

*The following is a sermon preached at Trinity Baptist Church, Burlington. It has been left in its basic preaching style, and it addresses a problem faced by every Christian.*

In Ephesians 6:11 the apostle Paul uses the expression "the wiles of the devil". The Greek word translated "wiles" is that from which we get our English word "method"; it has been translated "schemes, intrigues, devices, deceit and trickery". These words all convey what the apostle had in mind when he used this word; the "wiles of the devil" are those crafty methods he uses to accomplish his purposes. When you have been involved in Pastoral work for some time you get to recognize some of the most frequently used "wiles of the devil", and in my opinion one of his most oft-used methods used to bring trouble in Christian lives is to make them imbalanced people, people of extremes. Let me illustrate this by suggesting three areas where the devil operates in this way.

Take first of all our attitude towards sin. There are many professing Christians within churches today who have been manipulated by Satan into an extreme position where they are altogether too flippant about sin. I am not speaking now about the masses who never darken the doorstep of a church and who make no profession of Christ; of course those people have no concern about sin. They are the "fools" of the book of Proverbs, when it declares that "fools make a mock at sin" (Prov. 14:9). These are people who never give a moments thought about the salvation of their soul; they never give a thought to the fact that they must one day stand before God as their judge. They are immersed in the things of time; sin is just a word which they do not understand, and care nothing about. Now I say I am not speaking about those people. I am rather speaking of those within churches, who do profess the name of Jesus but who have very little concern about sin. Their attitude is flippant, they are full of self-confidence, their conscience seldom seems to bother them, and they are too busy having a great time to bother with self-examination. "I'm saved" they cry, "I made my decision at the evangelistic meeting, and now I don't have to worry about sin any more; if I do sin, well I only have to confess it before God and He is faithful and Just to forgive me and cleanse me from all unrighteousness".

Now these people often speak truth. It is true that for a child of God confession of sin brings Fatherly forgiveness and cleansing; it is true that the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son cleanses us from all sin; but what troubles the discerning and spiritual mind is the attitude, the flippancy, the "sin is no great sweat" impression which these people convey. They are just far too nonchalant about it! They are far too little concerned about sin. This is an extreme into which the devil would lead those who profess the name of Christ. Sadly some of these people later reveal that their professed conversion was no conversion at all. There was a profession, but there was no real work of grace, there was no new creation in Christ Jesus. Their light estimation of sin, ends in a light estimation of the Saviour, and a light estimation of the Christian faith until one day the whole thing is forgotten as just a phase of their experience in life. Others who are genuinely children of God are trapped in serious sinful situations in which God's name is shamed, and in which their Christian testimony is ruined. Sin is never to be treated lightly; that is an extreme into which the devil leads people.

But then here you see the imbalance; for while there are those who are far too flippant about sin, on the other hand there are those who are obsessed by it in an unhealthy and unscriptural manner. These people, often very dear children of God, become so obsessed by sin that their entire life becomes consumed by the consideration of it. They analyze it, they bewail it, they groan about it; they are so taken up with sin that they virtually become blind to the glorious grace of God in the Lord Jesus Christ. They are so taken up and overwhelmed by the reality of sin, that they lose sight of the even greater reality of forgiveness through the blood of Jesus. They become so taken up with sin that all joy leaves them, peace forsakes them, life becomes

a burden, religion becomes grim, and the problem is that they have been tricked by the devil into a state of imbalance. The joyful significance of perfect redemption and full atonement in Christ is never allowed to dispel their gloom because they are obsessed with sin. This is not a healthy and Biblical concern about sin; it is an unscriptural obsession which is dishonouring to Christ and disastrous to the individual.

Now you see what I mean by imbalance in this area? On the one hand people who are careless and flippant about sin; that's the one extreme. On the other hand those who are obsessed by it to such a degree that they deprive themselves of the joy and comfort which the finished work of Christ ought to bring them. The devil delights to push people to one extreme or the other, whereas the Biblical position would surely be that the Christian is always to take sin seriously; it ought always to cause humbling and grief, but the focus of our attention must always be on that great salvation which is centred on the person and work of Christ, and that great salvation should make the Christian a joyful and praising person.

Let me suggest a second area of imbalance brought about by the wiles of the devil. This relates to the work of the Lord, to the cause of Christ. On the one hand there are those who are too slack in the cause of Jesus. It is a sad reality that in every church there are those people who scarcely put forth any effort in the service of Christ in their church. Some people stagger under the weight of several jobs while others are responsible for nothing. I find it difficult to understand the Christian who has no interest in contributing what he or she can to the service of the Lord. It seems to me that the reaction within a Christian to the fact that they have been redeemed by the infinite cost of the blood of Jesus ought to be deep gratitude, and surely that gratitude ought to display itself by serving the Lord who died for them. The great missionary C.T. Studd once said "if Jesus Christ be God and died for me then no sacrifice is too great for me to make for him". I think every Christian ought to be able to relate to that statement. Every Christian is not called to the same work that Studd was called to, and few perhaps would claim to have his dedication, but his statement should ring a bell in every redeemed heart. If you are redeemed by His blood then you ought to want to serve Him, and the first and most obvious place in which to serve Him is your own church. There are those who talk grandly of what they would like to do in the service of the Lord, and how they would like to contribute to the cause of Christ, but its all very abstract and unreal. All the while they are saying these things there are situations in their own church desperately needing personnel; but they never seem to think of putting their shoulder to the wheel at home. Now that is an extreme to which the devil would seek to bring a Christian, because he is interested in arresting and ruining the work of Christ, especially in the churches. He is happy to see Christians doing nothing for their Lord.

