and abound!" Be not now slothful or unfruitful: "So shall an entrance be ministered into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ!"

8. Lastly: If in time past you have abused this blessed hope of being holy as he is holy, yet do not therefore cast it away. Let the abuse cease, the use remain. Use it now to the more abundant glory of God, and profit of your own soul. In steadfast faith, in calm tranquility of spirit, in full assurance of hope, rejoicing evermore for what God hath done, press ye on unto perfection! Daily growing in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, and going on from strength to strength, in resignation, in patience, in humble thankfulness for what ye have attained, and for what ye shall, run the race set before you, "looking unto Jesus," till, through perfect love, ye enter into his glory!

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