

Describing the Deceivers

Acts 20:30-31

Introduction

Centuries before Paul arrived in Europe, hoping to overwhelm it with the gospel of Jesus Christ, Cyrus, the Persian king, was attempting to conquer it for his empire. The city of Sardis, however, lay in his way. It was more than in his way.

Sardis was the capital city of the former Lydian Empire. It was also the place where the first gold and silver coins were first minted. Sardis, a synonym for wealth, was the place where modern money was born.

Cyrus had a problem. Although he vastly outnumbered his target, the fortress that defended Sardis was built on a rocky ledge that seemed impenetrable. So, he sent a message to his troops that there would be a handsome reward for any soldier who could figure out a way into Sardis. They would have to determine a way up the seemingly unscalable cliff, then up over the walls of the fortress, and ultimately, into the walled city of Sardis.

In Cyrus' army was a soldier named Hyeroeades. One afternoon he was watching the cliffs, trying to figure out a way up. As he watched, a Lydian soldier accidentally dropped his helmet over the fortress wall. The soldier then made his way down the wall, picked his way down the cliffs, recovered his helmet, and climbed back. (When I read this, I could not help but think that this soldier, to go through all that trouble, must have been told that if he lost another helmet, he would be buried alive or something!) Hyeroeades carefully marked in his memory the place where the Lydian soldiers had evidently carved foot holes into the battlement and cliffs in order to descend into the valley.

That night, Hyeroeades led a select band of troops up the cliffs by that same way. When they reached the top, they discovered the guards were either asleep or not at their posts. Even though they knew Cyrus was in the valley, no one was concerned enough to watch.¹

In the letter written in the book of Revelation to the church at Sardis centuries later, they are reminded of their city's history. The church is told twice, in verses 1 through 6 of chapter 3, to "Wake up . . . wake up!"

The Greek word translated "watch out or wake up" is "gregoreuo". It gives us our English name Gregory. The word means, "to watch out; keep your eyes open; look out; stay alert". Everyone hearing this named Greg is now wide awake!

"Hey, Lydian soldiers, watch out – Cyrus is in the valley!"

"Aw, so what . . . he'll never get in here."

"Hey, church at Sardis, wake up – Satan is in the valley and deception and lies want to overthrow your spiritual wealth in Christ!"

"Aw, that'll never happen . . . they can't get in here."

My friends, if we were above the possibility of spiritual disaster; if our testimony and purity and effectiveness for Christ were impossible to ruin, then we would never have been warned in the word. Don't ever say or think, "Oh, I'll never be guilty of that sin," or "Oh, I'll never fall into that," or "Oh, I'll never have that problem."

The word "gregoreuo" appears as the most passionate of all the Greek words for warning. Paul used the word when he warned the Corinthians, in I Corinthians, chapter 16, verse 13a,

Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith . . .

The apostle Peter used this word under the unerring inspiration of the Holy Spirit, as he wrote, in I Peter, chapter 5, verse 8,

. . . be on the alert. Your adversary the devil, prowls around . . . seeking someone to devour.

Now, in Acts, chapter 20, Paul's final words to the Ephesian elders are words that include this same Greek word. In verse 31a, Paul summarizes his warning by saying,

Therefore be on the alert . . .

In other words, "Watch out, wake up . . .!" Why? Because he has just told these elders in the previous verses that the wolves are coming. False teachers dressed to look like sheep, but are, in reality, wolves, are coming. Look back at verse 29.

I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock

One author wrote,

Many an [elder] fails as a [shepherd] because he is not vigilant. He took it for granted that there were no wolves, no birds of prey, no robbers; and, while he was drowsing, the enemy arrived. False ideas, destructive interpretations, and false teaching came into the flock; and he never knew it - errors as fierce as wolves and pitiless as hyenas; they tear faith, hope and love to pieces and leave churches, once [healthy], mangled and half dead.ⁱⁱ

So, to the elders, Paul passionately gave a warning, "Watch out! Be alert! Look out! Stay awake! Destroyers are coming from outside the church."

They destroyers; these false teachers:

- deny the deity of Jesus Christ;
- consider the cross as foolishness;
- suppress the truth of creation;
- twist the grace of God into a justification for sin;
- are unaccountable to others;
- magnify personal authority;
- find fault with the church and create their own following.

If that is not bad enough; if that is not reason enough to stay alert, to wake up, to watch out, Paul gives them another warning.

Warning – Deceivers From Within!

