

Do Not Be Deceived

M. W. Bassford, 4-3-11

In all of creation, both seen and unseen, I don't know of anybody who has a harder sales job than the devil. After all, he has nothing pleasant or beneficial to offer. For those who follow him, he can only deliver misery in this life and death in the life to come. If he told the truth about what he is selling, he wouldn't convince a single soul.

As a result, just like fraudulent salesmen throughout the ages, the devil lies about his product. He doesn't remind people about the unpleasant consequences of sin once they give into temptation. He doesn't point out that a life of sin will lead them to hell. Instead, he gets people to focus on the immediate, short-term pleasures of sin instead of the long-term pain. He deceives them, and he is so successful in his deceit that he persuades almost everyone to follow him.

Sadly, simply because we have committed our lives to Christ does not mean that we are immune to the wiles of Satan. We are just as vulnerable to his deceptions as people in the world are. In fact, every time we sin, we commit that sin because we have bought into Satan's lies. We've let him convince us that we will be happier sinning than being righteous. Of course, it never works out that way. The sweet of sin, which is never as good as we anticipate, is always followed by a much greater bitterness. We know this. However, the devil is so good at deceit that we continue to listen to him anyway.

When even God's people are so vulnerable to the deception of wickedness, it's no surprise that the Scripture warns repeatedly against being deceived. When we look at this list of warnings, we see that the devil hasn't changed any in 2000 years. The lies that were such a problem for the early church are equally a problem for us today. Only as we understand how Satan operates can we hope to resist him. Let's listen, then, when the word says, "Do not be deceived."

General Deceptions

The first thing that we must not be deceived about is that **GOOD ONLY COMES FROM GOD**. James raises this point in James 1:16-17. This is a simple statement, but it has a host of logical consequences. If every good thing comes from God, then anything that does not come from God must not be good. This is true both in a moral sense and in a practical sense. Let's start with the moral side first. This tells us that unless some doctrine can be found in God's word, at least in principle, then it is an evil and false doctrine. Well-intentioned people have been trying to add to the word for thousands of years. They sincerely believe that if God's church takes on all kinds of works that are not found in Scripture, it will be a good thing. However, those people are not correct. They are merely deceived.

Likewise, unless we can identify some thing in our lives as a gift from God, it is not truly good for us. The joys of sexual immorality can appear so alluring, but because God warns us against them, we can be sure that their only lasting effect will be sorrow. Greed and materialism promise happiness to so many, but that's a lie too. If we serve money rather than God, we will find that it is a crueler master than He can ever be. If we think that we can find joy or good in our lives through disobedience, we have been deceived. Satan doesn't want to bless us. He only wants to harm us.

Second, we must see that **THE WORLD'S WISDOM IS FOLLY**. We learn this from Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:18-19. From the very beginning of creation, there have always been people who think they've got it all figured out. They think they can get ahead in life by playing the game by their own self-centered rules. When the boss is handing out promotions and raises, they think they can get more than their share by backbiting their co-workers. When their marriage has gotten a little boring, they think that their best bet for happiness is to try to go out and get an upgrade. When they think honesty would have unpleasant consequences, they're quick to lie. The wisdom of the world can have a nearly infinite number of expressions, but we must remember that every time we think we can be wiser than God's word, we're wrong. Sooner or later, the people we've backstabbed will find out about it. Sooner or later, we learn the person who will cheat with us will also cheat on us. Sooner or later, even the most well crafted lie will fall apart. If we give in to those temptations, the only good consequence will be when we learn how badly we were deceived and how wrong we were.

Instead, we are far better off if we learn to **WALK IN CHRIST**. Paul argues for this in Colossians 2:6, 8. As we all know, the Lord's church isn't the only religious option out there. There are all kinds of other nominally Christian churches, and every one of them has something that is appealing to somebody. Some of them are very philosophical. In the name of love and tolerance, they embrace all kinds of deviance that the Bible clearly labels as sinful. Others of them are very traditional. Their worship incorporates hundreds or even thousands of years of human modification, and it is often more stirring and grand and dramatic than the plain, simple devotions of the early church. Still others are very elemental and worldly. They feed the appetites of the flesh with everything from a rock band up on stage to a Starbucks in the church-building lobby. These departures from God's plan are many things, but there is one thing they are not. They are not according to Christ. They may honor the Lord with their lips, but they do not honor Him with their obedience. If we come to the conclusion that these things are acceptable to God, we have been deceived. Instead, we must remain focused on Christ and on His word. That is the only possible path to pleasing Him.

Personal Deceptions.

On a more personal level, we must remain focused on the truth that **WE HAVE SIN**. John points this out in 1 John 1:8. Of all of the deceptions of the devil, this is one of the deadliest. All sin leads to death, but this lie keeps the sinner from seeking the help that will save him. From a certain perspective, it seems almost nonsensical. When any of us open the word and start comparing our lives to God's expectations, it's as plain as day that we don't measure up. However, somehow the devil gets people to look past this obvious point. Those who fall into this trap will sideways acknowledge that they don't do everything perfectly, but instead of repenting, they will insist that they're good people, and that God is pleased with them, and that they don't need to repent in order to avoid the punishment for sin. The basic problem here is that people like this don't want to repent. They don't want to change their lives to bring them into accordance with God's will, so they will swallow any deception that will allow them to continue living as they are. This isn't just a problem for people in the world. It's a problem for Christians too, who don't want to confront the spiritual ugliness that makes them displeasing to God. We must face the hard truth, and not be deceived.

In this, we must also look squarely at one of the sources of sin in our lives, at the fact that **EVIL COMPANY CORRUPTS GOOD HABITS**. Paul is quite clear about this in 1 Corinthians 15:33. Scripture is filled with examples of this. Solomon was the wisest man ever to live, yet when he married foreign wives, they turned his heart away from God to the worship of idols. Peter was the man whom God selected to bring the gospel to the Gentiles, yet when he associated with Judaizing false teachers, they convinced him that he shouldn't even eat with his Gentile brethren. Now, friends, if great men of faith like Solomon and Peter proved so susceptible to the influence of the wicked, what kind of influence can the wicked have in our lives? If we aren't watching for their corruption and guarding against it, they will drag us down to their level in no time flat, and the more evil the companion, the greater our fall will be. Of course, this doesn't mean that we should shun non-Christians altogether. God doesn't want His people to be monks who only associate with one another. However, it does mean that we should make an effort to make most of our companions righteous ones. If most of our friends are people of the world, it won't be long before we rejoin them in the world.

Sadly, this doesn't mean that just because someone goes to church and claims to be a Christian, that we can count on them to be a good moral influence. Instead, we must remember that **THE RIGHTEOUS PRACTICE RIGHTEOUSNESS**. John reminds us of this in 1 John 3:7-8. Jesus put this another way in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7, when He told us that we could know others by their fruits. It is true that we are saved not by our works, but by grace through faith. However, it is equally true that we are created in Christ for good works, and if those good works are not evident in our lives, we are defeating the purpose of our salvation. Being a Christian isn't about displays of emotion in worship services or sitting around thinking warm fuzzy thoughts about God. It's about discipleship. It's about walking as Jesus walked. What do we do when it counts? Do we consistently make the hard choice to be righteous, or do we consistently make the easy choice to be wicked? What we do tells us who we are, and it tells God who we are. If we make a practice of sin in our lives, we must confront that unpalatable truth and change our actions accordingly. What we must not do is fool ourselves into believing that because we talk like a child of God, we are one.

As we examine ourselves, we must also acknowledge that **WE REAP WHAT WE SOW**. Consider Paul's warning on this subject in Galatians 6:7-8. In nearly every case in the physical realm, and in absolutely every case in the spiritual realm, what we do now determines what we will get later. Let's talk about the realm of child-rearing. If we are inconsistent in our attendance, hypocritical in our lives, and lackadaisical in working for the Lord, what kind of impact is that going to have on our children? Sure, some kids buck the trend and end up as better Christians than their parents. However, that's not what usually happens. What usually happens is that the lukewarm parent raises a lukewarm child, who often ends up falling away altogether. Is that what we want for our children? Are we eager to watch them destroy their lives by making foolish and evil decisions? If that's not what we want to reap, it cannot be what we sow. If we want to reap a harvest of righteous children who are dedicated to the Lord, we have to start sowing that now. We have to make the sacrifices and the hard choices that will set their feet on the path to heaven. Do not be deceived, brethren. We can't be lukewarm and lazy and trust that things will work out in the end. What we sow now is what we will reap later.

Finally, we must be undeceived and see that **GOD WILL PUNISH THE WICKED**. Paul highlights this idea in Ephesians 5:5-6. Perhaps this deception is such a problem because of the great regard that all of us have for ourselves. All of us are the center of our own universes, and regardless of what we have done, we have trouble accepting the notion that God would take someone as wonderful and special as us and condemn us to eternal hell for our sin. Surely, God wouldn't do that to us, would He? Friends, God loves each one of us more than we can imagine. However, He hates unrighteousness more than we can imagine, and if we love and practice unrighteousness, He correctly concludes that we also hate Him. If we live lives that are filled with wickedness and the hatred of God, it doesn't matter how wonderfully special we think we are. We will spend eternity in torment, along with all of the other sinners who thought they were too wonderfully special to be lost. Do not be deceived. The only way to escape hell is through the blood of Jesus.