

The Battleground is the "Heavenly Places"

Picture for a moment the best commando in the world. The top experts have trained him in tactics, strategy, martial arts and survival. The equipment he carries is state of the art. In his possession are some of the most sophisticated miniature electronic devices available. Only the very best makes up his arsenal of weapons and equipment. His mind has been enriched beyond measure by the assimilation of the most critical information needed to carry out his mission. Thousands of hours and millions of dollars have gone into making him the most effective fighter in the world.

In active warfare, the most critical information is not what you know, but what you don't know

Watch him now on his last day in town in a Third World country. Tomorrow he will travel to the war zone, but today he is relaxed, enjoying a drink in a busy sidewalk cafe. Surrounded as he is by friendly faces, it is even hard for him to believe there is a war going on right now. Everything is enjoyable around him, and he is determined to relish every moment of it.

Traffic is heavy at this time of the day, and many vehicles crowd the street. A motorcycle peels off from the colorful caravan of cars. The motorcycle rider slows down as he draws near the cafe where the commando is relaxing. All of a sudden a gun goes off and the commando goes down, a bullet through his head. A young guerrilla fighter, dressed in rags with little more than elementary-level schooling, has disposed forever of the best human fighting machine in the world. Thousands of hours' worth of training and millions of dollars worth of equipment lie wasted in a pool of blood caused by a \$5 bullet. He is dead—not on account of what he knew, but what he did not know.

The principle: In active warfare, the most critical information is not what you know, but what you don't know, especially if your enemy knows that you don't know it. The corollary of this principle is that it is fatal to step into a war zone unaware. The worst mistake in war is to not know where the battleground is located.

Costly Ignorance

We must know at all times where our battleground is. Often, Christians become war casualties when they least expect it, and in places where they sincerely believe they are out of danger. This is why so many Christians have been seriously wounded in the safest of all places, such as in church, at home, or while fellowshiping with other believers. To them, the battlefield was somewhere else, most likely on the mission field, thousands of miles away. Or, they think, perhaps the closest battlefield would be in the so-called inner city, usually among the ethnic ghettos, where pimps, drug dealers and gangs struggle for survival. In those awful places, yes! Closer to home? Never! What a dangerous miscalculation!

Our real enemy is Satan. He uses the flesh and the world to seduce us, but he is the source of that seduction (see Eph. 2:1-3). He is the master of deception (see John 8:44). He is the inventor of spiritual guerrilla warfare (see 2 Cor. 2:10,11). Lacking real authority to defeat us, he has compensated by perfecting the art of subversion and trickery (see 2 Tim.

2:25,26). He has more than made up for his limitations by developing deceptive schemes of all sorts (see Eph. 6:11). The success of those schemes always depends on one thing: the ignorance of the saints, which he actively promotes (see 2 Cor. 2:11; 11:3).

Generally speaking, the Church today is dangerously ignorant of the schemes of the devil. In contrast, the apostle Paul boldly stated, “For we are not ignorant of his [Satan’s] schemes” (2 Cor. 2:11). Paul, the man entrusted with the richest spiritual revelations concerning the Trinity and the redemptive work of Christ, also made it a point to know what Satan was up to. Some people seem to have rewritten James 4:7 to say, “Ignore the devil and he will flee from you,” instead of “Resist the devil and he will flee from you.”

“The Heavens” Here and Now

Nowhere is this ignorance more damaging than in the reality and the location of the spiritual battleground: “the heavenly places,” or as the Greek literally says, “in the heavens” (Eph. 3:10). The average church member in the Western world has no idea what this expression really means. It is used five times by the apostle Paul in his epistle to the Ephesians. Therefore, it must be an important, foundational component of God’s revelation concerning spiritual warfare. Yet, somehow we seem to have no clue what it really means. Because of our ignorance on this important point, we are vulnerable to the enemy’s deceptive schemes against us.

What are “the heavens”? When believers in Ephesus read or heard the term “the heavens” in Paul’s epistle, they evidently understood what the apostle meant. Today, however, we are at a great disadvantage. The passage of time, along with the dramatic cultural and religious differences between us and the world of Paul and his contemporaries, have conspired to cloud our understanding of the subject.