Paul goes on to warn the Ephesian elders that *deceivers will arise from within*. Look at verse 30, ***and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse [twisted] things, to draw away the disciples after them.***

Notice the end result is the same – they draw away disciples after them. The false teachers from without and the deceivers from within have the same desire – to create their own following; to be considered by their following as the true teacher. They hunger for power and authority; they love to be the fountain of knowledge and the source of wisdom. They, like Satan before them, want to be as God.

The character and conduct of deceivers

So, how do you spot the deceivers who arise from within? Let me give a number of ways.

They are outwardly godly, yet inwardly corrupt

1. First, these deceivers are outwardly godly, yet inwardly corrupt.

I list this first, not necessarily to help you detect them, because we cannot really tell what a person is like on the inside, but to help you understand that a person may seem religious and yet, not know the Lord. Just because someone uses the name of the Lord; just because someone fasts and prays publicly; just because someone seems to want to follow God and serve God, does not mean that all of these things may be nothing more than a part of their disguise. It is possible to be all of these things outwardly, and yet inwardly, be far away from God.

Isaiah the prophet records the Lord saying, in chapter 29, verse 13,

. . . this people draw near with their words and honor Me with their lip service, but they remove their hearts far from Me . . .

It is possible to sound spiritual on the outside and at the same time, be a rotten sewer on the inside.

This is the reason Paul gave Timothy a warning when he was serving as the pastor/teacher in the church at Ephesus. Look at II Timothy, chapter 3, verse 5.

holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; avoid such men as these.

In other words, “Timothy, watch out for men in the Christian community who talk about the power of God; who want to teach others about the righteousness of God and yet, do not allow the power and righteousness of God to impact and change their lives.”

Remember David, the great king who stole another man’s wife? He then had the man sent on a suicide mission so he could publicly marry the woman, who was now secretly pregnant with his child. Nathan the prophet came into the courtroom where David sat in the seat of judgement. He said, “We’ve got a problem, David. It seems a wealthy rancher was having company over and needed a lamb for dinner. He didn’t want to use one of his own, so he went over to his poor neighbor’s place and took his only lamb that he had tenderly raised and that had become a dearly loved pet to his children. This rancher just came over and took that poor man’s pet lamb.”

David said, “That man deserves to die!”

Nathan replied, “That man is you!”

The problem was not David’s verdict; the problem was David’s heart. What he said in public was right; who he was in private was wrong.

That is why a false teacher can publicly say all the right things and yet, privately be involved in all the wrong things. And, if he is exposed publicly for what he has been doing privately, we say, “We can’t believe it! He sounded so good; he seemed so godly.”

Perhaps that is why the hypocrisy of the teacher is a greater form of hypocrisy. James, chapter 3, verse 1, warns us,

Let not many of you become teachers, . . . knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.

Do you realize that, when you volunteer to teach, you invite God to take a closer look at your life than anyone else’s?

So, this first point is perhaps more of a warning to the false teacher than it is to the church.

They prey on vulnerable women who naively trust them

2. Secondly, deceivers from within prey on vulnerable women who naively trust them.

Why? Because these women, like the false teachers, are involved in secret sin. Notice verses 6 and 7 of II Timothy, chapter 3.

For among them [false teachers] are those who enter into households and captivate weak women weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge [or recognition] of the truth.

What an astounding passage. These women are always learning; that is, they sign up for every Bible study; they read all the books; they never miss a conference. Yet, because of their secret sins, their impulses – whether it was materialism, covetousness, lust, or greed – they are never able to arrive at the recognition of the truth. And because they cannot really recognize the truth, they are open prey to false teachers who sound good, who use kernels of truth, but ultimately, deceive the naive.

They introduce destructive ideas

3. Third, the deceivers from within introduce destructive ideas.

Turn to II Peter, chapter 2, where Peter says in verse 1,

. . . false teachers among you . . . will secretly introduce destructive heresies . . .

While they use the vocabulary of the church, they use a different dictionary. They talk about salvation, but it is a different salvation than faith alone in Christ. They talk about holy scriptures, but the Bible is actually subservient to church tradition. They talk about heaven, but heaven is something you make up in your mind.

How many of you have noticed how secular society today uses the word “spiritual”? People are having “spiritual” experiences. That concert was a “spiritual” experience. While I was in the woods communing with nature, I had a “spiritual” experience. I have heard actors and newscasters use the word “spiritual” in a myriad of ways.

I was watching an interview with the woman who wrote the best-selling book, *A Course in Miracles*. She used the word “spiritual” over and over again. If you listened to her, you heard her talk about God, morality, and the need for repentance. However, if you listened a little longer, she also talked about yoga and eastern religion and a lot of other sour milk. It looks good, but it will make you sick.

