

Christian discernment not only involves recognizing the presence and guidance of God. At times we are called upon to identify - in order to avoid or reject - the work of the enemy. As I was exploring the scriptures I discovered an insight about this aspect of discernment that I wanted to share. The insight is this: *by paying careful attention to our feelings we can improve our ability to recognize the enemy's schemes.* The scriptures suggest that the devil pays careful attention to our feelings, exploiting them for evil purposes. If we are watchful and aware of the ways in which our feelings can be subject to the influence of the enemy, we can better resist that influence and lead a victorious life in Christ. Let's look at a few of these scriptures together.

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul gives advice to the church of Corinth concerning sexual relations. In verse five he encourages couples, saying "do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control." Paul, in his wisdom, is aware that couples can unwittingly find themselves in dangerous ground while pursuing spiritual life. He probably encountered devout couples who wanted to serve the Lord and decided to separate themselves from sexual activity in order to give themselves entirely to "spiritual" pursuits. In the process of following their spiritual pursuits, however, Paul watched them become distracted or even shipwrecked due to the influence of sexual temptations. Indeed, Paul saw that normal sexual urges, left unattended, could easily be exploited by Satan to lead believers into trouble.

In 2 Corinthians 2, Paul expresses his forgiveness for a man who had grieved the church at Corinth and was subsequently punished. Paul encourages the church to reaffirm their love for this man as well. He writes in verses 10-11, "And what I have forgiven - if there was anything to forgive - I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes." While the details of the relationships between Paul, the church, and this man are difficult to determine, one thing is clear. Paul was concerned that appropriate steps of forgiveness be taken in order to prevent the enemy from damaging the Lord's work. Paul was aware that when reconciliation between brothers and sisters in the body is left incomplete, it leaves open a door for gossip or slander or bad feelings to spread among the body, leading to the decay of the gospel witness. Paul was eager to restore a sense of mutual acceptance to the church in Corinth, lest Satan exploit unresolved feelings to spread ill-health through the church.

Ephesians 4, verses 17 and following, gives advice to a Greek church concerning how to live a new kind of life: no longer like the Gentiles, but "made new in the attitude of your minds." After mentioning the value of truthfulness in speech, verses 26-27 state, "In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil a foothold." The "and" in verse 27 clearly connects the two halves of the statement; letting the sun go down on

your anger and giving the enemy a foothold are related. What lies behind this connection is the wise recognition that the devil has a habit of exploiting unattended anger for evil purposes. If our anger is allowed to sit and fester, the enemy will often suggest thoughts, images, and feelings that incline us away from the heart of God. This “foothold” of bitterness can become the start of serious problems in the life of a believer or of a group. Verse 27 encourages us to deal with the feelings right away. In so doing we remove any chance the devil has for causing trouble in our midst.

Likewise, the second chapter of the epistle of 1 Timothy addresses the emotions of pride and community reputation as it recommends qualifications for leaders in the church. Being raised up as a leader too early may result in the person becoming conceited, an emotional disposition which can become very damaging to the church and can result in the leader falling under “the same judgment as the devil.” In addition, if the leader does not have a good reputation with outsiders (dishonest, lack of integrity, phony, or something similar), the surrounding community may spread rumors about this person causing a “disgrace” which in turn can cause damage to the credibility of the leader or to the church. Indeed, the inclination to bring capable leaders on board who do not have a quality reputation with outsiders (common enough when willing servants in the church are hard to find) is named a “trap” of the devil. We must pay careful attention to the feelings of leaders and community alike, being wise to the way those feelings would probably develop over time and how that development might impact the ministry of Christ.

Later in the same letter, Timothy receives advice concerning how to deal with the presence of younger widows in the congregation. Timothy is encouraged not to put them “on the list” of those expressing a vow of singleness and receiving regular financial support from the church. First, they may be tempted to leave their pledge to Christ (expressed in the vow of singleness) by desiring to marry. Second, they can become idle and foster gossip in the community. “So,” verses 14-15 state, “I counsel younger widows to marry, to have children, to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander. Some have in fact already turned away to follow Satan.” They have seen this problem already: young widows wanting to devote themselves to God make vows of singleness and give themselves to the service of the church found the free time and the opportunities for various relationships too much of a temptation. The presence of sexual desires and an atmosphere of whispering stories about each other becomes an environment that is exploited by the enemy, giving rise to “slander” and “turning away.” Here boredom and sexual desires are the emotions to attend to. If not properly attended to, these emotions can be used by the devil to harm the church.

