

THE PASTORS' PEN

articles from the elders of BBC

Every now and again, a biblical phrase is lifted out of context to teach things that the writer never intended. Despite President Lincoln's bold claims, Jesus' words about a house divided (see Mark 3:22–27) had nothing to do with the American Civil War. Biblical phrases like, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13) have been used as a mantra for all manner of goals and achievements, which actually have nothing to do with the context from which it is lifted. "All things work together for good" (Romans 8:28) is likewise quoted, with alarming frequency, completely out of context.

There is another phrase that is often used as something of a springboard for a topical study, but which is not always considered in context. In the Authorised King James Version of the Bible, it reads, "We are not ignorant of [Satan's] devices" (2 Corinthians 2:11). More modern translations speak of Satan's "designs" (ESV) or "schemes" (CSB). As it is popularly used, the phrase is quoted and is followed by a list of Satan's "devices": pride, envy, lust, falsehood, discouragement, doubt, etc. These are Satan's schemes, we are told, of which the believer must be aware. We must resist these schemes as we stand for Christ.

Satan may well use things like pride, envy and lust to attack the believer, but the biblical context of the phrase reveals something far more sinister at play when Paul wrote those words. In context, Satan's "devices" have little to do with the individual believer and everything to do with a particular strategy for destroying a local church. Context, they say, is king, and establishing the context of 2 Corinthians 2:11 will help us to understand what Paul was actually saying.

To properly understand 2 Corinthians, it is necessary to come to grips with 1 Corinthians. Paul wrote his first letter to a Corinthian church that was wrestling with disunity and immorality. In addition to that, the church was deeply confused about matters of

basic doctrine and devotion. The church was a mess, and he wrote to set things straight.

According to chapter 16, Paul planned to send Timothy to Corinth with the letter. Second Corinthians reveals that that Timothy did take the letter to Corinth—and found a church in an even greater mess than he and Paul had realised. The situation was so dire, in fact, that Paul, having received Timothy's report, made an emergency visit to Corinth to try and correct things in person. That emergency

visit turned out to be so "painful" (2 Corinthians 2:1) that he vowed to himself never return to Corinth. Back in Ephesus, he wrote a second, "severe" letter (2 Corinthians 2:5) to the church (which letter is lost to us today) in which he

sternly rebuked the believers for the way they had treated him. That letter seemingly bore some fruit (2 Corinthians 7:8–9), but there remained a rebellious element in the church. Paul concluded that he had little choice but to return to Corinth to sort it out. He therefore wrote 2 Corinthians to, on the one hand, defend his ministry against the accusations he had encountered in his emergency visit, and, on the other, to inform the church that he was coming again to sort out the remaining problems.

The letter that we know as 2 Corinthians reveals a great deal of what unfolded during Paul's emergency visit to Corinth and shows why it was so painful. He arrived in Corinth to find the church questioning his apostolic authority and bringing his ministry into disrepute with false and unfounded accusations—and 2:5–11 reveals a major source of the trouble he faced.

Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I



beg you to reaffirm your love for him. For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.

(2 Corinthians 2:5–11)

According to these verses, there was a particular (unnamed) individual who spearheaded the conflict. This man, seemingly an influential church member, openly attacked Paul, levelling a series of false accusations against him. Instead of defending him, the church sat idly by as the man attacked Paul (12:11). The church's apathy added to the pain he already felt because of the false accusations. It was this conflict, spearheaded by one man's false accusations, which drove Paul to write his severe letter (2:1–4).

As noted above, the severe letter bore fruit of repentance. And—glory to God!—one of those who repented was the very man who had spearheaded the entire fiasco. But now there was another problem: Though the man had repented, the church would not forgive him. He had already faced church discipline—“punishment by the majority” (2:6)—but the church, despite his repentance, seemed to be insisting on greater punishment than God actually called for. They seemed to think that God's prescribed discipline was not “enough” (2:6). Paul was grieved that the Corinthian believers refused to forgive as he had chosen to forgive. It is in the context of forgiveness—or lack thereof—that he writes, “so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs” (2:11).

In the context, then, Satan's design was not to cause an individual believer doubt or despair. It was not to tempt a believer with pride or envy or lust. No, his design was far more insidious: It was to sow in the local church bitterness and unforgiveness between its members. Why? Because nothing will tear a church apart like bitterness and unforgiveness in its ranks! Yes, unrepentant sin must be dealt with decisively in church discipline, but forgiveness and reconciliation must be extended without question when repentance is expressed.

In our time in the Gospel of Mark on Sunday mornings, we were recently exposed to Mark 3:22–30. There, Jesus speaks of entering Satan's domain, binding him (the “strong man”), and plundering his house. Jesus was saying that his war against demonic forces in his ministry was an act of binding Satan. This culminated at the cross, where Satan was fully defeated and put to open shame (Colossians 2:13–15). But it is important for us to understand what Jesus meant by binding Satan.

Comparing Jesus' words with Revelation 20:1–3, we learn that the way in which Jesus bound Satan was in restricting his ability to deceive the nations. In the Old Testament, Satan's power to deceive nations was great—so great that, apart from scattered Gentile believers, only one nation in all the world had knowledge of the true God. But during his ministry, and ultimately at the cross, Christ triumphed over Satan and his minions. Since then, Satan has been bound, and the gospel has gone with great effect to all nations. Satan no longer has the power that he once had to deceive the nations.

How has Satan responded? Being restricted in his authority to deceive the nations, he has turned his wrath on the church. That is why Peter warned, “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world” (1 Peter 5:8–9). Satan's focus is no longer deceiving the nations; it is now destroying the church. And one of the most effective strategies for doing so is to sow bitterness and unforgiveness within churches.

According to Paul, to give in to bitterness and unforgiveness is to be “outwitted” by Satan. Those who have experience God's forgiveness in Christ have no right to withhold forgiveness from others (see Matthew 6:9–15; 18:21–35). To do so is not human; it is devilish.

The New Testament does not take sin lightly. Church members who will not repent of sin must be disciplined (Matthew 18:15–20; 1 Corinthians 5:1–5; Titus 3:9–11), but the church has no right to withhold forgiveness and reconciliation from those who seek it by repentance. Unforgiveness is a scheme of Satan, not a characteristic of Jesus Christ.

Are you ready to forgive, or will you give into the devilish devices of bitterness and unforgiveness—ultimately being outwitted by Satan rather than resisting him firm in the faith?