According to the book of Ephesians, they are those who have not submitted to the sovereignty of Jesus Christ; those who have not placed their faith in the one and only way to God. That is what Jesus Himself said in John, chapter 14, verse 6, when He told His disciples,

. . . no one comes to the Father but through Me.

Those who have not believed in that biblical truth are spiritually dead.

The spirit within a person is not alive to experience anything until it is brought to life by faith in Jesus Christ. Ephesians, chapter 2, verse 5, says,

even when we were dead in our transgressions, [God] made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),

They compromise the truth here and there, until the truth is unrecognizable.

I read recently that the United Methodists have begun a formal interfaith dialogue with the Mormon Church. They want to discuss their differences and perhaps, in the spirit of ecumenism, arrive at some mutually acceptable compromises.

The only compromise that will be affected is best illustrated in the story of the man who got caught in a snowstorm in the woods. He was freezing cold and wandered around for four hours until he found a cave. In the cave, he stumbled over and awakened a big grizzly bear. The bear looked at him and said, "You're just what I've been dreaming of, and I'm so hungry."

The man said, "Listen, you might be hungry, but I haven't a warm coat and I'm freezing. What do you say we sit down and work out a compromise that will give us both what we want?"

The bear agreed and swallowed the man whole. The bear said, as he dozed off to sleep, "Ah, sweet compromise; I got my meal, and he got his warm coat."

There is no such thing as an interfaith dialogue. That term presumes the existence of and potential validity of other faiths. Paul made it very clear to the Ephesians, in chapter 4, verses 4 and 5, that,

There is . . . one Spirit, . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism,

There cannot be interfaith conferences, interfaith dialogues, interfaith agendas, or interfaith projects. There is only one faith, and all the others, Paul said to the Roman believers, in chapter 1, verse 21, are,

. . . futile speculations, and . . . foolish . . .

They display lifestyles that are given over to the flesh

4. Fourthly, they display lifestyles that are given over to the flesh.

Turn to II Peter, chapter 2, and notice Peter's vivid description of these false teachers. In:

- verse 2a – "Many will follow their sensuality . . .";
- verse 10a – ". . . those who indulge the flesh in its corrupt desires . . .";
- Verse 13b and 14 – ". . . They count it a pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are stains and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions, as they carouse with you, having eyes full of adultery that never cease from sin, enticing unstable souls, having a heart trained in greed, accursed children"

Perhaps you are thinking, "Wait a second, I thought your first characteristic was that they were outwardly godly, yet inwardly corrupt."

Good point! You're alert; you're awake!

I think the argument could be made that Paul focused on the beginning stages of a false teacher's deception, while Peter focuses on the latter stage. The Greek language seems to indicate this progression (a progression, by the way, that I have witnessed – there is a seemingly godly start, then ultimate exposure, and a disgraceful finish).

The word that we just read in verse 2a that is translated "sensual" is a vivid term for blatant immorality. One expositor explained the word as describing the attitude of a man who is lost to shame; who is past the stage of wishing to conceal his sin and of being ashamed of it. This is like the sinful Israelites whom Jeremiah said were so wicked they were unable to blush (Jeremiah 6:14; 8:12).

They are ultimately motivated by greed

5. Fifthly, they are ultimately motivated by greed.

II Peter, chapter 2, verse 3a, says,

and in their greed they will exploit you with false words . . .

Literally, they will make merchandise out of you. You are a client with money; they will sell you the product. And, as long as you buy the product, you will be in.

The result of their ministry is not edification, but extortion

6. Sixthly, the result of their ministry is not edification, but extortion.

I do not know how many times I have seen some preacher on television telling his audience that if they send in their gift of money, God will bless them financially. If they send in their handkerchief and a financial gift, he will pray over the handkerchief and send it back, guaranteed to bring healing and prosperity.

The problem is, they have subtly attached your money to their power. They have blatantly suggested that you can buy God's anointing.

There is an ancient Hebrew word for that – it is pronounced “baloney”.

Peter, because he wants to be sure we know, writes in II Peter, chapter 2, verse 3,

and in their greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.

The practice of selling the grace of God is not new. In fact, the selling of indulgences by the Roman church for the forgiveness of sins was the final insult that led Martin Luther to begin what we now refer to as the Reformation.

I received in the mail recently, a card from a Catholic priest. The card informed me that someone in his church had purchased a certain amount of prayers in behalf of a family member in our church who had died. That money was now converted into so many prayers and candles in behalf of the deceased, whose time in purgatory would be shortened as a result.

In other words, someone gave some money to buy some prayers to get someone into heaven a little quicker?

The grace of God is free! It cannot be bought with candles; it cannot be sold for money.

