



Confronting Satan's Strategies

"You can't stop birds from flying over your head," wrote Luther, "but you can keep them from nesting in your hair." In this article, I want to give you a sampling of remedies that will assist you in following Luther's bold assertion.

Obviously, Satan's strategies and devices are too numerous to be covered in these short articles. William Gurnall said quaintly that no actress has "so many dresses to come in upon the stage with as the devil hath forms of temptation." Instead, I will group some of his major devices under four major headings, then offer ways to counter each strategy. Many of the remedies suggested will also help you battle other satanic devices not listed here.

Strategy One: Satan Entices Us to Sin

Device: Satan offers the bait of pleasure that hides the hook of sin. So Satan gave Adam and Eve a piece of fruit in exchange for Paradise and life. The hook of sin enveloped in the fruit led to punishment and death.

Remedies:

- 1) Remember the consequences of yielding to temptation. All sin is bittersweet. Sooner or later, Satan's snap trap will find you out. One evening my wife watched two mice carefully eat peanut butter from a snap trap. They were astonishingly clever; the trap never sprang. But two mornings later, those mice were dead in the trap. They had become more careless and bold.

Sin is a plague that inevitably incurs the saddest losses. "All Satan's temptations are so many 'welcome' notices (or billboards) along the broad road that leads to destruction," writes J. I. Packer. "Many eat that on earth which they digest in hell," Brooks says. William Gurnall put it this way: "There is a spark of hell in every temptation." These thoughts alone should keep us from playing with Satan's enticing bait.

- 2) Don't toe-dangle. If you know you are weak in a certain area, stay away from situations where this temptation is likely to occur. For some, that may mean not going on the Internet unsupervised, and avoiding chat rooms. For others, it may mean canceling catalog browsing or trips to the mall, or keeping distance from bars and taverns. Know your own areas of weakness and flee them. Proverbs 5:8 says, "Remove thy way from her, and come not nigh the door of her house."

Do not ask how close you can come to sin without sinning, but strive to keep as far from sin as possible. "If you don't want the devil to tempt you with forbidden fruit, you had better keep out of his orchard," Doug Barnett wrote. As Romans 12:9 says, "Abhor that which is evil." The Greek word for "abhor" means to hate sin with horror, to hate it as hell itself.

- 3) Stay actively involved in growth and ministry. David was especially vulnerable to temptation when he was not in the battle where he belonged (2 Sam. 11). Remember the old adage: Idle time is the devil's playground.
- 4) Share sustained temptations with a close, confidential, Christian friend. Since sin thrives in secrecy, bringing the issue out into the light helps to break its power by making you more accountable to handle it righteously (1 John 1:6-7). Pray with your friend and pray often on your

own for spiritual strength to resist temptation (Matt. 26:41). Remember, lone rangers often become dead rangers; Christians need each other.

- 5) Remember that you cannot remain neutral to any temptation. Each temptation will drive you either closer to God or further away from Him. *“Our response to temptation is an accurate barometer of our love for God,”* writes Erwin Lutzer.

Device: Satan presents sin as a virtue. He makes little of sin so as to retain the sinner. Pride becomes self-esteem, covetousness becomes ambition, and drunkenness becomes fellowship.

Remedy: Remember, sin is more dangerous when it is painted and disguised. But sin will eventually lose its covering and be exposed. We must see sin in all its blackness, the way we would see it on our deathbed. We must remember that the forgiveness of sin cost our Savior His precious blood.

Device: Satan says repentance from sin is easy. By minimizing the difficulty of repentance, Satan minimizes the horrible nature of sin. That encourages us to keep on sinning.

Remedy: Repentance is so difficult that it is nearly impossible for us. *“Repentance is a flower that grows not in nature’s garden,”* Thomas Brooks writes. True repentance is radical and comprehensive. As Brooks notes, *“to repent of sin is as great a work of grace as not to sin”* (*Precious Remedies*, p. 63). Repentance is a daily, lifelong task that changes a whole person, moving the person continually from sin to God. It produces sorrow and shame for sin, confession, forsaking sin, and accepting sin’s punishment. It makes a person loathe himself (Job 42:6; Ezek. 20:43) and fly to Christ alone for forgiveness and solace.

