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AVOIDING SPIRITUAL DECEPTION (Part 2)

1 John 2:24-27

By

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February 19, 2006
1 John Lesson 11

Avoiding Spiritual Deception (Part 2) 1 John 2:24-27

Last year I heard John MacArthur say that when he began in the ministry, he never dreamed that he would have to spend a major portion of his time and energy defending the gospel among those in the evangelical camp. But it has been so.

As you probably know, he has written several books to defend the gospel against those who deny that saving faith inherently requires submission to Christ's lordship. He also has written and preached against those who are calling for evangelicals to set aside justification by faith alone, so that we can be reconciled with the Catholic Church. He is speaking out against the "seeker" churches, which dodge the issues of sin and judgment so as not to offend "seekers." He recently edited *Fool's Gold* [Crossway Books], which deals with the theme of discernment. It has a chapter by Phil Johnson defending the gospel against a relatively new error that is called, "the new perspective on Paul."

Since the days of the early church, Satan has actively opposed the truth of God's Word, especially with regard to the gospel. Repeatedly he has raised up false teachers within the church in attempts to deceive God's people. The apostle Paul warned the Ephesian elders that "from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:30). And so a major theme throughout the entire New Testament, including John's epistles, is that God's people need to develop discernment so that they can avoid spiritual deception.

Last week, we saw that to avoid spiritual deception, we must be discerning of people (2:18-21). Satan works in the realm of religion, using the Bible and Christian terms. We should beware of any that leave the true church to form a new group with new theology, or of anyone offering new "truth" that others have missed. Also, we must be discerning of doctrine (2:22-23). Sound doctrine really matters, because it is inextricably linked with a personal relationship with God. Also, sound doctrine about the person and

work of Jesus Christ is vital. Satan usually hits that subject because it is so important.

In 1 John 2:24-27, the apostle continues the theme of avoiding spiritual deception. He shows us how to develop the discernment that we need to persevere in the faith:

To avoid spiritual deception, develop discernment
by abiding in the Word and in the Spirit.

1. To avoid spiritual deception, develop discernment by abiding in the Word, especially with regard to the gospel (2:24-26).

If you are paying attention to the text, you may be thinking, "I don't see any mention of the Word or the gospel in these verses. Where are you getting that?" I'm getting it from John's repetition of the phrase, "what you heard from the beginning" (2:24). What these believers had heard from the beginning was the teaching of the apostles, especially their teaching on the core issue of the gospel. John begins this letter with the words, "What was from the beginning," which refers to Jesus Christ Himself. The person and work of Jesus Christ *is* the gospel.

When John tells us to abide in what we heard from the beginning, he does *not* necessarily mean that you should never change the beliefs that you have held since childhood. To do so would only perpetuate error if your parents had been wrong! Rather, he means, if you began with the gospel and with the sound doctrine of the apostles, whose teaching is the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20), why depart from these sure truths for the religious speculations of these false teachers? We have the apostles teaching in the New Testament. John is telling us to abide in these certainties.

John makes four points about the gospel here. Then we can draw two applications.

A. The gospel comes to us only through God's Word.

The false teachers were claiming to have special revelation apart from the Word, but their revelations were subjective philosophical nonsense. By way of contrast, the apostles had been with Jesus Christ. They had heard His teaching and seen His miracles. They saw Him risen from the dead. They knew that the entire Old

Testament pointed to Jesus Christ (Luke 24:44, 45). He fulfilled all of its prophecies and its law (Matt. 5:17; Rom. 10:4). Even Paul, who was not a part of the twelve, had a personal encounter with the risen Lord Jesus and said that he received the gospel that he preached directly from Jesus Christ (Gal. 1:11-17).

The point is, the gospel is not the result of philosophic speculations or mystical revelations. It is the witness to Jesus Christ Himself, written in the New Testament by men who had seen the risen Lord. You can't learn the gospel by going out into nature and having a mystical, aesthetic experience, although God's glory is reflected there (Ps. 19:1; Rom. 1:20). You can't attain a knowledge of the gospel through philosophy or logic. But you can learn the truth of it in God's Word, which tells about Jesus Christ. One of the most succinct statements of the gospel is the familiar John 3:16, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life." Any deviance from the truth of the gospel is heresy. It is spiritual deception, coming straight from Satan himself.