To put into perspective the difficulty the average Christian in the Western world has in grasping this concept, imagine that you have lived in Mexico City all your life. You are familiar with smog and everything associated with it, such as itchy eyes, irritated nose and smog alerts. Now picture yourself in the village of Thule in the northernmost part of Greenland, above the Arctic Circle, trying to explain to a native what smog is all about. How would you do it? There is nothing in that remote, unpopulated part of the world capable of providing a suitable frame of reference to understand it. Nor is there anything in the mind of the native that may enable him to relate to this new concept. You show him a picture of downtown Mexico City on a bad day, with a brownish cloud all over the city, and you say to him, “This is what smog looks like.”

To this he may reply, “How long does it stay there? One minute? Five minutes?”

“No! It stays there forever,” you say.

Now he is perplexed as he compares the brownish cloud with the pristine air all around him, and he asks, “How long do people breathe it? They could do it for more than a few minutes, right?” When you tell him that people breathe it day and night, 24 hours a day, he cannot believe it.

“The heavenlies” is a concept totally familiar to the Early Church, we had better become thoroughly acquainted with it ourselves!

It is nearly impossible to explain something new to someone who has no frame of reference in which to fit the new concept. This is what usually happens to us in the Western world with the notion of “the heavenlies.” For example, the average Westerner has serious difficulty accepting the fact that demons and angels are active and present in our world. It is even harder to believe that any interaction can take place between the natural and the supernatural realms. Even though he admits he doesn’t fully understand what Jesus meant when he said, “Whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven” (Matt. 18:18), he has already concluded that it cannot mean what the text literally says. For Christians in the West, Paul’s teaching that we, the Church, are seated with Christ “in the heavenly places” (Eph. 2:6) and that “the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (Eph. 3:10) is closer to a figure of speech or to a poetic style than to plain truth.

However, when Christians in Ephesus read in Paul’s epistle the term “in the heavenlies,” they knew it referred to the spiritual realm where angels, demons and even we—the Church—operate. When they heard the admonition that our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, they knew it was a direct reference to spiritual powers that existed and operated in the same sphere in which the Church did. Otherwise, the command to stand firm against those forces of wickedness “in the heavenlies” would have been meaningless. “The heavenlies” is a concept totally familiar to the Early Church. Because that is where the warfare takes place (see Eph. 6:12), we had better become thoroughly acquainted with it ourselves. Otherwise, everything we know may become invalidated because of what we don’t know regarding this cosmic battleground on which we are expected to face and defeat the master of deception.

It is understandable why Western Christians have difficulty with the expression “in the heavenlies.” When we think of heaven, we either think of a faraway realm where God sits enthroned, or we think of the believer’s future eternal home with God in heaven. This is exactly the opposite picture from what the apostle Paul is teaching in Ephesians. Though the literal translation of these words is indeed “in the heavenlies,” the best functional translation would probably be “in the spirit realm.”¹

Satan has gained a decisive advantage in his struggle against the Church because of the Church’s growing ignorance of the spirit world. Like the commando described above, the Church, especially in the West, has been partially neutralized. In spite of enjoying powerful means of communication, sophisticated teaching tools, political freedom, financial backing and the largest pool of talent ever assembled, it has failed to reach the world for Christ. Worse yet, in many countries the Church is losing ground, with more churches being closed than those being planted. Like the U.S. Pacific fleet anchored at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the Church in the West today presents too easy a target for Satan. We do not believe we are at war. We do not know where the battleground is located, and, in spite of the might of our weapons, they are neither loaded nor aimed at the right target. We are unaware of how vulnerable we are. We are better fitted for a parade than for an amphibious landing!

Ephesians: A Road Map of the Heavenlies

God's Dilemma

In chapter 2 of Ephesians, Paul describes a sinister character whom he calls “the prince of the power of the air” (Eph. 2:2). Before Christ’s death and resurrection, this princely being had a jurisdiction, or authority to govern, in the heavenly places. He is called a “prince”—which describes his rank—“of the power of the air”—which explains his area of domain.

Paul’s teachings in Ephesians about the believer’s and the Church’s warfare with Satan, and “the powers” (or demons’) hierarchy, is complex and confusing for those of us who live in a totally different sociocultural-spiritual context. I will attempt to simplify the subject by using word pictures with diagrams; their weakness is that they are too literal. They attempt to describe invisible actions and beings using human word pictures and diagrams. Their strength is that they can help us visualize the invisible so we can understand what has occurred and is occurring “in the heavenlies.”