Device: Satan encourages us to make friends with worldly people. Satan knows that association begets assimilation, so he entices us to sin through friendships with ungodly people.

Remedy: Scripture warns us against the infectious danger of ungodly company. Ephesians 5:11 says, *“Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them.”* Proverbs 5:14-16 says, *“Enter not into the path of the wicked, and go not in the way of evil men. Avoid it, pass not by it, turn from it, and pass away.”*

Device: Satan presents unconverted people as people who have many outward mercies and few sorrows, and believers as having few outward mercies and many sorrows. In this way, Satan tries to convince us that it is vain to serve God (Ps. 73:1-15; Jer. 44:16-18).

Remedy: God’s hand of mercy may seem to bless a person while God’s heart condemns that person. That was the case with King Saul. Similarly, God’s hand of mercy may seem to be against a person while His heart strongly loves that person. That was the case with Job. Many times God chastens those whom He loves (Heb. 12:5-6) for their eternal welfare. All afflictions, yes, *“all things work together for good to them that love God”* (Rom. 8:28). In addition, the internal joys of believers are often greater than can be outwardly observed, whereas the internal needs of the wicked are always greater than their outward enjoyments.

Device: Satan minimizes the seriousness of sin, then leads us on to greater sins. Sin encroaches upon us, moving from our thoughts to our looks to our words and then to our actions. Spurstowe says, *“Satan casts down none suddenly from the pinnacle of a high profession into the lowest abyss of wickedness, but leads them rather by oblique descents and turnings, lower and lower, until at last they take hold of hell”* (p. 36).

Remedy: Brooks tells us that *“the least sin is contrary to the law of God, the nature of God, the being of God, and the glory of God.”* Technically, there is no such thing as a little sin because there is no little God to sin against. Brooks sees committing a so-called *“little sin”* as a great insult to God. *“The less the temptation is to sin, the greater is that sin,”* Brooks writes. *“So it is the greatest unkindness that can be showed to God, Christ, and the Spirit, for a soul to put God upon complaining, Christ upon bleeding, and the Spirit upon grieving, by yielding to little sins”* (*Precious Remedies*, p. 41).

When Satan tempts you to commit a little sin, tell him that you will not displease your greatest Friend who died for all your sin — including your smallest sins — by yielding to His greatest enemy.

A little sin can do great damage. Once you have begun to sin, you do not know how or where or when you will stop committing that sin. As Brooks writes, *“Little sins often slide into the soul, and breed, and work secretly and undiscernibly in the soul, till they come to be so strong, as to trample upon the soul, and to cut the throat of the soul”* (p. 42). Ultimately, the smallest sin will bring the wrath of God down upon the one who commits it. Truly, the Puritans are right in stressing that there is *“more evil in the least sin than in the greatest affliction”* (p. 44).

Strategy Two: Satan Hinders Spiritual Disciplines

Device: Satan makes us focus on how difficult it is to practice spiritual discipline. He discourages us from persevering in prayer, in Bible study, in fellowship with believers, and in holiness. He plants the thought that it’s better for us to neglect these disciplines altogether than to undertake them in a perfunctory and unsatisfying manner.

Remedy: Counteract this satanic and self-defeating reasoning by focusing on God’s command to use the spiritual disciplines. Read the Scriptures daily, diligently, systematically, and prayerfully. Regularly meditate on the truths of Scripture, for disciplined meditation will provide inner resources on which to draw (Ps. 77:10-12). Pray unceasingly, use the sacraments faithfully, regularly fellowship with believers, sanctify the Lord’s Day, and witness to your neighbors.

Remember the benefits of spiritual disciplines. Practicing spiritual disciplines may be hard at times, but the Holy Spirit will bless their use. Through prayer, Bible study, fellowshiping with believers, and other disciplines, we honor and enjoy God, meet and embrace Christ, kindle our love, establish our minds, and keep sin at bay. Our weak graces are strengthened, our languishing comforts are revived, our fears are scattered, and our hopes are raised. Practicing the spiritual disciplines promotes godliness in every area of our lives.

Look more to the crown than the cross, more to future glory than present suffering. Remember that if you gain many benefits from the use of spiritual disciplines in this earthly wilderness, you will gain so much more in heaven. Heaven will more than make amends for all the work involved in maintaining spiritual disciplines.