B. The gospel introduces you to a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

John states (2:24b), "If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father." The gospel is not only a set of doctrines to agree to, but a personal relationship with the living God through faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus said (John 17:3), "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent." He also said (John 14:6), "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me." If you have not trusted personally in Jesus Christ to forgive your sins and to give you eternal life, then you do not understand the gospel.

The apostle Paul was a devout Jew, fastidiously keeping all of the rituals and rules of the Jewish faith. But he did not have eternal life and he did not know God personally. After his conversion experience on the Damascus Road, he wrote that he counted all of his previous experiences as loss "in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil. 3:8). If you do not know Christ personally, don't settle for religion! Ask God to open your eyes so that you will abide in the Son and in the Father!

C. The gospel centers on God's promise of eternal life.

John writes (2:25), "This is the promise which He Himself promised [lit.] us: eternal life." What could be greater! Apart from the gospel, we are all under God's righteous condemnation because of our sins. We all face death and then judgment. The great news of the gospel is that God did *not* come to us and say, "Here are the rules and rituals that you must keep for all of your life, and then if you don't commit a mortal sin, and you have enough relatives to pray and pay your way out of Purgatory, you might get into heaven!" That's *not* good news! The good news is that God Himself promised us eternal life! Why turn to anything else?

The fact that eternal life is God's *promise* means that it is not something that we have to work for or deserve. You see this all through the gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry. When they let the paralytic down through the roof on a stretcher in front of Jesus, He said to the man, "Son, your sins are forgiven" (Mark 2:5). What had the man done to deserve that? Absolutely nothing! It was a free gift! When the notoriously sinful woman wet Jesus' feet with her tears and anointed them with perfume, even though her sins had been many (Luke 7:47), Jesus said, "Your sins have been forgiven" (Luke 7:48). He forgave them all! Or, when the guilty thief on the cross next to Jesus asked, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" Jesus responded, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:42, 43).

What could be greater news than that God promises eternal life as a free gift to any guilty sinner who will receive it by faith? If God promises eternal life apart from works, why turn to a system of religious bondage that cannot deliver eternal life even after a lifetime of striving after it? Apart from spiritual blindness and the pride that wants to take credit for salvation, there is no way to explain why anyone turns to false religions to save them. The gospel alone proclaims (Rom. 4:5), "But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness."

D. Satan relentlessly promotes confusion about the gospel.

John writes (2:26), "These things I have written to you concerning those who are trying to deceive you." As I said last week,

from the earliest days, while the apostles were still living, the enemy has sown confusion in the churches about the gospel. In his last letter before his death, Paul warned Timothy (2 Tim. 3:13), "But evil men and impostors will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived." He goes on to exhort Timothy to continue (the same Greek word that is translated *abide* in John) in the Word, which is able to bring us to salvation.

If Satan can cause confusion about the gospel, everything else is affected. It is the domino that causes all the others to fall. At the start of this message, I mentioned several errors that center on the gospel, which are currently in the evangelical camp. I can't comment on them all, but I will touch on a couple of them. By the way, as John Calvin notes, it is the duty of a godly pastor to drive away the wolves and to warn the flock about those who pervert the gospel. One of the qualifications for an elder is that he be able to exhort in sound doctrine, and also that he refute those who contradict (Titus 1:9). I would not be a faithful pastor if I only spoke to you about positive, heartwarming matters, but did not also warn you of these insidious errors.

Take the error that believing in Christ for salvation does not include repenting of sin or submitting to Jesus as Lord. The man who taught the course on 1 John that I took in seminary is one of the leading proponents of this error. As a result of this teaching, there are thousands in evangelical churches who claim to be born again, but they habitually live in sin. They've been assured that because they received Christ, they are going to heaven. But as Paul describes such people (Titus 1:16), "They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient and worthless for any good deed." They will be shocked when they stand before the Lord and hear Him say (Matt. 7:23), "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness."

