

Satan: How Does He Operate?

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

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REVIEW

In 2 Corinthians 2:11 the apostle Paul says, "We are not ignorant of [Satan's] devices." We are expected to recognize his schemes, plans, and stratagems. Since we have the Word of God, which unmasks Satan's disguises and reveals his schemes, we have no reason to be ignorant.

I. SATAN: IS HE?

II. SATAN: WHO IS HE?

III. SATAN: WHAT IS HE LIKE?

LESSON

IV. SATAN: HOW DOES HE OPERATE?

Satan operates within two groups of people: his own children and the children of God.

A. In His Own Children

Anyone who doesn't know Jesus Christ is outside the family of God and is a child of Satan. First John 5:19 says, "The whole world lieth in wickedness [lit., "the wicked one"]." In John 8:44 Jesus says to unbelievers, "Ye are of your father the devil."

1. By preventing conversion

Satan is busy preventing people from coming to Christ.

a) Hardened hearts In Luke 8:11 the Lord begins to explain a parable He gave in verses 5-10 about a sower sowing seed: "The parable is this: The seed is the word of God." The sower was spreading the truth of God's Word. Verse 12 says, "Those by the wayside are they that hear; then cometh the devil, and taketh away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved." Verse 5 tells us that the wayside "was trodden down." The path was rock hard. Therefore when the seed fell on it, it remained on the surface and birds ate it. When people with hard hearts hear God's Word, they don't receive it and the devil comes and takes it away. The devil is in the business of preventing people from entering God's kingdom, and he does so by snatching away God's Word. (1) The types of hearts a) The unresponsive heart Matthew 13:19 says, "When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received seed by the wayside." The devil snatches away God's Word--it doesn't register in an unresponsive heart. b) The impulsive heart Verses 20-21 refer to a person with an impulsive heart: "He that receiveth the word in stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and immediately with joy receiveth it; yet hath he not root in himself, but endureth for a while; for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, immediately he is offended." A person who makes an impulsive commitment to Christ has no real root or depth. c) The preoccupied heart Verse 22 says, "He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this age, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful." That person is too preoccupied with the world to give himself to God's Word. d) The receptive heart Matthew 13:23 tells us that "he that received seed in the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it, who also beareth fruit." (2) The result of indifference Jesus' parable teaches that the condition of a person's heart determines how he or she will respond to the gospel. The heart we are concerned with here is the unresponsive heart. When the Word of God

lands on a heart that is indifferent, callous, and unresponsive, the devil can come and snatch away the Word. Before the person can dwell on its significance, Satan removes its impact by bringing new allurements that are more appealing than the necessary commitment to God's Word.b) Blinded mindsSecond Corinthians 4:3-4 says, "If our gospel be hidden it is hidden to them that are lost, in whom the god of this age [Satan] hath blinded the minds of them who believe not." Satan blinds the minds of those who willfully disbelieve God. That is not to say God wants you saved and Satan wants you lost, and you cast the deciding vote. Neither is it that you'd like to vote for God, but you're blinded by Satan. It does mean that Satan can make a person blind to spiritual truth because that person has an unbelieving heart to begin with. To people with hard hearts the gospel is irrelevant. First Corinthians 1:18 rightly says, "The preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness."

2. By perverting the truth

Satan desires to pervert the truth so that what people hear isn't the truth.