Device: Satan afflicts our minds with vain thoughts to distract us from seeking God through spiritual disciplines. Such assaults can be so grievous and perplexing that we become weary of engaging in sacred duties.

Remedy: Focus on God’s majestic holiness as you approach Him. Confess your sin of indulging in wandering thoughts and tell God that you abhor those distractions. Then resist them through the Spirit’s strength, and press on with the spiritual disciplines. Beg God for strength to set aside worldly cares. Ask Him to increasingly fill you with heavenly and eternal truths. Strive for a large, growing, and varied acquaintance with God.

Focus on the spiritual disciplines rather than on the cares of this world. If your life is packed with secular obligations, trim back your obligations until you feel you have adequate time to seek God each day. Do not let business dealings intrude on your spiritual disciplines.

Martin Luther said that he wanted the devil to hear that he was serious about communing with God, so Luther practiced his spiritual disciplines aloud. Speaking aloud aids concentration. For further help in battling distractions, read Richard Steele’s *A Remedy for Wandering Thoughts*.

Strategy Three: Satan Misrepresents God and His Truth

Device: Satan presents God as a harsh taskmaster. Ever since Genesis 3, Satan has portrayed God as hard and cold and distant. Satan has also slain multitudes of people by telling them that the

holy, just, living God would not have mercy on them because they are too hard-hearted and sinful for God.

Remedy: Jonathan Edwards once preached a sermon on Psalm 25:11 (“*For thy name’s sake, O Lord, pardon mine iniquity; for it is great*”), addressing this strategy of Satan. Edwards said we can understand David’s cry for pardon only if we realize that David expected forgiveness solely because of God’s name. David made the greatness of his own sins a ground to plead for forgiveness. Edwards concludes that just as a beggar begging for bread pleads the greatness of his poverty, so a man in spiritual distress calls for pity from God. No more “*suitable plea can be argued than the extremity of his case,*” he says. The triune God delights to receive beggars. He is not a harsh taskmaster who is unmoved by our poverty. Remember, as Charnock said, “*Satan paints God with his (Satan’s) own colors.*”

Device: Satan pushes the misconception that not all members of the triune God are equally willing to save sinners. Satan doesn’t mind sermons that make Christ sound willing to save sinners, if the preacher presents the Father and the Spirit as more reticent to save.

Remedy: Jesus truly “*receives sinners*” with joy (Luke 15:2), but so does God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. God the Father so delights to save us that He gave His only-begotten Son to work out our salvation. God the Holy Spirit so delights to save us that He is willing to work with amazing patience in the hearts of all kinds of sinners.

Device: Satan sometimes stresses only the love and mercy of God. Satan convinces many people today not to be troubled about sin and their relationship with God, for God is full of mercy. Since God delights in mercy, and is always willing to show mercy, people don’t need to be concerned about His justice, Satan says.

Remedy: God is indeed merciful, but His mercy is just. If mercy is used for a license to sin, we sin against mercy. God will then “*rain hell out of heaven,*” as Thomas Brooks says, for “*sins against mercy will bring the greatest and sorest judgments upon men’s heads and hearts.*” Brooks goes on to say that God “*first hangs out the white flag of mercy,*” but if people reject His mercy, God will then “*put forth his red flag of justice and judgment*” (*Precious Remedies*, pp. 51-52).

Believers must view the mercy of God as the most powerful argument to preserve them from sin, and not as an encouragement to sin (Ps. 26:3-5; Rom. 6:1-2). “*There is nothing in the world that renders a man more unlike to a saint, and more like to Satan, than to argue from mercy to sinful liberty; from divine goodness to licentiousness. This is devil’s logic*” (pp. 54-55).

Strategy Four: Satan Opposes Sanctification

Device: Satan dampens obedience to the saving knowledge of gospel truth. Once you are saved and come under the refining process of God’s pruning knife, Satan tries to bewilder you. Like Peter, you will then deny your Master and walk unworthy of the spiritual vocation to which you are called.

Remedy: Repent of your backslidings, return to God, and do the good works that you did so zealously in your time of first love (Rev. 2:4-5). Immerse yourself in the Scriptures and in solid biblical literature. Pray much to be enabled to walk in firm, loving obedience before God.