The Cosmic Grave

The center of Satan’s jurisdiction appears to be what I call a “cosmic grave,” in which every human being ever born (with the exception of Jesus Christ) has been entombed.

All who live outside of Christ are dead and entombed. Instead of dirt, Satan uses sins and trespasses to bury his captives, who are described as “children of wrath” (Eph. 2:3). They are all dead in their “trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1).

“And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience” (Eph. 2:1,2).

Drawing from other passages in the Bible, it is safe to assume that “the gates of hell” (Matt. 16:18, KJV), which I reinterpret to fit my word picture, kept a tight lid on this cosmic grave, and that prior to Jesus’ resurrection, the padlock of death kept those gates secured (see Heb. 2:14,15; Rev. 1:18). The whole picture is the epitome of despair—scores of people eternally buried, rotting in their own sins and trespasses, and programmed to follow the course of an evil master.

God's Love

However, God loves that lost world (see John 3:16). The specific focus of His love is on the masses of humanity suffering in that cosmic grave under the dictatorship of the “prince of the power of the air.” In fact, God loves them so much that He is willing to pay the highest price—the life, the death, the blood of His Son (see John 3:16,17; 1 John 4:9).

God’s interest in lost sinners presents Him with a twofold dilemma.

First, how can He, a holy God, bring to Himself sinners—children of wrath and disobedience—who are programmed to follow this evil prince?

Second, how can He rescue them from a cosmic grave that is legally under someone else's jurisdiction?

God has the power to do it, but His power never violates the holiness of His character. Prior to Jesus' death, if God would have intervened directly, Satan could have accused God of trespassing because the kingdom of the earth and their glory had been given to him, "And the devil said to Him, 'I will give You all this domain and its glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I give it to whomever I wish'" (Luke 4:6).

Cosmic Checkmate

The answer to this dilemma is found in what unfolds alongside each mention of "the heavenlies" in the rest of the epistle of Ephesians. Five times the term "heavenly places" is used in Ephesians. The first time it has to do with the Father (see Eph. 1:3), the second time with Jesus (see Eph. 1:20,21), the third with the Church (see Eph. 2:6), the fourth with the principalities and powers (see Eph. 3:10), and the last time with the struggle between the Church and those principalities and powers (see Eph. 6:10-12).

If we imagine the conflict between God and the devil for the salvation of man in terms of a chess game, each one of the five references to "the heavenly places" mentioned represents a move by God that eventually leads to cosmic checkmate.

First move:

God seeded the heavenly places with all kinds of spiritual blessings for the benefit of the captives in anticipation of their liberation.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" (Eph. 1:3).

God seeded the formerly dark heavenlies with the bright lights and spiritual blessings He prepared "before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4) for those who would believe in Christ. We could say that, like seeds buried in the ground under the winter snow, God's blessings for the Church-to-be were scattered all over the heavenly places "before the foundation of the world" in anticipation of the rising of the "Sun" of Justice, who would thaw the ground and cause those seeds to sprout. Unknown to Satan, his kingdom had already been invaded in the eternal, sovereign plan of God.

second move:

God applied a one-two punch by sending Jesus first to the lowest parts of Satan's kingdom (see Eph. 4:9) and then raising Jesus to the highest place in the heavenly places (see Eph. 4:8; 1:18-22).

"What does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in

accordance with the working of the strength of His might which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead, and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come. And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church” (Eph. 4:9; 1:18-22).

Speaking figuratively, the first punch deposited Jesus’ feet at the bottom of the grave and confined the prince of the power of the air, along with his principalities and powers, under the feet of Jesus (see Eph. 1:22; 1 Pet. 3:22). The second punch placed Jesus in the highest possible place in the heavenly places—at the right hand of God—and established Him as head of the Church (see Eph. 1:18-22). Also, on the way out of the grave, Jesus took with Him the keys of Hades and death, thus eliminating the effectiveness of the padlock that formerly secured the gates of hell as shown in Diagram 1 (see Eph. 4:8; Heb. 2:14,15; Rev. 1:18).

What do we see as a result of God’s one-two punch? Figuratively speaking, Jesus’ feet are in the lowest part of the heavenly places and His head in the highest. His head and His feet are in position, so to speak. What is still missing? His body. This leads us to the third move described in Ephesians 2:6-10.

