

What if I told you the greatest enemy to the truth of the Christian faith is that you should try really hard to be a good person like Jesus. Why? Because good people go to heaven when they die. I mean, Jesus was a very good person, right? And he did talk a lot about heaven. That's part of the Christian faith. And it stands to reason if we call ourselves followers of Jesus, we will try really hard to live as Jesus did.

To be quite honest, I could go into 100 churches and listen to messages from pastors who would teach exactly that. But what if I said all of that is a lie from the pit of Hell. That's a strong statement! But I think it was this kind of teaching the apostle Paul was talking about when he wrote, *"The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons" (1 Tim 4:1).*

You see, when we say we should try really hard to be a good person like Jesus because good people go to heaven when they die, we are actually denying what we call the gospel. You see, the gospel is not about good deeds; it's about good news. The gospel starts by telling us we aren't good people. It tells us we're sinners who've willfully rebelled against our Creator. In fact, it says no one seeks after God! That's the hard news. But then the gospel goes on to tell us the good news.

The good news is God loves sinful people. He loves us so much he sent his only Son to rescue us from the consequences of our sin, which was spending eternity separated from him. The gospel tells us we can do nothing to earn our way into heaven. Our only hope is to put our faith and trust in the mercy of God and the work of Jesus on the cross to save us. You see, the greatest enemy to the gospel isn't going out and living a life of sin. The greatest enemy of the gospel is thinking that you can save yourself by being a good person. That's the greatest lie you can buy into. It's called moralistic religion. Moralistic religion says, "DO!" But the message of the gospel is different. The message of the gospel says, "DONE." That's why Jesus said on the cross, "It is finished." Done! There's nothing we can add to what Jesus finished on the cross.

When Jesus said, "Watch out; don't be deceived," he was talking about being deceived by moralism more than anything else. In 2 Corinthians 11:1-15, we see how any one of us could fall into this trap. We see how a group, which started on the right track, could end up sidetracked, heading in a direction that isn't only dangerous but deadly. This is what Paul was facing in Corinth. He'd come there and preached the gospel. Many had responded by trusting in Christ. A church was born, rooted in the truth of Paul's teaching about the gospel. But then a new group of teachers came to town. They were slick and had no use for Paul's teaching about weakness, suffering, and the cross. If Paul were a real Christian, he wouldn't constantly be beaten and thrown into prison. They believed as many do today, the central goal of life is to be happy.

They offered the Corinthians the good life—now! And the Corinthians were buying it. How could it happen? How could that happen, not just to them, but to us?

Abandonment of Simple Devotion to Christ

Turn with me to 2 Corinthians 11. *"I hope you will put up with me in a little foolishness. Yes, please put up with me!" (v. 1).* The foolishness Paul speaks of here is the foolishness of having to commend himself and defend his own ministry to the Corinthians. At the very end of chapter 10, Paul said ultimately, all that matters is if the Lord commends you (10:18). Nevertheless, because of what was going on at Corinth, Paul was forced to commend himself. He did it, though, not out of personal ego but out of pastoral love and concern. That love and concern are seen as we continue to read.

I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the Spirit you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough. vv. 2-4

Paul is jealous with a godly jealousy. There's a jealousy that's of the flesh—selfish, petty, and even cruel. But godly jealousy is motivated by love and a deep passion for the welfare of another. It's love tormented by the fear that a relationship, which by its very nature demands exclusivity, is being defiled. Throughout the Old Testament, we see God is jealous for his people. Because his passion runs so deep, he requires we be exclusive in our worship. He'll have no rivals.

Notice Paul wasn't jealous for himself, but for Christ. He likens his jealousy to a father who has betrothed his daughter to a bridegroom. He was the spiritual father of the Corinthian church because it was through his preaching it had been born. He views them as a daughter he's betrothed to Christ in marriage, Christ being the bridegroom. Back then, betrothal was more than engagement. It was a binding contract. Although the marriage wasn't consummated, only divorce could break the bond. And if a betrothed were found to be impure during this time, a divorce would be in order. That's why Paul says he's promised them to Christ as a "pure virgin." The purity Paul is talking about is faithfulness to the gospel. But that purity was being threatened in Corinth.

I hope this image stirs you. Could there be a more intimate picture of our relationship with Jesus than this? We're his bride-to-be. We've

entered into a binding contract. The marriage hasn't been consummated yet but, oh, how we look forward to that day! I remember how I looked forward to that day with my wife. We dated for over three years, and when that day came, it was wonderful. And it will be wonderful for us when we see Christ face to face, and we sit at the marriage supper of the lamb. We have to keep ourselves pure for that day.

Notice the warning is the abandonment of *"the simple and pure devotion to Christ."* His fears were based on the fact that they were very willing to put up with someone preaching another Jesus, offering them a different gospel. Take another look at that phrase, *"your sincere and pure devotion to Christ."* Another translation says, *"the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ."* The word sincere means undivided. They were becoming divided in their focus. Someone once said, "The main thing about being a Christian is to see that the main thing remains the main thing." Jesus and the gospel are the main thing! Take Jesus out of Christianity, and you have nothing left. Distort the gospel, and you have a distorted faith.

How can a group of people end up fatally deceived? They move away or distort the main thing—the simplicity and purity of devotion to Jesus. That is where it all started, right? You and Jesus. His unconditional love. Forgiveness through the cross. He was enough. I remember coming to Christ. I didn't know the Bible from the Readers Digest. I was a mess, but I knew he loved me. It was simple! So much of the Christian life is maintaining that simplicity of faith in Jesus as our Savior. Luther said, "We don't grow beyond our conversion, but we keep crawling back into it." We don't grow beyond simple faith in Jesus and simple love for him; we keep crawling back into it.

