

It is through life's cracks and loopholes that evil dynamics gain entrance and the church must close these loopholes. The latter half of chapter four of Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus warns against Christians allowing room for the devil. After all, the devil doesn't need much room to worm his way into our lives. Let us look at some of these loopholes the devil uses to undermine Christians. Paul's letter to the Ephesians sternly cautions believer to guard against five loopholes that the devil can use to derail the Christian.

One: Lying is one of those bad habits that's been around since man was created. Paul warns the Ephesians *to put away falsehood.* The pagan culture at the time of Ephesians taught that lying was a perfectly valid activity. Recently converted Gentiles had to be told that telling the truth was a pledge and sign of discipleship. After twenty one centuries of Christian teaching, you'd think we'd have realised this by now, but the instruction to put away falsehood is as valid today as it was then. In fact in many walks of life, lying is part of the way things work. Do you watch Judge Judy? I admit it's atrocious but Judy often asks how do you know when I teenager is lying; their lips are moving! The same can be said of many politicians, you know they're lying when you hear words come out of their mouths!

I think that worst kind of lying is when we lie to ourselves, and I admit to doing that from time to time. I tell myself that certain kinds of behaviour are okay even although I know they are not. We lie when we tell ourselves that we are okay, when we know our thinking is not in line with what God asks of us. I lie when I think to myself that I am a committed Christian, and then I read the passage on the fruits of the spirit and realise how many of these Godly qualities I lack! *Lying is one of the church's most dangerous loopholes because we are members of one another, one body; the church!* As the unified body of Christ, to lie to one another is to lie to ourselves, and to lie to Christ himself, and that's quite a thought!

The second loophole Paul's addresses is anger: Note that Paul doesn't say ***never be angry, but be angry but do not sin.*** There is such a thing as justifiable anger, righteous indignation, anger over injustice and exploitation. Saint John Chrysostom said that *He, or she who is not angry when they have has cause to be, sins.* Greek philosophy defined anger as *a short madness.* Have you ever tried to reason with someone who's in a rage? How did you get on? You have to wait until the person has cooled off before rational conversation can begin. Only after sanity is restored can the cause of the person's anger be safely addressed.

Ephesians warns that our cooling off period should be short; *do not let the sun go down on your anger* (v26). It's tempting to revel in our rage, to relive and reignite the flame of our fury because anger can make us feel powerful. But we should close the loophole on our anger. The body of Christ cannot maintain its health if its pulse is always pounding, its adrenalin is always pumping and its fists are always clenched.

Jesus got angry when He drove the money-changers from the temple, condemned the Pharisees as a brood of vipers who put stumbling blocks before little ones. But Jesus didn't get angry at Judas. He didn't curse Peter; Jesus did not blast Pilate or scream back at the cursing crowds. On Good Friday, the sun didn't go down on an angry Jesus. The time for righteous wrath had passed; the time for love crucified had begun. Have you closed your loopholes of anger with bonds of love and forgiveness? Are you keeping the body's fabric of faith intact?

Loophole number three is Greed: Consumer culture wants us to believe that more is always better. Our inability to distinguish quality of life from the quantity of things filling our lives can lead us to be a greedy and grasping people. Ephesians qualifies the warning against greed with the command that *everyone should do work so that everyone will have enough to share.* This seems to turn earthly wisdom on its head because the me first attitude that pervades some is that we work so we can get more, and the poverty of others is not our fault or responsibility. Ephesians says different!

Every year ,we piously lecture ourselves against turning Christmas into a consumption ritual. We complain about the Christmas spirit of giving being replaced by the corporate spirit of profit-taking. Yet our well-meaning sentiments rarely slow down our spending. And then there's the day after Christmas when we've just received lovely gifts and gadgets, and yet this is the day that has become the second biggest shopping day of the year for retailers. We aren't at the shops merely to exchange that shirt my sister sent me that's always a size too small, we're lured by the sales and the opportunity to part with our money all over again! Greed; enough is never enough.