Third Move:

Figuratively speaking, God now proceeded to effect the largest transfer of “building material” in the entire history of the universe. He did it by moving human beings (sinners) from Satan’s grave into the heavenly places, where He seated them (as saints) there with Jesus (see Eph. 2:6). The now vulnerable and unsecured gates of hell could not prevail against God’s command (see Matt. 16:18). From among those whom He transferred, Paul later tells us that He appointed some to be apostles, some to be prophets, others to be evangelists and still others pastor-teachers (see Eph. 4:11). He did this for the purpose of building up the Body of Christ until it has reached the full measure of Christ (see Eph. 4:11-16). Filling the “all in all” mentioned in Ephesians 1:23 reflects the fullness of Christ in the Church as it occupies the heavenlies, thus displacing the prince of the power of the air and his underlings from their control in the heavenlies. They are now confined in subjection under Jesus’ feet (see Eph. 1:22). This is a powerful metaphor of Christ’s absolute lordship over all things visible and invisible.

“And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all....And raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 1:22,23; 2:6).

Now the picture is complete, showing Jesus’ feet at the lowest part of what used to be Satan’s domain, His head at the highest part, and His body—the Church—in between those two.

fourth move:

God established the Church in the heavenly places as both an example and a witness to the principalities and powers. God did this “in order that the manifold wisdom of God might

now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places” (Eph. 3:10).

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The Church is an example of the principalities and powers. An example of what? —Of God’s grace. Grace is something Satan cannot relate to because he is absolutely outside of its scope. When Jesus was hanging on the cross, Satan was relying on the letter of the law for a technical victory. He knew he could not touch Jesus Himself on account of His sinlessness, but he was counting on being able to continue to keep mankind inside his cosmic grave on account of its sinfulness. To this effect, he was using the “act of the decrees”—the law of God that mankind had violated—as his claim of authority over his captives (see Col. 2:15). He was counting on the fact that God’s law declared that the soul that sins must also die (see Ezek. 18:4).

However, Satan overlooked a mystery that was hidden in Christ, a mystery called “grace” that came to light when Jesus’ body was pierced. Grace allows God to grant unmerited favor without violating His holiness on account of Christ’s expiatory sacrifice. When Christ’s body was lanced and His blood shed, a new dispensation began: the dispensation of grace. In absolute perplexity, Satan watched Jesus open a new way of access for man to the Father, not on the basis of man’s own righteousness, but on the righteousness of Christ imputed to them. Now God has put men and women, saved by grace, on display in the heavenly places as an example of that grace to Satan and his underlings.

According to Ephesians 3:10, the Church has an active role of making known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenlies the manifold wisdom of God. The manifold wisdom of God is what we have just discovered—God’s plan of salvation through the grace of Christ. The Church makes it known both by its example and also through the word of its testimony spoken into the spirit world, declaring to the powers their defeat by Christ and our authority in His name to claim lost souls for the kingdom of God.²

fifth move:

Ephesians 6:12 says, *“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (NIV).*

In four moves God has deprived Satan of his rightful control of the heavenlies. By making Christ the “fullness of all in all” in the Church as it occupies the heavenly places, God has displaced Satan and his hosts and confined them under the feet of Jesus. The Church has now been placed as potentially in control of the heavenly places once ruled by the prince of the power of the air.

But the Church must engage and defeat the enemy to retake the heavenlies in the name of her Lord, so that the eyes of those still being held captive by Satan will be opened. Though Satan and his evil powers have already been defeated by Christ, they have not yet been abolished. They are allowed to hold mankind captive until God’s liberating army, the Church, invades Satan’s kingdom, rescuing men and women from bondage. This is the

warfare so vividly described by Paul in Ephesians 6:10-20. Even though the focus of Ephesians 6:10-18 is usually interpreted as more defensive than offensive, this warfare is both defensive and offensive as we will soon see.

We are to stand firm against the schemes of our enemy (see Eph. 6:10-14a) because Satan attacks the Church now seated with Christ in the heavenlies (see Eph. 2:6). How does he do it? To answer this question, we must understand that in this picture of the Church in the heavenlies there are two constants and one variable.

The first constant is Jesus' position of authority over Satan and his demons. They are under His feet, and He is far above them and every name of this age and of the age to come. This can never change.