Or, take the error of the seeker churches. They take surveys to determine what people want from a church. Those who have been turned off by legalism or by guilt-producing, fire and brimstone sermons, have said, "We would like a church that is upbeat and positive. We want modern music. We want to feel good about ourselves when we leave. We want help with how to succeed in our families and our careers. But keep it light and on the short side."

So, the church marketers have gone back to the drawing boards. They've devised a church service that only lasts an hour. The music is contemporary and not too heavy on doctrine. There are skits or other entertaining acts. The messages avoid controversial or difficult subjects like sin, judgment, or righteousness. The "gospel" is packaged as, "If you've got problems, try Jesus. He will help you become all that you've ever wanted to be." But, where is the message of Scripture, that our sins have alienated us from a holy God, and that we must repent? Where is any careful, verse-by-verse exposition of Scripture? It's not there.

No one has written more incisively on this than David Wells in his three books, *No Place for Truth*, *God in the Wasteland*, and *Losing Our Virtue* [all Eerdmans]. (His booklet, *The Bleeding of the Evangelical Church* [Banner of Truth] is on our book table.) In *God in the Wasteland* (p. 30) he writes,

The fundamental problem in the evangelical world today is not inadequate technique, insufficient organization, or antiquated music, and those who want to squander the church's resources bandaging these scratches will do nothing to stanch the flow of blood that is spilling from its true wounds. The fundamental problem in the evangelical world today is that God rests too inconsequentially upon the church. His truth is too distant, his grace is too ordinary, his judgment is too benign, his gospel is too easy, and his Christ is too common.

All of this leads to two applications:

ü *Never grow tired of the gospel!*

Don't think that you do not need to hear it and meditate on it over and over. Although I've been preaching it now for 29 years, I still find that there are depths in the gospel that I need to plumb. The angels long to look into the truths of the gospel (1 Pet. 1:12). Let that which you heard from the beginning abide—dwell, be at home—in you!

ü *Let the Word abide in you!*

Read it over and over. Know it so well that you can instantly spot deviations from it. Be at home in the Word and let the Word be at home in your life, in the sense that you apply it to every area

of life. To avoid spiritual deception, develop discernment by abiding in the Word, especially with regard to the truth of the gospel.

2. To avoid spiritual deception, develop discernment by abiding in the Spirit (2:27).

John has three purposes in verse 27: to explain, to comfort, and to warn the flock (A. W. Pink, *Exposition of 1 John* [Associated Publishers and Authors], p. 182). He *explains* that the reason they have remained in the truth is not due to anything in them, but rather it is due to God's gracious gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Thus they should ascribe all glory to Him and not boast in their own intellect or grasp of doctrine. John also wrote to *comfort* them in the face of many of their friends leaving the church for this new, heretical teaching. He tells them that the anointing they had received would abide with them and teach them all things, so that they would not fall into these errors. John also wanted to *warn* them to continue in vigilance. Comfort should never cause us to let down our guard.

We must interpret verse 27 in its context and in light of the entire New Testament. John is *not* saying that the church does not need godly teachers to instruct the flock. If that were his meaning, he would invalidate this entire letter, which contains a lot of teaching! He would also contradict the apostle Paul, who taught that God gives gifted teachers to the church to help believers grow to maturity (Eph. 4:11-16; Col. 1:28).

Rather, John means that they do not need the elite gnosis of the false teachers to let them in on God's "secret truth." Rather, every Christian has the indwelling Holy Spirit to enable him or her to understand and interpret Scripture. When the Spirit applies the word of the gospel to the soul, we receive it, not as the word of man, but of God (1 Thess. 2:13). Through the Word, the Holy Spirit reveals to us the riches that God has prepared for us (1 Cor. 2:9-12). This is the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. You do not need an elite order of clergymen to give you the official interpretation of biblical truth, especially of the gospel. Read the Word for yourself, in dependence on the indwelling Holy Spirit.