a) Through false doctrineJ. Dwight Pentecost said, "Satan, of course, would rather not have to do this work of taking away the seed that has been sown. He would rather so control the one who is doing the preaching that something other than the good seed of the Word of God is proclaimed. Think of the work that Satan has to accomplish when the Word is preached: if there are 500 people present when the true Word of God is planted in 500 hearts, he has to have 500 demons to get into 500 different lives to take out that which has been sown. What an economy of operation it is if he can have those people who think they will be taught the Word of God hear some lie of the devil. He has had to work with only one individual instead of 500. But knowing that the Word of God will be proclaimed and that the truth of God will be declared, Satan has prepared to prevent the good seed of the Word from falling into the good ground so that it can bring forth fruit" (Your Adversary the Devil [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969], p. 114). Satan would much rather pervert the truth than prevent people from receiving it. Even now he is actively perverting the truth by propagating false doctrine.(1) A Commentary on false doctrine(a) 1 Timothy 4:1-2--"The Spirit speaketh expressly that, in the latter times, some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their conscience seared with a hot iron." False teachers speak hypocritical lies and it doesn't seem to bother them.(b) 2 Thessalonians 2:9--Paul identified the Antichrist as "him whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders." False preachers not only speak lies that sound like the truth, but also do deeds that appear to be godly.(2) The core of false doctrine(a) Denial*i*) The authority of ScriptureWhen Satan said to Eve, "Yea, hath God said?" (Gen. 3:1), he was casting aspersions on the truth of God. Satan will continue the same tactic until the end: "The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine but, after their own lusts, shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables" (2 Tim. 4:3-4).*ii*) The deity of ChristFalse teachers invariably deny the deity of Christ (2 Pet. 2:1). And a denial of the deity of Christ destroys the doctrine of salvation. If Christ on the cross were not God Almighty in human flesh, then He didn't accomplish the atonement He purported to accomplish.*iii*) Salvation by graceThere are only two possible methods of salvation: divine accomplishment or human achievement. Paul argued in Galatians that a man or woman is not saved by human achievement, but by divine accomplishment. Satan argues the opposite.*iv*) The second coming of ChristSatan denies the second coming because it is connected with judgment. Most false teachers have a truncated eschatology because they can't face ultimate judgment. In 2 Peter 3:4 scoffers ask, "Where is the promise of his coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation." But Peter responded that not all things have continued as they were, and he used the Flood as a case in point (vv. 5-7).(b) DeceptionIn place of the true doctrines they deny, false teachers propagate false doctrine.*i*) RebellionSatan likes to suggest that rebellion against God is effective. But God wants the world to know that rebellion against Him will not work. That's why He's allowing Satan's rebellion to run its course. Satan says you can get away with

rebellion; God says you can't.ii) IdolatryPsalm 96:5 tells us that "all the gods of the nations are idols." If man wants to worship a rock, I believe Satan often allows demons to impersonate the god that man thinks is in the rock. Psalm 106:36 says, "They served their idols, which were a snare to them. Yea, they sacrificed their sons and their daughters unto demons." While they were making sacrifices to idols, they actually were sacrificing to demons, who had impersonated their god. Satan even promotes angel worship (Col. 2:18).b) Through a damning lifestyleEphesians 2:1-3 says, "You hath he made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins; in which in times past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the sons of disobedience; among whom also we all had our manner of life in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others." Satan wants to trap people in a damning lifestyle from which they cannot extricate themselves.c) Through oppression(1) LustSatan would like all men and women to abandon themselves to their lusts, and he has been successful in many cases. Romans 1 tells us that for the most part, the world did just that: "God ... gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonor their own bodies between themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections; for even their women did exchange the natural use for that which is against nature.... Even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind" (vv. 24-26, 28). Notice that the body is the major feature of verse 24, the heart in verse 26, and the mind verse 28. Satan perverts the entire person.Verses 29-31 is a catalog of lust: "unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness, full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity; whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, insolent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents; without understanding, covenant breakers, without natural affection implacable, unmerciful." Verse 32 concludes that while those who've abandoned themselves to such things know "that they who commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same but have pleasure in them that do them." Satan wants people not only to abandon themselves to their lusts, but also to encourage others to do so. We certainly see that in our world today. Many have lost control in their abandonment to the aforementioned lusts.(2) Physical illnessThe gospels tell of people who were oppressed by Satan's demons with a loss of speech (Mark 9:17-29). Others were made blind (Matt. 12:22), others had physical deformities (Luke 13:11-17), and still others had epilepsy (Luke 9:37-43). That is not to say all physical illnesses are caused by demons, but it would be just as extreme to say that none are.(3) Mental illnessOne of the great causes of mental illness is Satanic activity. Mark 5:2 tells of a man with an unclean spirit who lived among the tombs in Gadara. Though the people often bound him (v. 4), he kept breaking his fetters and chains, constantly crying out and cutting himself with stones (v. 5). His insanity was the result of his being possessed by demonic hosts.Mark 9:22 tells us that a demon so oppressed a young man that he was unable to withstand the demon's attempts to "cast him into the fire, and into the waters, to destroy him." I am sure that many cases of mental illness and suicide are a result of Satan's oppressing his own people.(4) DeathIn Revelation 9:13-18 John says, "The sixth angel sounded, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar which is before God, saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, Loose the four angels who are bound in the great river, Euphrates. And the four angels were loosed, who were prepared for an hour, and a day, and a month, and a year, to slay the third part of men. And the number of the army of the horsemen were two hundred thousand thousand [two hundred million]; and I heard the number of them. And thus I saw the horses in the vision, and them that sat on them, having breastplates of fire, and of jacinth, and brimstone; and the heads of the horses were like the heads of lions, and out of their mouths issued fire and smoke and brimstone. By these three was the third part of men killed, by the fire, and by the smoke, and by the brimstone, which issued out of their mouths." That demon-inspired army will destroy one third of the earth's population. God sometimes gives Satan the power to take life.