But now there is another extreme in this situation. Here is a Christian who is not going to be kept from serving God. He has been saved and is full of zeal, and bless his heart he is ready to anything in God's service. We could stand more of that kind! But the devil, seeing that he cannot keep him from active service tries to get him to the other extreme, to make him too busy in the cause of Christ. What do I mean by too busy in the cause of Christ? Well I can think of people who have been so busy in the Lord's service that they have neglected their own families for instance. A Christian man is horrified because he discovers that his wife has become involved with another man. He expresses shock and horror; he asks how she as a Christian could do such a thing, and we can well understand and sympathize with his reaction. But when the matter is analyzed with the help of a counselor or Pastor, it becomes apparent that one of the major causes of the disaster is that the man was so involved with religious matters, dashing out to meetings every night, away in support of this or that good cause, that for years he had utterly neglected his wife. He had not recognized his God-given

responsibilities to her; he had not been mindful of her needs; he had no time to take her out or just to sit and talk with her. He was busy for the Lord; but he was so busy he lost his wife.

Now that is not far-fetched, it has happened all too often, and let me emphasize that it cuts both ways; sometimes a wife has lost her husband for the same reasons. Now please don't suggest I am justifying unfaithfulness! I am simply pointing out the dangers of being pushed, by the wiles of the devil, into a wrong extreme, so that "busyness" in the cause of Christ, which is desirable and commendable, becomes imbalanced and serious responsibilities are neglected. Indeed let me change the illustration and say that many a Christian has become spiritually impoverished, because they were just too busy even in the Lord's service. They have been so busy dashing here there and everywhere that they have neglected their prayer life, and the study of the Word of God, and they have become spiritually malnourished while all the time they were dashing about supposedly serving God. You see again there must be the balance. There is no excuse for a Christian not serving God and not fulfilling their responsibilities in the church; but be careful that the devil doesn't make you too busy for your souls good.

Let me touch on a third area, this time concerning the raising of children. Here again we have a classic area for imbalance to be produced, and the devil is always ready to inject it. The one extreme here of course is parents who are too slack hi the discipline of their children. Now this can often be a "touchy" subject, and I have known many a man fulfill the old proverb that "fools rush in where angels fear to tread". But we cannot deny that it is a crucial subject, and the Word of God gives it a great deal of attention. Having been involved in the process of raising children for a good number of years now, I have long been convinced that we should always have compassion hi dealing in this area, because it is an area where there are many difficulties. There is no more demanding task than raising children in a right and wise manner. I am always a little cynical when I hear those who have no children waxing eloquent and authoritarian as to how those who have them ought to raise them!

However the subject must be addressed, and it is true to say that there are parents, even Christian parents, who are far too slack in the discipline of their children. Poor Eli, the priest who trained Samuel hi the tabernacle, stands before us in scripture as a sad memorial of the bitterness which often results from a refusal to discipline children. The Bible tells us that Eli would not restrain his sons; he would not say "no" to them, and they turned out, to use the Biblical expression, "sons of Belial". They were a shame to Eli, a disgrace to the priesthood, a disaster to the nation, and an offence to God. And the problem seemed to stem from this slackness in discipline with Eli. Now some Christians hi our day seem to have the same problem. Perhaps the prevailing philosophy of the day rubs off on them. The great thing in our day of course is that corporal punishment is a "no no". You mustn't smack Johnny's bottom for that is displaying violence and Johnny will grow up toting a machine gun! You mustn't smack little Susie because she will then grow up psychologically twisted! The fact of the matter is of course that we already have a lot of Johnnys and Susies who have been brought up under that teaching and who are now tearing society apart; they would have been quite different and society as well as they themselves would now be a lot better off if their bottoms had been smacked in earlier years. Of course there are other elements in discipline which play their part, and you must understand that in speaking of corporal punishment I am not speaking of brutality and the inflicting of serious injury on children; that is a terrible and shameful matter. I am saying however that proper discipline, including corporal punishment when necessary, is most important in raising children, and Christian parents ought not to be affected by the world's outlook, but rather be directed by the Word of God. Christian parents must not be afraid to say "no" to their children; they must not be afraid to restrain them from wickedness, and discipline them as necessary.

But then imbalance comes in here too. If the devil sees that he will not succeed in persuading a Christian parent to withhold discipline, he will try to push that parent to the other extreme, so that he becomes severe and repressive with his children. This is a problem encountered in more than a few Christian homes. The Christian parents know that they must bring their children up in a disciplined manner, but they become so zealous in this that they treat their children as though they were in military service. Every slight infraction is made a great serious offence to be dealt with in the full rigour of the law! Mountains are made out of molehills; perfection is expected and demanded from the children, and woe to them when they don't produce it. No allowance is made for their immaturity, their lack of knowledge and experience; no room is made for their own personal development, and so often what develops is a humourless, repressive, regimented home with sullen resentful children who can't wait to get out of it. The result is so often, children who utterly repudiate everything the parents have stood for - including their Christian faith. Oh, how careful and prayerful Christian parents must be. There is nothing more important than balance in all aspects of Christian life.

May God deliver us from imbalance - one of the wiles of the devil.