This is not to say that every passage of Scripture is easy to understand! Nor is it to say that you should not read commentaries to

try to discover the correct interpretation of difficult texts. But it is to say that on the essential truths of the Bible, any Christian who can read and who makes the effort to compare Scripture with Scripture in reliance on the Holy Spirit, can grasp the meaning. In John's mind was Jesus' promise (John 14:26), that the Holy Spirit would teach the disciples all things.

Jesus also called Him "the Spirit of truth" (John 14:17), which is behind John's words here, that He "is true and is not a lie." This means that the truth of the gospel is not a subjective matter of personal interpretation. It is not something that I see one way and you see it another way, but both ways are right. Rather, it is objectively, absolutely true in every culture and every age. You must believe it to be saved and any contradiction of the gospel is a lie.

Two applications:

ü *The Spirit always works in conjunction with the Word.*

He does not give direct revelation today on a par with Scripture. The false teachers were claiming to have direct revelations from the Spirit, but their teaching contradicted the Word. If you get some "insight" that you think came from God, but it does not line up with God's Word (interpreted properly in context), your "insight" is *not* from the Holy Spirit! Or, if someone says to you, "The Lord told me..." be careful! Sometimes they will even use a verse of Scripture, but invariably it is taken out of context. The Holy Spirit always leads us to the Word and to a deeper understanding of the supremacy and all-sufficiency of Jesus Christ.

ü *The Spirit abides in you, but you also must abide in the Spirit.*

John says that the anointing abides in you, but the last part of the verse should be a command, "abide in Him." John uses "abide" five times in verses 24 & 27. As we've seen, it is his term for fellowship, or for maintaining a warm, close relationship with the Lord. Let the Holy Spirit be at home in every area of your life, and you be at home in every area of His Word. Don't keep any secret closets locked away from Him. Give Him entrance to every nook and cranny of your thoughts and emotions. To live closely and openly before the Holy Spirit in His Word is the best safeguard against spiritual deception.

Conclusion

Another example of the subtle intrusion of spiritual deception in the evangelical church is the book and ministry, *Wild at Heart* [Thomas Nelson] by John Eldredge. Our Southwest CBA sponsored a men's conference with one of their speakers that was, shall we say, *wildly* popular. I did not attend, but I read the book and I'm baffled at what the attraction is for men who are seeking to know the Lord. The book is only mildly Christian, at best. Yet it has a glowing endorsement from Chuck Swindoll in the foreword!

As Daniel Gillespie critiques it in *Fool's Gold* (pp. 79-95), it has an insufficient view of Scripture, an inadequate picture of God, an incomplete portrait of Christ, and an inaccurate portrait of man. To amplify just the first of these criticisms, Eldredge quotes Scripture (often out of context) and uses biblical examples to support his position. But he also cites movies and other sources as if they are just as authoritative and helpful for godly living as the Bible. He even acknowledges this directly (p. 200, cited by Gillespie, p. 81),

God is intimately personal with us and he speaks in ways that are peculiar to our own hearts—not just through the Bible, but through the whole of creation. To Stasi he speaks through movies. To Craig he speaks through rock and roll.... God's word to me comes in many ways—through sunsets and friends and films and music and wilderness and books.

Eldredge cites a supposed revelation that he had where God told him he was like some macho movie heroes. Gillespie comments (p. 83), "it's hard to envision the Lord of the universe resorting to movies to reveal spiritual truth."

This is just another example of why you need to be on guard. The enemy is actively spreading spiritual deception in the church. To avoid it, develop discernment through God's Word and through the Holy Spirit.

Application Questions

1. If the gospel is, "Believe in Jesus Christ," then why can't we accept Roman Catholics, who believe in Jesus, as saved?
2. The Bible commands us not to judge others (Matt. 7:1). How does this square with "refuting those who contradict" (Titus 1:9)?
3. Why is it crucial always to link the Spirit with the Word? Does the Spirit give direct revelation today? If so, how can you know if it is the Holy Spirit?
4. Some argue that verse 27 militates against using commentaries. Why (biblically) is this a serious mistake?

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