The other constant is Jesus' position of authority at the right hand of God in the highest point of the heavenly places. Nothing can ever alter that. He is there waiting until all His enemies are finally placed as a footstool under His feet. (see Heb. 1:13).

The only variable is the position of the Church vis-à-vis the demonic forces, as it confronts Satan and his "forces of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12).

Satan cannot challenge Jesus' authority over him and thus he must remain under His feet. Likewise, he cannot question God's decision to place Jesus in the highest place, interceding for the Church. So what option is left open to him? —To challenge the position of the Church in the heavenly places, since the Church has been set up as an example and a witness to him and his hosts (see Eph. 3:10). This is where Satan concentrates his attack—on the only variable element in the equation. Why would Jesus constantly intercede before God for the Church unless such intercession is directly related to the Church's struggle against Satan? God the Father does not need Jesus to remind Him of what His shed blood accomplished. Jesus' intercession has to do with the warfare between the Church and Satan.

Satan's Counterattack

The battle lines have been drawn. What is Satan's strategy? Since he was dispossessed of authority by Jesus and confined under His feet by God, he needs a place to stand over, a jurisdiction over which he can exercise authority. He cannot challenge the Father and he cannot challenge Jesus.

Satan's only option is to try to deceive the Church, God's agent on earth, into yielding to him what has been entrusted to her care by God, much like what he did to Eve, and then Adam, in the garden. Satan has no power; this is why he must resort to deception in order to obtain that which he has no right to. Just as with Eve, the Church, which is the target of this scheme, is never told by Satan the whole truth regarding the proposed transaction. Satan has chosen a seemingly innocuous weapon to use.

What is Satan's weapon? —Anger, not Satan's anger, but that of Christians, primarily directed at each other. In Ephesians 4:26,27, Paul warns believers not to let the sun go down on their anger and thus "give the devil an opportunity."

Paul does not say not to get angry. He says when you are angry, do not sleep on it. Deal with it immediately. Apply grace and so eliminate the source of your anger. Anger, like the desire that drove Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, is a normal emotion. Because anger touches us so much and so often, we fail to see—like Eve in the garden—that what appears like a minor problem can, in reality, be a major scheme of Satan that has terrible and eternal consequences.

The word “opportunity” is used here as a place or region. It is the Greek word *topos* from which we get our English word “topography.” It can also be translated “office,” suggesting an area of jurisdiction. A jurisdiction is a sphere of influence entrusted to someone. What Paul is saying is, “Do not fail to forgive those that hurt you lest you create an area of jurisdiction for the devil to have authority over.” This is the jurisdiction that Satan so desperately needs in order to do war against the Church. That jurisdiction is located in the heavenlies.

As soon as such a jurisdiction is created, Satan and his demons are able to invade the heavenly places from where they had been previously displaced. They are able to do this because Christians, through unresolved anger, deny the validity of the example described in Ephesians 3:9,10 by depriving each other of grace. Instead of forgiving, they choose to make the offender pay for the offense. When Christians fail to forgive their offenders, in reality, they are withholding grace from them. Since Christians are set in the heavenlies as a testimony and an example of God’s grace to the rulers and authorities, when they deny grace to each other they invalidate their testimony. They are no longer an example. The new life is not in evidence, but the old self is. They behave like the children of wrath and disobedience they once were when Satan ruled unimpeded over them. In essence, Christians have reverted to the old pattern used by Satan to control their behavior inside the cosmic grave. By inserting the old disk where the new one should be, Satan is able to use God’s hardware to print his program on God’s paper. What a clever scheme!

“And do not give the devil an opportunity” (Eph. 4:27).

When we connect the unresolved anger mentioned in Ephesians 4:27 with the resulting grieving of the Holy Spirit described in Ephesians 4:30, we immediately see a highly destructive combination. These two elements allow the devil and his forces of wickedness to move into jurisdictions in the heavenly places created by our disobedience. Because Satan cannot challenge Jesus’ authority, he then challenges the Church in the realm of delegated authority. In essence, it is a repeat of what he did in the Garden of Eden.

Basically, these are the only two moves available to the devil to orchestrate a counterattack: Christians, angry at each other, no longer walk in the light and, therefore, fellowship is broken. This, in turn, prevents the blood of Jesus from cleansing them from all unrighteousness (see 1 John 1:7). Because of those sins, the Holy Spirit is grieved and the fullness of Christ in the Church as it sits in the heavenly places becomes compromised.