3. By persuading the nations

Satan works among his own people by influencing governments and nations. When Satan was unmasked in Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28, on both occasions the prophets were speaking to a human ruler. Yet they were actually addressing Satan, who was influencing those rulers. Daniel 10:13, 20 refers to certain nations that were governed by men possessed by demons. Satan has always been active in politics.

When Satan tempted our Lord in Matthew 4:1-11, he offered Christ the kingdoms of the world if He would bow down to him (vv. 8-9). Although Satan is a usurper, as prince of this world he does indeed hold sway over the kingdoms of the world.

Ephesians 6:12 warns us that "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." From the Tower of Babel until now, Satan has ruled the nations of the world with his demonic hosts. And while God has allowed that, He sovereignly restrains their activity through the Holy Spirit, the restrainer of evil (2 Thess. 2:7).

B. In the Children of God

1. By creating doubt

Satan loves to make Christians doubt--to make us struggle with reality. I have endured those kinds of struggles. Satan typically suggests to me that Christianity is a waste of time. But I know it isn't, and one of the ways I reassure my confidence is by meditating on all the "I know" verses, like Job 19:25 and 2 Timothy 1:12.

Satan tempted Eve to doubt God--to doubt His Word, His goodness, His concern, and His security. That's why Paul described the hope of salvation as a helmet (1 Thess. 5:8). When Satan attacks with his broadsword of doubt, it will glance off the helmet of salvation.

2. By instigating persecution

Satan loves to persecute the church. He's had plenty of practice with Israel. In Revelation 2:10 we see Satan persecuting the church at Smyrna: "Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer. Behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried, and ye shall have tribulation ten days; be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life." Expect persecution because Satan will do it.

3. By hindering ministry

a) 1 Thessalonians 2:18--"We would have come unto you, even I, Paul, once and again; but Satan hindered us." Expect Satan to hinder your ministry. You may develop a ministry and see it run smoothly for a while. But when you run into the first obstacle, don't immediately assume you're doing something against God's will. Examine the obstacle first. It just might be Satan hindering it. The more effective your ministry is, the more he will try to hinder it.
b) 2 Corinthians 12:7--Paul referred to a hindrance he endured as "a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan sent to buffet [him]." God allowed Satan to hinder Paul in that way to keep him humble (v. 9). Paul understood that and was thankful, saying, "Most gladly, therefore, will I rather glory in my infirmities.... For when I am weak, then am I strong" (vv. 9-10). Despite Satan's efforts to hinder believers, he never short-circuits God's plan.

4. By infiltrating the church

a) Through false Christians Satan leads unbelievers to the church who appear to be Christians, and it is very difficult for true believers to know if they are real or not. Once accepted they can create much havoc. Their lifestyles don't match their claim, so they confuse the world about what a true Christian is. They often become difficult to deal with. And they usually try to get into positions of leadership, which gives Satan a voice in many decisions. In Matthew 13:38-39 the Lord identifies them in the parable of the wheat and the tares: "The field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom, but the tares are the children of the wicked one; the enemy that sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are the angels." The only way the wheat and tares