Device: Satan stresses that intellectual knowledge of spiritual truth is enough. If other people who claim to be saved are satisfied just knowing about Christ, why should you long for more experiential knowledge of Christ? Satan doesn’t mind if we continue to learn about Christ, but he works hard to prevent fact-gathering from turning into sanctified knowledge of the truth (2 Tim. 3:7). “*The devil does not care how many sermon pills you take so long as they do not work upon your conscience,*” wrote Thomas Watson.

Remedy: Settle for nothing less than Spirit-worked experiential knowledge of Christ (1 Cor. 1:30), and, by extension, knowledge of all the great truths of Scripture (2 Tim. 3:14-17). Christ, who is the

living Word (John 1:1) and the embodiment of truth, must be experientially known and embraced. As John 17:3 says, “*This is life eternal, that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.*” The word *know* in this text indicates a deep, abiding relationship.

Device: Satan makes sanctification look impractical because it is too difficult to understand. Satan tries to hide the beautiful simplicity of the way of holiness.

Remedy: Salvation and sanctification are free gifts. Remember, God, the great Giver of sanctification, lavishly works holiness in us, even when we fear it is only the size of a mustard seed. God also works within us the desire to give everything we are to Him, not to earn our way into heaven, but because God’s Spirit is prompting us in the way of holiness. This holy exchange is an uneven one, for Christ’s gift of Himself to us is far greater than our gift of ourselves to Him. Yet this exchange is beautiful, simple, and mystical. It does not divorce itself from the Scriptures or the mind and work of the Holy Spirit. Trust God with childlike simplicity to sanctify you in Christ, for God has promised that Christ Jesus in us becomes our “*wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption*” (1 Cor. 1:30).

Device: Satan makes us think that our salvation depends on our spiritual experiences, our holiness, or our works. He tries to confuse the true relationship between faith and works as well as gospel and law.

Remedy: A nineteenth-century believer rather quaintly explained his experience like this:

I thought I must obey the law, and went to Moses to make terms with him, and he at once knocked me down. I knew I deserved it, and did not complain. I prepared myself, and went again; and, with a severer blow, he brought me to the ground a second time. I was amazed, and entreated him to hear me. But he drove me from Sinai, and gave me no satisfaction. In my despair, I went to Calvary. There I found One who had pity on me, forgave my sins, and filled my heart with his love. I looked at him, and his healing mercy penetrated my whole being, and cured the malady within. Now, I went back to Moses to tell him what had happened. He smiled on me, shook my hand, and greeted me most lovingly; and he has never knocked me down since. I go by Calvary to Sinai, and all its thunders are silent.

(Wm. L. Parsons, *Satan’s Devices and the Believer’s Victory* [Boston, 1864], pp. 291-92).

Salvation is by grace alone. Do not trust any merits of your own. Take refuge daily by faith and repentance in Christ, the sinner’s Savior. Ask the Holy Spirit to continue to open your soul to God’s love in Christ, and to prompt acts of grateful obedience that flow sweetly out of this fountain of love.

Device: Satan tries to dismiss what we do, saying that only what we believe is important. “It is not so important to strive for higher levels of holiness in this life because there is only one thing needful and you have that,” Satan says. “You have been converted. You are on your way to heaven. When you die, you will be perfectly holy. Don’t worry so much about being holy now.”

Remedy: Entertaining such a suggestion, even for a moment, is unworthy of a disciple of Christ. Scripture calls believers to grow in grace. It persuades us to leave those things that are behind and to press on toward greater spiritual maturity. It teaches us to be steadfast in obedience to Christ. Our usefulness and mission in the world oblige us to go forward, even though the sea and the wilderness are before us (Exod. 14:13-14). We must either overcome the world by faith or be overcome by it. If we fall back into unbelief, we will forget that we were “*purged from our old sins*” (2 Pet. 1:9). Our sins will then return sevenfold to pull us back into bondage.

Device: Satan says it is useless for us to try living in Christ while in this life. So few people truly overcome the world by faith, as John charges us to do (1 John 5:4), so why bother trying?

Remedy: Refuse to believe that defeat by the world, the flesh, and the devil is inevitable. Trust your Deliverer that He will make you a conqueror, by faith, through His own power. Fight the good fight of faith. By grace, claim the promises of Scripture as your own. Remember the covenant and oath

of your Redeemer. Look to Christ for power to break the yoke of bondage and put you into “*the glorious liberty of the children of God*” (Rom. 8:21).