When Satan has the upper hand in an area, we always find a Church that is deeply divided with members, congregations and denominations angry at each other.

Consequently it is futile to try to effect transformation without first resolving the anger expressed in divisions among Christians. The battleground is the heavenly places. That is where we must stand firm against the schemes of the devil. If we have already succumbed to his scheme, we must void the jurisdiction we created for him to have authority and immediately retake the lost ground.

The Trigger

Like an earthquake taking place undetected in the deepest part of the ocean that triggers a tsunami, unwholesome words trigger a chain of events that eventually destroy the effectiveness of our stand against Satan.

What is it that causes so much anger among Christians? Without doubt, the trigger that fires this kind of anger is “unwholesome words” in Ephesians 4:29: “Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear.” This trigger is subtle and well disguised but every major relational tragedy is set in motion by unwholesome words. Like an earthquake taking place undetected in the deepest part of the ocean that triggers a tsunami, unwholesome words trigger a chain of events that eventually destroy the effectiveness of our stand against Satan.

What is the definition for unwholesome words? —Words that tear down rather than build up—truth without grace. Telling the truth devoid of “edification according to the need of the moment” (Eph. 4:29), is more cruel than choosing not to meet the need at hand. It is definitely far worse. It is making sure that the need is highlighted by the raw edge of truth and then made more painfully evident by withholding the grace needed to meet such need. The object is clear: to tear down. In so doing, we become Exhibit A for the accuser of the brethren (see Rev. 12:10).

Truth hurts more than lies

We are more easily offended by the truth than by lies. If someone says something false about us, it hurts us, but somehow we are able to sleep in peace because we know, deep down, that there is no substance to it. However, when someone says something critical that we know is true—partially or totally true—it makes us angry and takes away our sleep. We feel judged and condemned because somebody has voiced something that may still be true, but was spoken without grace. It may be something with which we desperately need to deal, a weak point where we need to change, something we have continually tried to suppress in light of our inability to correct it. But telling the naked truth without grace passes judgment leaving no room to escape.

Why the “Biblical Procedure” for addressing wrongs never works

Truth without grace is devastating. For instance, if you remove God’s grace from my life, all that is left is a wretched sinner. I do not want to face that kind of naked truth. Likewise,

truth without grace can be enslaving. For instance, in Matthew 18:18 we are told in a context of broken relationships, “Whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” The context refers to two people who have had a disagreement. Jesus instructs the one who seems to be in the right to seek the other party out for the purpose of effecting reconciliation. If he is not successful he is instructed to take two witnesses and repeat the procedure. If that fails, he should engage the church. If the offending party does not hear the church’s admonition, he should be considered a Gentile and a tax collector.

Matthew 18:15-20 is a favorite passage to deal with broken relationships in the church. Unfortunately, it seems that every time people choose to follow the procedures outlined in Matthew 18, rather than fixing the relationship, they make it worse. Why? I believe because we fail to incorporate grace to the truth under discussion.

When someone has done a wrong to us we go to that person with a certain degree of anger and confront him with the truth. When that person refuses to repent on our terms, we take two witnesses, who usually are close friends of ours, not so much to effect reconciliation but to document the offender’s refusal to repent. When he does not respond the way we demand it, we then take it to the church—a church that the other party no longer attends.

The church usually writes a letter to the offending person, outlining his disobedience and gives him a certain time to repent. When he does not repent, the church now considers the offending Christian a Gentile and a tax collector. And some churches have used these two terms—“Gentile” and “tax collector”—as synonyms for unbelievers so they can justify themselves in pursuing a lawsuit in secular court.

Once we have exhausted all the avenues for reconciliation, we should release the offender rather than bind him!

Why is it that in following “biblical procedure” we usually make the problem worse? I believe it is because we fail to discern the intent of the procedure outlined in Matthew 18:15-20. We are given the option to bind or to release, and we usually choose to bind. Please, notice the context. In the parable of the lost of sheep in Matthew 18:10-14, we have Jesus’ clear admonition that God does not want any one of those sheep to perish. Following the passage dealing with the discipline issue, we have the parable of two debtors (Matt. 18:21-35). Notice that the king became very angry with the party that was right, because of the party’s failure to release the offending party.