will ever be separated is by God at the end of the age (v. 40).b) Through false teachers Satan loves to infiltrate the church with unbelievers who become approved by the leadership of the church. Once established, those individuals disseminate Satan's lies.(1) 1 Timothy 4:1-3--Paul promised that false teachers in the church would speak "lies in hypocrisy."(2) 1 John 4:1--John warned the church that "many false prophets are gone out into the world."(3) 2 Peter 2:1-2--Peter said, "There shall be false teachers among you, who secretly shall bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious [evil] ways, by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of."That's why God has armed the Christian with "the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God" (Eph. 6:17). Only by God's provision can we counteract the satanic infiltration of false doctrine.c) Through division Satan loves to divide the church.(1) The situation in CorinthSecond Corinthians 2:5-11 shows how Paul was able to prevent further division in the Corinthian assembly. In verses 5-6 he says, "If any has caused sorrow, he has caused sorrow not to me, but in some degree--in order not to say too much--to all of you. Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which was inflicted by the majority" (NASB). Paul had previously instructed the Corinthians to discipline an immoral man in their assembly, perhaps the one mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5:1-5. Apparently he was satisfied that the man had been sufficiently disciplined.Verse 7 expresses Paul's concern that the Corinthians cease being overzealous disciplinarians and instead be forgiving and gracious friends: "On the contrary ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow." Unnecessary discipline, rather than being remedial, can drive a person to despair. Once the person repents, he is then to be restored (Gal. 6:1). Paul continued, "I beseech you that ye would confirm your love toward him. For to this end did I write, that I might know the proof of you, whether ye be obedient in all things. To whom ye forgive anything, I forgive also; for if I forgave anything, to whom I forgave it, for your sakes forgave I it in the person of Christ" (vv. 8-10). Paul wanted unity in the church, and that meant the people needed to be willing to forgive. A lack of forgiveness only creates further division.In verse 11 Paul says, "Lest Satan should get an advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices." What are his devices? One is he loves to split the church--and there's no greater way to do that than to deal with a discipline situation in an unforgiving and unloving way.(2) The application to todayWhat is the general principle? An overemphasis on doctrine to the exclusion of love is deadly to any church. Satan is very subtle--he infiltrates a church that's doing something technically right, like disciplining a sinning member, and tries to get them to carry it out in the wrong way. The church is built on two things: love and sound doctrine. Too much sound doctrine without enough love will bring about division. Too much love without enough sound doctrine will bring about confusion. Beware of either extreme.

5. By tempting us to sin

Satan tempts us to sin through our flesh (1 Cor. 7:5; James 1:14-15) and through the world (1 John 2:15-16). The following are some of the sins he tempts us with.

a) To trust in our own resourcesSatan wants us to trust in our own resources because we're no match for him when we're not leaning on God.(1) David's censusAs king of Israel, David desired victory in the many wars Israel was engaged in. Consequently he wanted to ascertain the manpower of Israel. Satan took advantage of that situation "and enticed David to number Israel. And David said to Joab and to the rulers of the people, Go, number Israel from Beersheba to Dan; and bring the number of them to me, that I may know it. And Joab answered, The Lord make his people an hundred times as many more as they are; but, my lord the king, are they not all my lord's servants? Why, then, doth my lord require this thing? Why will he be a cause of trespass to Israel? Nevertheless, the king's word prevailed against Joab. Wherefore, Joab departed, and went throughout all Israel, and came to Jerusalem. And Joab gave the sum of the number of the people unto David. And all they of Israel were a million and an hundred thousand men who drew sword; and Judah was four hundred threescore and ten thousand men who drew the sword" (1 Chron. 21:1-5).