Here's a typical story about my experience in a record store about two years ago. I was walking about HMV in town and I came across Marvin Gaye's What's Going On album in 180gram vinyl, only £25.00! Wow I thought, 180gram vinyl, that's going to sound amazing. I didn't pick the record up but mentally noted where it was so I could browse and collect it later. Then I came across the CD of the same album for £4.00, and I started to question whether I could really tell the difference between the 180gram vinyl edition or the CD, and I came the conclusion that I couldn't tell £21.00 worth of difference.

So I made my way to cash desk with the £4.00 CD. When the staff member asks can I help you, I suddenly remembered that I had this particular CD already. What's more, I realised that I had the CD version of nearly every vinyl record I had bought over the past two years. I had fallen for marketing hype that vinyl was better and rebought a large part of my collection! I immediately went home and listed my vinyl LPs on Ebay for sale. I'd fallen for the compulsive greediness and never-satisfied neediness that marks our culture. We become addicted to having stuff and in the long run, this addiction only brings hunger and emptiness. I asked Mary that is she ever sees me buying a vinyl LP again, she is to slap me. Funnily enough, she was only too happy to agree to my request!

We live in a consumer society where there's always someone or some company telling us that the route to happiness and success lies in this or that product. And when we get whatever they are selling, then what? What's next is then what! And so goes the cycle over and over again. And are we really more satisfied or fulfilled, not until we find a way off the consumer roundabout. Now, there is nothing wrong with having stuff and nearly all of us have stuff to some extent and we are happy with our stuff. But one of the devil's most effective loopholes into robbing us of our piece as Christians, is to tempt us to climb upon the consumer roundabout with its never ending quest for more.

What was it that Paul said about those caught up in greed: *Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed.* This doesn't sound like joyous and fulfilled living to me.

Loophole Four is Dangerous Talk and we covered this recently: The first person to ever recite that singsong refrain *Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me*, was probably crying to himself in some dark cupboard at the time; *Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can break my heart and seriously impair my chances of reaching my potential.* If words weren't capable of hurting us more deeply and more permanently, than any weapon of metal or wood, then there would be a lot of therapists at the job centre. Christians must close the loophole excuse that *it's only words*. Once they leave our mouths, words take on a life of their own. Words of cruelty, hatred and prejudice implant themselves in people's hearts and minds, where without any encouragement they take root and grow.

A loose tongue is one of the devil's favourite loopholes. Words are the things that divide churches, and that cause people to lose their faith because others in church have criticised them or excluded them.

Thankfully, I've never heard the words *that's my seat and you can't sit there* in this church, but's a common phrase elsewhere and one guaranteed to make visitors stay away. ***Thoughtless and cruel words are the devils ways of undermining the basic foundations of a church community.*** Hurtful speech tears down and destroys love and trust more effectively than any sledgehammer.

And lastly, ***Loophole five: Meanness of Spirit:*** A man once told me that he decided his life would be a success if he could make just one person happy. He chose himself! This is not the kindness or generosity of spirit that Paul is urging the church at Ephesus to adopt. A mean spirit is not the same kind of meanness that denotes cruelty or abuse, it's a meanness that takes no joy in the presence of others. Someone with a mean spirit is unable to see beyond the drive to satisfy their own desires. A mean spirit is concerned only with keeping itself going day by day, with no time or compassion for the welfare of others. A mean spirit may do no apparent wrong, but neither does it do any spontaneous rights.

A mean spirit keeps the body of Christ on a mere subsistence diet, refusing to glory in or enjoy the embarrassing abundance of riches God has lavished on us. Such a diet eventually starves the capacity for grace, empathy and forgiveness right out of the body. Using right-sounding loopholes like self-preservation, self-determination and self-esteem, the mean spirit hides the fact that it is really selfish. Such an attitude can never be part of a community that is working to fulfil the command to be imitators of Christ.

We are called to live in love as Christ loved us. ***Lying, Anger, Greed, Dangerous Talk and Mean Spiritedness*** are the loopholes Paul has identified. Let us examine ourselves and ask ourselves: ***What are the loopholes that we need to close in our lives today? Amen***

(1834 words)