Peter says of false teachers, in verse 19a of II Peter, chapter 2,

promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption . . .

The false teachers and false religions of the world promise freedom, and yet, it comes at a price. And those who promise freedom are themselves enslaved.

Application

How can we be preserved and protected from spiritual predators?

Be critical of those who would become your spiritual teacher

1. Be critical of those who would become your spiritual teacher.

They are not all authentic. Ask the critical questions:

- Do they claim special power over the demonic world?
- Do they expound the scriptures or their own visions from God and special revelations?
- Are they accountable to elders and a body of believers?
- Do they promote fleshly, materialistic goals or tell you to deny yourself and live for Christ and others?

Jesus Christ warned His disciples, in Matthew, chapter 7, verse 15,

Beware of the false prophets [teachers], who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

False teachers will one day be judged. Jesus continues, in verses 22 and 23,

Many will say to Me on that day, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?” And then I will declare to them, “I never knew you . . .”

In other words, “You did all that you did in My name, but in reality, you did it to build your own following and glorify your own name.”

Be a student of the New Testament and its doctrine

2. Be a student of the New Testament and its doctrine.

Paul wrote, in II Timothy, chapter 2, verse 15,

Be diligent [study] to present yourself approved to God as a workman [of the word] who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.

Diligent study and a desire to please God are the parents of accuracy.

Let me give you a small self test to take sometime this week. See how well you do. I have specifically written down questions that have and continue to spark debate among believers and unbelievers to whom you witness.

Do not be satisfied until you know the answers! If you need to, go to the Christian bookstore and get some solid commentaries or works of theology. Also, get a good study Bible. Don't spend your money on the candy mints with crosses on them, or the key chains that sing *Jesus Loves Me*, or the calendars telling you how God is on call for whatever you wish. Buy a good commentary or systematic theology – they are usually in the back under a layer of dust. This is not an indictment on the bookstores, as I depend on them. It is, however, an indictment on the appetite of the average Christian.

Take this self test.

Self test – Do you know what you believe?

Do you know what you believe?

- Is the Bible God's completed revelation?

Explain:

Supporting verse or passage:

- Who is Jesus Christ?

Explain:

Supporting verse or passage:

- How is a person saved?

Explain:

Supporting verse or passage:

- Can a person lose his salvation?

Explain:

Supporting verse or passage:

- What is the next prophetic event for the church?

Explain:

Supporting verse or passage:

I was talking to a Christian journalist some time ago, on the subject of writing short books that expound biblical truth. He told me, "If you ever want to market them to the Christian community, don't put anything on the cover that indicates it has anything to do with the exposition of scripture. They hardly sell at all."

Who is Jesus Christ? Is the Bible completed revelation or are there still visions and dreams today?

How is a person saved, and can that person lose his salvation? What is the next prophetic event for the church; for what are we waiting? Do you know? If you do not, then how do you know if what you are reading or listening to is the truth?

Be aware that discernment and insight are developed

3. Be aware that discernment and insight are developed.

Concerning the subject of spiritual discernment, insight and wisdom, which ultimately protect a believer from the wolves and deceivers, are not automatically given to Christians. One of the biggest shocks in my early Christian years was to discover that fact. When you were saved, God did not hand you a box and say, "Here's all the discernment you'll ever need."

Listen to the way Paul prayed for the believers in several of the churches in Asia Minor.

- In Colossians, chapter 1, verses 9 and 10, Paul prayed,

For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;

- Paul prayed for the believers in Ephesus, in chapter 1, verse 17,

that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him.

- In Philippians, chapter 1, verses 9 and 10, Paul prays that they,

may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ;

Discernment, knowledge, and insight are the fruit of the study of the written word and the application of the word to the way we live. Wisdom and discernment are not gift packages you simply unwrap; they are more like buried treasure for which you dig.

In his book entitled *Waiting*, Ben Patterson wrote:

The American Banking Association once sponsored a two-week training program to help tellers detect counterfeit bills. The program was unique; never during the two-week training did the tellers even look at a counterfeit bill, nor did they listen to any lectures concerning the characteristics of

counterfeit bills . . . all they did for two weeks was handle authentic currency, hour after hour and day after day, until they were so familiar with the [genuine item] that they could not possibly be fooled by [counterfeit].ⁱⁱⁱ

So, get into the word; handle the truth, and you will develop, among many other benefits, the insight to discern truth from error.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 6/14/1998 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ William Barclay, *Letters to Seven Churches*, p. 69.

ⁱⁱ John MacArthur, Jr., *Acts* (1996), p. 228.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ben Patterson, *Waiting* (Intervarsity Press, 1989), p. 153.