That was a mighty army!(2) God's condemnationGod condemned David for his sin: "God was displeased with this thing; therefore, he smote Israel" (v. 7). Who enticed David to number the people? Satan. He wants you to trust in your own resources.(3) Paul's commandIn Ephesians 6:10 Paul exhorts us to "be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might."**b**) To lose faith in God(1) Luke 22:31-32--Satan tempts us to give up on God. That was what he wanted Peter to do: "The Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat" (v. 31). Sifting refers to the process of letting the wind separate the chaff from the grain. But the Lord said, "I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not" (v. 32). I believe Satan was trying to separate Peter from his faith by blowing it away in the wind of adversity. You can be sure that since the Lord prayed for his faith not to fail, it didn't fail. Satan would love to separate you from your faith in God, but our Lord prays for us as well (John 17:20-24; Heb. 7:25).(2) 1 Peter 5:8-9--"Be sober, be vigilant, because your adversary, the devil, like a roaring lion walketh about, seeking whom he may devour; whom resist steadfast in the faith."(3) Ephesians 6:16--"Above all, [take] the shield of faith, with which ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked."**c**) To lieIn Acts 5:3 Peter confronted Ananias and Sapphira: "Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?" When you lie or even shade the truth, Satan is at the source.**d**) To lose sexual controlIn 1 Corinthians 7:5 Paul says this about sexual abstinence in marriage: "Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again lest Satan tempt you because of your lack of self-control" (NASB). If marriage partners decide to abstain from their sexual relationship for any other reason than prayer, they are in danger of succumbing to sexual temptation.**e**) To be preoccupied with the worldFirst John 2:15-16 says, "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world." When you are absorbed in Satan's system, you have effectively turned your back on God. That's exactly what Demas did: Paul said, "Demas has hath forsaken me, having loved this present world" (2 Tim. 4:10). Such a person reveals he was never a true believer to begin with.**f**) To be proudPaul cautioned Timothy that when choosing elders in the church, he shouldn't choose "a novice [a recent convert], lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil" (1 Tim. 3:6). The devil loves to exalt people to make them proud then they soon fall. When recent converts or immature believers are given too much responsibility, pride goes to their head and their fall is great.**g**) To be discouragedFirst Peter 5:6-10 says, "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time, casting all your care on him, for he careth for you. Be sober, be vigilant, because your adversary, the devil, like a roaring lion walketh about, seeking whom he may devour; whom resist steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world. But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after ye have suffered awhile, make you perfect, establish, strengthen, settle you." Satan will try to wear our faith down by bringing discouragement into our lives. But we need to cast all our cares on Christ, depending on Him (v. 7). Verse 10 assures us that when our suffering is over, God will have made us mature.

CONCLUSION

Satan attacks his own children by preventing conversion, perverting the truth, and persuading the nations. He attacks believers by tempting us to trust in our own resources, lose faith in God, lie, be immoral, love the world, be proud, and be discouraged. But we have a great promise: "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7).

Focusing on the Facts

1. Who are the children of Satan?
2. What does Satan try to prevent from happening to his children?

3. What does the downtrodden wayside path illustrate?
4. What type of heart does Satan prevent from dwelling on the gospel?
5. What are the three ways in which Satan perverts the truth?
6. What will those who deny God's truth do as an alternative (2 Tim. 4:3-4)?
7. Why is a denial of the deity of Christ also a denial of the doctrine of salvation?
8. What are the two possible methods of salvation?
9. How are demons related to idolatry? Support your answer with Scripture.
10. What kind of lifestyle does Satan want to trap people in?
11. In what ways does Satan oppress his people? Explain?
12. What piece of armor protects the believer's mind from doubts (1 Thess. 5:8)?
13. Why shouldn't we be quick to give up when we are faced with opposition in a ministry?
14. How does Satan confuse the world about Christian truth and lifestyle?
15. In what ways does Satan infiltrate the church? Explain.
16. What was Paul concerned might happen to the Corinthian church because of how they were treating a repentant brother (2 Cor. 2:7)?
17. What are the two things a healthy church is built on? What happens when the two are unbalanced?
18. What was the nature of David's sin in numbering Israel?
19. By "sifting" a believer, what does Satan hope to accomplish?
20. Why should a new believer not be put in a position of leadership (1 Tim. 3:6)?

Pondering the Principles

1. Have you ever viewed unbelievers as victims of Satan? They need to be reminded that by pursuing the course of this world, they are plunging into a dead end. Although Satan has deceived people into being content with a temporary earthly life, they need to reconsider the stark reality of both physical and spiritual death. Pray for an opportunity to share with a friend, neighbor, or relative that Christ became a man "that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver them who, through fear of death, were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (Heb. 2:14-15). Show them that they no longer need to be in bondage to a system in which they futilely search for meaning.
2. Division untreated becomes like a malignant cancer. Is your family or church suffering from the same problem as the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 1:10-13)? James tells us that pride and selfishness are the causes of many divisions (James 4:1-6). Read Philipians 2 to discover the keys to unity, and learn from the humble examples of Christ, Paul, Timothy, and Epaphroditus.
3. Satan tempts us to become preoccupied with his godless world system. According to the parable of the sower (Matt. 13:20-22), what causes an individual to be unproductive? Read the following passages and identify the instruction each one gives us to prevent us from being unproductive: Matthew 6:19-34, 19:16-26; 1 Timothy 6:6-12; and James 1:27, 4:1-17.

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