Device: Satan entices us to be worldly by attacking us at our weakest points. He desensitizes our consciences by encouraging us to compare ourselves with ourselves rather than with the standards set for us by Scripture.

Remedy: Remember, worldliness develops slowly in us. Like a malignant cancer, it is often not detected until it is too late. We must be circumspect. We must guard our hearts against worldliness. As John Flavel writes in *Keeping the Heart*, “*Set a watch before every gate that leads into or out of your heart.*” We must set a guard at the gate of our imaginations, our minds, and our hearts. We must keep watch over our private thoughts. Like the psalmist, we must make sure that no wicked thing is set before our eyes.

One of the greatest dangers of worldliness today comes through our eyes. Every year, thousands of people become enmeshed in Internet pornography. Other people think nothing of spending numerous hours watching unedifying television shows or renting questionable movies.

Do not flirt with sin. Consider the man who lived at the top of a mountain. He needed to hire someone to take his daughter up and down the mountain each day for school. So he interviewed candidates, asking each one, “How close can you come to the edge without going over?”

The first man said, “I can come within twelve inches and not go over the edge.” The second said, “I can come within six inches of the edge.” The third said he could come within an inch without falling over. But the fourth said, “The closer I came to the edge, the more I’d be hugging the other side. So I choose to stay as far away from the edge as I can.” You know who got the job.

Stay away from worldliness. Recognize its danger before you go over the edge. Confess sin as soon as you are conscious of it. Keep a short account with God. Only a habitually clean conscience will grant us the unclouded, uninterrupted communion with God that we so desperately need. Sitting in heavenly places together with Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:6) is the best cure for daily struggles with worldliness.

Concluding Advice

Donald Barnhouse wrote, “*There is no need for ignorance concerning the devices of the devil, for they are set forth plainly in the Word of God, and they are also visible all around us.*” And, we might add, they are exposed clearly in numerous books, particularly those written on the subject by able Puritans.

Space will not allow us to deal with other satanic strategies, such as how Satan keeps believers in doubt and darkness, capitalizes on their inconsistencies, promotes division between believers and churches, fosters doctrinal error and apostasy, cultivates false spirituality, and promotes Satan-worship, demonism, and occultism.

Remedies for all these devices, however, usually follow similar patterns. Thomas Brooks, whose classic *Precious Remedies against Satan’s Devices* has never been rivaled, summarized the Christian’s duty in responding to Satan’s devices in ten remedies. Brooks marshaled these remedies from the whole of Scripture:

1. Walk by the rule of Scripture
2. Don’t vex or grieve the Holy Spirit
3. Pursue heavenly wisdom
4. Resist Satan’s first overtures immediately
5. Strive to be filled with the Spirit

6. Remain humble
7. Maintain a strong and constant watch
8. Maintain communion with God
9. Fight Satan in Christ's strength, not your own
10. Pray much

Peter provides an even shorter summary. Let us obey his admonition, *"Be sober, be vigilant, because your adversary, the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour; whom resist steadfast in the faith"* (1 Pet. 5:8-9).

"Be sober": think clearly, think carefully, and, above all, think biblically.

"Be vigilant": be watchful; be alert to the signs of enemy presence, enemy activity, enemy purposes.

"Resist" the devil. His designs are always evil. The more you give him, the more he will want. Consider seriously what Brooks writes: *"Satan promises the best, but pays with the worst; he promises honour and pays with disgrace; he promises pleasure and pays with pain; he promises profit and pays with loss; he promises life and pays with death."*

Remain *"steadfast in the faith,"* unmoved, unyielding, using faith in God's Son and God's Word as your shield. All shall then end well. By God's grace, you will be perfected, established, and strengthened. As Brooks concludes, *"Remember this, that your life is short, your duties many, your assistance great, and your reward sure; therefore faint not, hold on and hold up, in ways of well-doing, and heaven shall make amends for all."*

Finally, would you truly see Satan's defeat in your life? Focus on Christ. Remember who you are in Christ. Overcome the world by faith in Christ. Bear fruit for Christ's sake. Don't become a tempter for Christ's sake. Put all your hope in Christ. Trust His power. Love Him and His people. Live in such a way that Christ means everything to you.

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