I believe a better way to deal with the issue is that once we have exhausted all the avenues for reconciliation, we release the offender rather than bind him. As Stephen did in Acts 7 and as Jesus did while hanging on the cross, we should pray for God not to count the offender’s sin against him. By doing this, we are sending grace to the offender and to the devil. Satan hates nothing more than grace, because grace neutralizes his most effective weapon: sin. Where sin abounds, grace overflows. Every time somebody offends us we should forgive that person unilaterally, because in so doing we take the truth of that offense and wrap it in grace. It is amazing how grace changes evil deeds into momuments

to goodness. Jesus did this when He took man's evil deeds at calvary and changed them into God's gateway of grace.

When it comes to the truth itself, Jesus, no single person on earth can claim a corner on its understanding.

But what about the terms "Gentile" and "tax collector"? What about them? A Gentile is someone who is outside of God's covenant with God's people. And a tax collector is a member of God's people who is working for the enemy. These two categories are worthy of pity. I believe that what Jesus is saying is to be merciful to them. Have pity on them, because they are working for the enemy. Release them. Do not bind them. Do not ignore the truth of their misdeeds, but rather than use that truth to bind them and make them pay, as the slave did in the parable of the two debtors, add grace to that truth and turn it into a blessing. By adding grace to Saul of Tarsus, Stephen changed him into Paul of Antioch. Truth plus grace is a powerful combination.

Truth always has two sides. The greater the truth, the farther apart those sides are. When it comes to the truth itself, Jesus, no single person on earth can claim a corner on its understanding. However, so many times self-appointed proponents and guardians of that truth claim the right to its full understanding. This is tantamount to their considering themselves greater than the truth itself and their positioning themselves over the truth to "instruct" others that, in their estimation, lack the "complete" understanding that they ascribe to themselves. Ridiculous! No wonder the Bible warns us that "knowledge puffs up" (1 Cor. 8:1, NIV).

This is so serious that in Ephesians 4:3 Paul exhorts us to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." He doesn't say in the bond of agreement of "the truth as we understand it." He says peace. This is because when brethren who differ on important issues are at peace with each other they are able to grow together in the understanding of the truth. Not for the sake of proving their particular point of view, but for the sake of what truth spoken in a context of grace does: it sets people free.

It Works!

These principles were dramatically illustrated in Argentina when, on November 15, 1993, we called the Church in La Plata to hold a prayer meeting in the main plaza, but the authorities had decided not to grant us the proper permit. There was ample room for our frustration to turn into anger with its devastating consequences.

City Hall never said no, but it never said yes either. This ambiguous stance allowed the ruling authorities—closely connected to the Free Masons and to the most reactionary elements within the Catholic Church—a broad range of options. If we went ahead with our plans, they could jail us for conducting a meeting without a permit, or if we challenged them on constitutional grounds, they could claim that they never denied us the permit.

If you conduct a meeting in a public place in Argentina without a permit, you are liable to be arrested and your equipment, sound system, vehicles and so on can be confiscated. In close cooperation with the pastors in La Plata and under the leadership of Sergio Scataglini,

a dear friend and fellow missionary, we chose a path that allowed us to be wise as serpents while remaining innocent as doves.

We waited until enough people had gathered to make a mass arrest impossible. Then, the young people began to sing and that allowed us to spot the undercover agents. (You can always spot the undercover agents because even though they can mimic the words they can never imitate the joy of the Lord.) These undercover agents were there to surreptitiously identify the leaders in order to arrest them and thus end the meeting. Under Sergio's leadership, we ran a five-ring circus with action on several fronts so that no one could be identified as "the" leader. Finally, when enough people had gathered, the sound truck was quickly moved into place and an "impromptu" prayer meeting was underway.

An English pastor came to the podium and asked forgiveness of the Argentines for England's massacre of teenage soldiers during the Falkland War. An American asked forgiveness for U.S. Secretary of State Al Haig's duplicity during the early peace negotiations. This touched a deep nerve in the Argentines present, because close to 2,000 teenage draftees lost their lives during the meaningless Falkland War. An Argentine pastor came forward to extend forgiveness, while asking the same for the fact that Argentina started the war. It was a most moving moment. There was hardly a dry eye in the crowd of almost 3,000 people. None of this was planned.