Finally, feelings for money and possessions are addressed in 1 Timothy chapter six. Verse six encourages us toward “godliness with contentment,” virtues which are developed in the following verses. Verses nine and ten state, “People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.” Inappropriately placed

desires can become traps of the enemy, means by which Satan chokes the life out of our faith and causes us to wander away from God.

Sexual interests, tensions between people, unforgiveness, anger, conceit, boredom, misplaced desires - all these and more can become “traps” used by the enemy. The enemy is called the accuser (false guilt) and the deceiver (false hope). Devilish wisdom comes from bitterness and envy, is delivered with boastfulness, and leads to disorder (James 3:13-18). I think it is clear that the Scriptures repeatedly associate the enemy’s work with particular tendencies or patterns of emotional experience.

These types of patterns of emotional experience are not unknown today. We have known young believers who returned to the streets too early and were not able to stand against the temptations. We have seen those who have tried to make great devotions to God only to find that in doing so they set themselves up for the enemy’s snares. Interpersonal tensions not properly resolved in a community have brought great harm to the reputation of Christ. Do you know anyone who used to be “sold out” to Jesus only to become so increasingly distracted by career, possessions, or income that in the end there was no vibrant faith left?

Emotions respond to that which concerns us. Our fear of the snake poised in front of us responds not merely to the snake itself, but also to a concern for our lives. If we had no concern for our life (as in some pathologies) or were not aware of the danger to our lives (as with many infants) then we would not experience fear of the snake. Concerns for our sexual fulfillment, for mutual acceptance, for just treatment, for our sense of self-esteem, for meaningful activity are an essential part of who we are as people. These concerns contribute to the emotional richness that we experience and express as humans. The scriptures do not condemn these concerns. Nor do they prohibit the emotions that develop from them. Indeed, it appears that the passages we read acknowledge the appropriate place of emotional experience. Again and again the scriptures recommended a *realistic and sensible attention* to emotional experience as a way of preventing the enemy’s traps.

However, if we pretend our feelings are not there - if we remain unaware of the highways and byways of emotional experience - we set ourselves up to be “taken” by the enemy. Our legitimate fears, our hopes, our loves, our joys, our angers, our offenses, will be subtly exploited by the devil. Satan will use them to set believer against believer, to lure Christian toward anti-Christian life, to destroy our trust in God and more.

When I was a young Christian I was taught that I was not to let my life be run by my feelings. Just as a train could not make real progress if run by the caboose, so feelings were not meant to control the Christian life. Our responsibility as believers was simply to place our faith in the fact of God and his word and let the feelings follow. Just because I did not “feel” something special when I prayed, did not mean that God did not hear my prayers. Likewise if I did feel something special, this did not mean that I was any more holy than someone else. Our faith ought not to be run by our feelings.

Now while I think the “train diagram” is a helpful image for the encouragement of some believers, I have seen dangerous consequences of an over-strict application of this model. We can begin to think that there is no need for attention to our feelings. We can simply rely on an “application of the scriptures to our lives” and not notice avenues through which our hearts may be subtly drawn further and further from Christ (or closer and closer toward Christ). By failure to pay careful attention to personal desires and interpersonal dynamics, we can unwisely give place for the enemy to sow destruction into the body of Christ.

Feelings are not simply consequences of our faith, but are also part and parcel of what it means to be human. Just as the enemy can and does utilize rational means to deceive the body of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 10:5; 2 Corinthians 11:14; 1 Timothy 4:1), so Satan also exploits our emotional experience to draw us away from wholehearted love and service of our Lord and of one another.

Be watchful, therefore! Pay attention to your thoughts, your feelings, your inclinations - as individuals and as communities. Your enemy prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Be discerning of the enemy’s strategies; be on guard for his attacks. Examine your emotional experience realistically. *By paying careful attention to our feelings we can improve our ability to recognize the enemy’s schemes.* So put on the full armor of God. In so doing the kingdom of God will gain great victories in your life and in the world.

May God the Father bless you with the riches in Christ Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit.