

Self-Deception

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It is often said in the wider religious world that God has a plan for every one of our lives. Depending on how specifically we take that, it may or may not be true, but it is certainly true that someone else has a plan for every one of us. The devil has the same goal in mind for everyone here this morning. He wants to see us join him in eternal torment. In fact, he has devoted great attention to our individual weaknesses and flaws, and he has a well thought-out strategy for how he's going to get each one of us there. I appreciate the consideration, I guess, but I wish he hadn't bothered!

In dealing with Christians, Satan has a particular challenge. He knows that we're on to his game, and so he also knows that for many of us, he can't just throw straightforward temptation in our path and expect that to get the job done. Instead, he has to use a subtler method. He has to get us to do wrong while still believing that we're doing right. This sounds unlikely, but it's a terrible danger for everyone here. Let's look this morning, then, at self-deception.

How Self-Deception Works

Let's begin our study of this sobering but significant topic by learning how self-deception works. We see **THE PROCESS** laid out for us in 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12. In this context, Paul is writing specifically about the coming of the man of sin, but lying signs and wonders aside, this is the way that self-deception operates in all our lives. We ourselves create the opening when we don't love the truth of God's word. It's not enough for us to accept the accuracy and validity of the Scripture. We have to love it, to yearn for it as the pathway to becoming more like Jesus. If we don't, if we don't have that emotional attachment to righteousness, the devil will surely use its absence to deceive us.

Once we no longer love the truth, something truly frightening happens. God gives us over to the devil and his minions, so that deceiving spirits have free reign in our lives just as they did in King Ahab's life during his final days. We don't love the truth, we don't really want to be righteous, and the devil will gladly show us a path to get what we do want. In fact, he will show us a path that looks like we get to have it all. We will still stay righteous enough—we think—to remain in God's good graces, but we also get to engage in this wonderful activity that we have now been enlightened to understand is acceptable too. The result of this self-deception is pleasure for a season and condemnation for eternity.

There are many different instances of self-deception that the Scripture cites, but we're going to explore three of self-deception's main avenues. The first of these is self-deception **AS TO THE WORD**. James warns us against this in James 1:22. Don't get me wrong; it's great to be a hearer. It's great that all of us are here this morning, listening to and studying God's word. However, it's all too easy for us to make our devotion to God about nothing more than hearing.

When we do this, we convert Bible study into a hobby, kind of the way that I view politics. I try to keep abreast of current events. I read a fair amount of political commentary from liberals and conservatives alike. However, nobody's thoughtful perspective on gun control is going to get me to call my representative in Springfield or Washington. Nobody's analysis of the problems with Medicare funding is going to get me out knocking doors for some candidate. I regard all of those pleas for action with placid interest, but they do not change my life in any way.

Some here would probably argue that my detachment from politics is a mistake, but when we are detached from God's word, that's not merely a mistake. That's a disaster. God did not give us the Scriptures to excite our intellectual interest. He gave them to us to *do*. When we nod thoughtfully as the Bible condemns lust, or materialism, or any other evil, yet continue to practice those things in our lives without interruption or even qualm of conscience, we are as self-deceived as we could possibly be. We take what could not matter more and treat it as though it does not matter at all.

Second, we can deceive ourselves **AS TO WISDOM**. Paul condemns this practice in 1 Corinthians 3:18. We have this problem when we acknowledge that we should change our lives to conform to the word, but we actually twist and distort the word so that it conforms to our lives. The more I've matured as a preacher, the more suspicious I've become of convoluted Biblical arguments. If I have to finesse this passage here, and draw this inference from this passage over here, and explain away that other passage over there, I might reach a conclusion that would help me sleep at night. However, I have probably also reached a conclusion that allows me to do what I want instead of what God wants.

This isn't only a preacher problem. It's a Christian problem. I've seen it more times than I can count. Some brother thinks he's wiser and more spiritual than other Christians, and so from the pinnacle of his enlightenment, he understands that he can do this thing that other disciples have a problem with. Of course, it can work the other way too. We can, for reasons of our own pride, find a way to turn something that we don't like into something that the Scripture condemns. Rather than thinking we know something, we need to practice the humility that knows nothing but Christ.

Finally, we can deceive ourselves **AS TO CONSEQUENCES**. Paul raises this point in Galatians 6:6-7. We do this when we know that we are responsible for living God's word, we know we aren't, but we think that somehow, our disobedience isn't going to matter. We could not be more wrong. We are certain to reap what we sow. This is true in first of all in this life. Sin is not a self-contained activity. We can't expect the effects of our sin to stay in this little area of our lives that we've separated out for them. Instead, the sin we practice will contaminate our entire being, like an entire

pool of water will be contaminated by a small trickle of sewage. No matter which sin we practice, be it lust, anger, gossip, lying, or anything else, it will have consequences in areas we never imagined it would reach. If we practice corruption, we will become corrupt people.

Of course, the earthly consequences of sin are nothing compared to the eternal consequences. In the eyes of God, there is no such thing as insignificant evil. No matter how much effort we've put in to convincing ourselves that our little problem won't really matter, it is going to matter. Indeed, the weight of how much it matters will crush us. After the Day of Judgment, there are going to be a lot of surprised sinners in hell, but there aren't going to be any of the wicked in heaven. Every one of us, without exception, is going to reap what we sow.

Jesus and Self-Deception

During His ministry, our Lord Jesus had a great deal to say about deception, and many dealings with people who deceived themselves. We're going to consider His words to and about them before we partake of the Lord's Supper. First, Jesus warned against self-deception in the area of **MATERIALISM**. Consider with me the conversation recorded in Luke 12:13-15. Clearly, Jesus knew that the man he was talking to *did* believe that his life consisted of his possessions. This points to a different kind of self-deception than we have yet examined. This isn't believing that an important thing is insignificant. This is believing that an insignificant thing is important. The reality is that our money and our possessions do not matter. They are given to us for a limited time, and when that time ends, all of us will lose all of them. And yet, so many people invest their lives in chasing these fleeting possessions. Why? Because the devil has fooled them into thinking that those things do matter, so much so that they are more important than other people and even than God. And yet, if we make that foolish mistake in our lives, we will have forever to consider how wrong we were.

Second, we can allow ourselves to be deceived about the importance of **HUMAN TRADITION**. In Matthew 15:7-9, Jesus quotes approvingly from the prophet Isaiah's condemnation of the commandments of men. Brethren, this is an area where we must be extremely careful. As a church, we very loudly take a stand for the word of God and against the traditions of men. When we read this text, we nod approvingly and scowl as we think about all the other people who have given their allegiance to human tradition. However, I cannot help but think that 2000 years ago, when the Pharisees were studying Isaiah 29 in their synagogues, they too would have nodded approvingly as they thought about some other group of people somewhere that was engaged in violating this text. They recognized its application to others, but they deceived themselves about its application to them.

With little difficulty, we can fall into the same error as the Pharisees. There is nothing wrong, per se, with having traditional ways of doing things in our congregation. However, when we place importance on those traditional ways simply because they are traditional, those traditions have ceased to become mere traditions and have become unwritten doctrine. Once they attain that status, it won't be long before they begin to interfere with our obedience to the Lord.

This is not to say that we should scrap every one of our traditions and start fresh. Many of our usual practices were instituted because they were effective, and they continue to be effective. However, effectiveness, rather than tradition, should be our criterion for evaluating everything we do. Anything that will help us do a better job of serving God is something we should adopt. If, by contrast, we maintain an ineffective practice simply because it is traditional, and we resist all change simply because it is change, we are no longer serving God. We are serving ourselves.

Third, Jesus warned against self-deception in **PARTIAL LAW-KEEPING**. Read with me from Matthew 23:23. Once again, the Pharisees are the culprits here. In addition to developing traditions that overrode certain of the commandments of God, they also sorted through those commandments, emphasized the ones they liked, and discarded the rest. For instance, they liked the commandments about tithing. Tithing was nice and numerical, you could be objectively sure that you had tithed, and you could come conspicuously trotting up to the temple with your tithe so that all your neighbors could see that you had paid it. For these reasons, they were scrupulous about tithing all the way down to little bunches of herbs from their gardens.

Justice, mercy, and faithfulness, on the other hand, were not commandments that the Pharisees liked. You couldn't quantify them, and you couldn't check them off your list and move on. They weren't about doing; they were about being, and you had to be them all the time. When you were just, merciful, and faithful, that could really interfere with some lucrative practices, such as cheating widows out of their property. That's why the Pharisees didn't like them.

Here, too, we can walk exactly the same path the Pharisees did. We can have our list of quantifiable, easy-to-keep commandments and boast in keeping them, while ignoring the big, life-changing commandments that would require us to invest real effort in being disciples. It's great that we don't have a piano in our auditorium. I'm sure there's never been one here. However, do we have hearts that are filled with love even for our enemies? Do we restrain our anger and act with patience and kindness when others frustrate us? Do we shine the light of Christ and proclaim His gospel whenever we have opportunity? Or do we deceive ourselves into believing that partial obedience is the same as discipleship?

Finally, we must remember **WHERE IT LEADS**. Let's consider together Matthew 7:22-23. This is, of course, a fairly familiar verse. We like to use it to illustrate that mere belief isn't enough, that Jesus expects our obedience too.

However, we can get more specific than that in the lessons we draw from it. These people won't merely have an obedience problem. They will have a self-deception problem. These are people who cared about Jesus. These are people who thought they were doing right. However, Satan was able to fool them. They weren't honest with themselves and with the word, so they continued in behavior that was actually disobedient. For that, they will pay the price.

Let's reflect on these things as we prepare to celebrate the supper of the Lord whom these people will claim with their lips after having denied Him with their lives. As I was preparing for this lesson, I spent some time reflecting on the fact that the Holy Spirit describes this sacred meal as the Lord's Supper--not the Lamb's Supper, or the Savior's Supper, or even Christ's Supper, but the Lord's Supper. I doubt that particular designation was chosen by accident. It tells us that as we remember His offering Himself for us, we should resolve to offer ourselves to Him. This morning, let's ask ourselves whether we are truly doing that. Are we genuinely giving our lives to Jesus, or are we lying to ourselves about it while keeping from Him the evils that we value? Let's consider this as we partake.

Solving Self-Deception

It's obvious from a consideration of the word that self-deception is a potentially soul-destroying problem. We need to spend the last portion of our time together, then, considering what we must do to solve this problem in our lives. First, we must **SPEAK TRUTH**. David makes an interesting comment about this in Psalm 15:1-2. It's certainly important for us to speak truth to others, but it is most important of all for us to speak truth in our hearts to ourselves. The devil will provoke us to lie to ourselves as surely as he will stir us up to lie to others. He doesn't want us to think about our motives. He doesn't want us asking about whether we might be in error. He doesn't want us weighing the godliness of our thoughts and emotions. Most of all, he doesn't want us examining every corner of our lives in the light of God's word. Of course, what the devil doesn't want us to do is precisely what we must do. People in the world live random, heedless lives, filled with special pleading and self-justification. If we want to go to heaven, that's a luxury we can't afford. We must constantly search and weigh our own thoughts, asking the questions of ourselves that we least want to ask, pinning ourselves down on the subjects we don't want to consider. Only then can we have truth in the heart.

Next, we must **THINK RIGHTLY**. Paul tells us what right thought looks like in Philippians 4:8. In other words, our minds should be turned constantly toward godliness, and if they are, we will be less prone to deceive ourselves.

On the other hand, if our minds are turned toward things that are ungodly, we practically invite the devil to send a deluding influence upon us. Self-deception is usually a gradual process. It begins with Biblical gray areas, but as it continues, it picks up momentum, until finally the Christian in question finds himself accepting things that he would have found unthinkable a year or two ago. Take, for instance, the teenage boy who knows that fornication is wrong, but really wants to sleep with his girlfriend anyway. He turns to his Bible and quickly realizes that it contains several principles of purity rather than a list of forbidden body parts, and he reads those principles as permissively as he possibly can. As things progress, his standards slip lower and lower, until finally fornication becomes the next logical step.

The problem with this boy wasn't where he drew the lines. It was the reason why he drew the lines in the first place. He wasn't looking to glorify God in his relationship. He was looking to get as close to sin as he possibly could, and sin is exactly what he got. If we are determined to, we can lie ourselves into believing that literally anything is acceptable. I've had people in my own extended family claim that God accepted their adultery because God wanted them to be happy. That sounds ridiculous to us, but if we give the devil the opportunity, he will twist our minds around until we accept something equally as ridiculous. If we believe his initial lie about the desirability of sin, we give him all the opening he needs to tell us every other lie in the book. Only the heart turned toward righteousness can defeat him.

Third, we must **DETERMINE OUR GOAL**. Along these lines, ponder Jesus' stark statement about goals in Matthew 5:29-30. The point here is not about literal eyes or hands. I've certainly made both my eye and my hand sin before, but neither one of them has ever made me sin. Instead, it is about the extreme measures we must take to ensure that we pass into eternal life. It is all too common in the church for brethren to defend their right to behavior that is questionable. They say, "Show me from the Scripture where it says that this is wrong." Admittedly, there are some gray areas where we can argue back and forth with no end in sight. I can't demand that anybody else conform himself to my understanding of what is godly in a gray area. Nonetheless, I submit that asking whether the Bible condemns it is asking the wrong question. Instead, we need to be asking whether the Bible endorses it, and if we can't prove from the Scripture that it is acceptable, we need not to engage in that activity. Isn't that the logical implication of Jesus' words here? If heaven is so important that I should be willing to gouge out my own eye or chop off my own hand to get there, shouldn't I also be willing to give up every activity in my life that is even questionable? Isn't that what prudence demands?

Let's put it like this: I've got a friend who is a linesman in California. Let's say that I were in California, and he invited me to his jobsite, pointed to a line, and said, "That's a 100,000-volt line. It's turned off. Want to lick it?" I would quickly decline. Sure, that line might be dead, and I could lick it, and no harm would come to me, but it might not be dead, and if I licked it, they'd be finding pieces of my skull three counties over! It's the same deal with those gray areas. I might be right. Those questionable activities may be completely acceptable in the sight of God, and I can practice them

my whole life with no ill effects. On the other hand, it might also be that the only reason I think that they're acceptable is that the devil has deceived me, and if I practice them my whole life, I will spend my whole afterlife apart from God. Do we really want to wager our souls on something that is ultimately about as meaningless as licking a power line? If we aren't willing to fool even with the things that might harm us, we give the devil a whole lot less opportunity.

Fourth, we must **BURN THE BOOKS**. This point comes from the incident described in Acts 19:19. Once the Ephesians realized that their books of magic were sinful, they made sure that neither they nor anybody else would ever use them again. This is an obvious part of repentance, but it is one that is frequently neglected. Instead, we try to quit the sin but leave the books around. We repent of our porn habit, but we leave the links on the browser and the files on the hard drive. We repent of our ungodly attraction to our co-worker, but we keep eating lunch with her. We repent of our habit of hateful speech on Facebook, but we keep reading the updates of that person who is always wrong. If we think that is sincere repentance, friends, we are deceived! That's not repentance. That's keeping the door to sin open so that we can go back when we change our minds. If we keep those things around, we are giving the devil the opportunity to construct yet another rationale why it's actually harmless for us to pursue them. Brethren, we don't dare keep that door open. We need to close it, lock it, bar it, nail it shut, and put drywall over it. If we want to be free from sin, we must remove from our lives the things that we know will tempt us to sin.

Finally, we must **FILL THE VOID**. Jesus warns us of the necessity for this in Luke 11:24-26. When I clear a patch of ground for my garden, I can't let it sit for six months and still expect it to be clear at the end of that time. Instead, a bare patch of ground is destined to become a weedbed. The only way I can keep the weeds out is to put something good in and care for it and maintain it. Likewise, if we clear sin out of our lives and don't replace it with some righteous activity, the sin will come right back. We're sending an engraved invitation to the devil saying, "Here! Deceive me about this again!" This too points to a basic heart problem. If we truly belong to God, we will have minds that are full of His word and lives that are full of His work. However, if we're not willing to put God in that first place, the devil has a whole world full of suggestions for what we can do instead.