"I am a public official and I am ashamed of what we have done by denying the permit for this marvelous act. I am an atheist, but I want to publicly repent on behalf of the government for this terrible deed..."

After this, the heavens opened up and prayer after prayer went up on behalf of the Catholic Church—which has opposed us so fiercely—on behalf of the Pope and the Cardinals, the Bishops and the Archbishop. At that moment, a group of born-again Catholics came to the front of the podium and the whole crowd exploded in praise and worship. People reached out to them, embracing them, kissing them. It was a most memorable and healing moment!

Immediately after that, as I stood on the platform, somebody tugged my leg and asked me to lean down. A well-educated man shook my hand while saying, "I am a public official and I am ashamed of what we have done by denying the permit for this marvelous act. I am an atheist, but I want to publicly repent on behalf of the government for this terrible deed. Would you forgive me and those I represent?"

Can you feel the full impact of what this man said? "I am an atheist, but I want to publicly repent on behalf of those I represent...." An atheist repenting? Only God can do it! When I reported this to the public assembly, another spontaneous never-ending clamor of praises to God swept the heavenly places.

On one side of the crowd stood the massive doors of the Catholic Cathedral, locked, projecting a sense of rejection. On the other side stood City Hall, brightly lit on the outside but uninvitingly dark on the inside. Officials and functionaries had retired early, afraid that we might face them with their own misdeeds. Ungodly men, both secular and religious, had tried to encircle the Plaza with enmity and mistrust, but God's people built an altar right in the middle of it and what the devil had intended for evil, God turned around for good!

What a service of reconciliation! What went on in that Plaza was a modern-day replay of Acts 2.

Following this, Cindy Jacobs prayed for the sick. Many people were miraculously healed, several of them unbelievers. Then, an invitation was given and many more came to the Lord. As we continued to minister to the needs of the people, a second wave of onlookers drew near. Being an evangelist, I could not resist the temptation, so I gave another invitation for them to receive the Lord. Scores of people with their hands upraised moved toward the platform from every corner of the Plaza. It was an incredible sight! By dealing first with the jurisdictions in the heavenlies, we were able to gain the upper hand over Satan.

Conclusion

Anytime you choose to sleep on your anger, you are inviting evil forces to move into the space entrusted to you in the heavenly places.

The importance of the heavenly places cannot be overemphasized. Anytime you choose to sleep on your anger, you are inviting evil forces to move into the space entrusted to you in the heavenly places. These evil forces have a deadly agenda: to kill, to steal and to destroy, and you could be their first victim, and the trigger could be as close as your tongue!

But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father; and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Neither can salt water produce fresh (St. James 3:8-12).

Every challenge the Church faces today is, in essence, a spiritual problem that has a natural manifestation. This is why it is so essential to understand the reality of the heavenly places, because that is where those challenges must be met and overcome. People are not responding to the gospel because the god of this world has blinded them. This is not natural blindness but spiritual blindness. In order to facilitate their “turning of darkness to light,” we must first open their eyes; but we cannot open their eyes unless we take authority over the forces of evil that are keeping those eyes closed. And we cannot exercise the necessary spiritual authority unless we first void the jurisdictions created by our sins (usually unresolved anger) for those demons to have a claim against us.

Likewise, the most pressing social problems we face today are spiritual in nature. Abortion, violence, bigotry, corruption and systemic poverty are spiritual problems with a human shell. Let us meet the enemy—the real enemy, Satan—in the heavenlies and let’s defeat him by using the divinely powerful weapons available to us. Every time we face our challenges in the natural we are bound to respond in anger. In so doing, we compound the problem by giving the devil a jurisdiction on which to stand. The battle must be won in the heavenlies!

Summary

1. The battleground is the heavenly places.
2. Whoever controls the heavenly places, wins.
3. The Church must take its position in Christ in the heavenlies and defend against Satan's counterattack.
4. Satan's counterattack is aimed at fragmenting unity through unresolved anger and wrath directed at each other. This creates jurisdictions in the heavenly places for Satan to exercise authority conceded to him by the Church. If unity is compromised, the credibility of the Church and the effectiveness of its message are diminished.
5. Voiding those jurisdictions is the first step toward bringing Christians to full strength to effect transformation in their sphere of influence.

Taken from [That None Should Perish](#) ch 3.