There's a danger when our Christian faith becomes complex. Why do we think the more we grow in Christ, the more complex our faith should be as well? The Christian life isn't easy, but it is simple. And you have to fight to maintain that simplicity. You can lose it in the midst of your Christian activity. You can get so wrapped up in serving you forget the Savior. You can lose it in the midst of learning about the Bible. You can get so caught up in what you know, you forget about who you know. You can lose it in the midst of the daily pressures of life. You can get so distracted by the worries in front of you that you forget Jesus is adequate for whatever you're facing. Turn back to the simplicity and purity of devotion to Jesus.

This simplicity isn't to be mistaken for shallowness. There's a depth and richness in Christ that can keep you busy your whole life through. In Col. 2:3, we're told in Christ, *"are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."* How can you get bored with Christ? Consider his majesty and glory! As the old creed says, he's "very God of very God." Christ is the second person of the Trinity, the Eternal Son through whom and by whom all things were created. He dwells with the Father in perfect fellowship from everlasting to everlasting. He knows all; he rules all. His presence permeates the universe.

Consider his love! Though he dwelt in perfect fellowship with the Father, he humbled himself and became a man; a tiny baby even. He lived in submission to two earthly parents he created; he lived confined to an earthly body. He got tired; he wept; he aged. And in the end, he

died in our place. As the great hymn goes, "Died he for me who caused his pain, for me who him to death pursued. Amazing love, how can it be that thou my God should die for me."

Consider his sufficiency! The spotless lamb of God became the perfect payment for sin. Nothing more is needed to reconcile us with a Holy God. At the cross, he said, "It is finished!" and it is finished once and for all. He's all you need. If you have him, you have the sure hope of glory. Nothing can separate you from the love of God. Because of His Son, he's adopted you, purchased you, forgiven you, sanctified you, and glorified you! There's enough in Christ to keep you busy for a lifetime!

Every deviant teaching that's ever existed has moved from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. They may talk about Christ, but it's another Jesus and another gospel. They've either denied his divinity, his humanity, or his sufficiency. They've diluted Christ by adding to the gospel. It's not just Jesus, but it's Jesus and healing. Jesus didn't just die for your sins; he died for your diseases. Or it's not just Jesus, but it's Jesus and conservatism or progressivism. Or it's not just Jesus, but Jesus and social justice. Jesus isn't just your Savior; he's your liberator from oppression. Or it's not just Jesus, but it's Jesus and prosperity. He'll give you not just riches in heaven but riches on earth.

I had someone come to me and say, "I'm leaving your church." I said, "Why?" He said, "You teach people to be content with their lives as they are." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "I think you should teach people how to get ahead in life. God wants us to be successful." I said, "You're right. We do disagree. Tell me, when did Jesus ever teach us to be successful?" He couldn't answer me, but he left anyway. And that's okay. Let's never stop teaching people to be content with Jesus!

How does this deception take place? By abandoning simple, sincere, and pure devotion to Jesus and the gospel.

Attachment to Wrong Kinds of Leadership

But there's more. There's also an attachment to the wrong kind of leadership. Look at verse 5. *"I do not think I am in the least inferior to those 'super-apostles' (v. 5).* Paul is using irony and sarcasm here. He says he's not inferior to the "super-apostles." He's not speaking here of the real apostles, like Peter and John and the rest. He's talking sarcastically about the self-appointed super-apostles in Corinth. These men were undercutting Paul's leadership. They were saying Paul was an amateur and they were professionals.

They pointed first to his lack of polish as a speaker. *"I may indeed be untrained as a speaker, but I do have knowledge. We have made this perfectly clear to you in every way" (v. 6).* Paul says, "Perhaps I'm not trained in the rhetorical way of speaking that you like, but I do know what I'm talking about. I do have knowledge. Don't look at my style; look at what I'm actually saying. Look at what I really know. Look at the message rather than the messenger."

A group of people was at a dinner party. They agreed after dinner each would recite something. A well-known actor rose, and with great drama and elocution, he recited the 23rd Psalm. He sat down to tremendous applause. Then a very quiet man stood up with his own recitation of

the same Psalm. At first, there were a few snickers. But, by the time he'd ended, his listeners were silent and still. When he sat down, the actor leaned across the table and said, "Sir, I know the Psalm, but you know the shepherd." Paul's critics may have spoken with great skill, but Paul preached with personal conviction. He knew the shepherd.

They also said he was an amateur because he refused to be paid for his preaching.

Was it a sin for me to lower myself in order to elevate you by preaching the gospel of God to you free of charge? I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you. And when I was with you and needed something, I was not a burden to anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied what I needed. I have kept myself from being a burden to you in any way, and will continue to do so. As surely as the truth of Christ is in me, nobody in the regions of Achaia will stop this boasting of mine. Why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do! And I will keep on doing what I am doing in order to cut the ground from under those who want an opportunity to be considered equal with us in the things they boast about. vv. 7-12.

If he was a real apostle, he'd make his living as an apostle. Paul himself taught those who preach the gospel have the right to make their living from the gospel (1 Cor. 9:14). But it was Paul's policy when he came into a new city to refuse to be paid for his preaching. He didn't want anyone to question his motives. And he didn't want to be obligated to stay if the Lord led him elsewhere. And so, when he came to Corinth, he made tents to support himself. At one point he says he was in great need, but he still wouldn't take their money. He relied on the Macedonian churches to meet his need.

Why is this such a big deal? Because the Greeks looked down on those who worked with their hands. They saw it as degrading for a teacher to do such a thing. It seems the Corinthians felt it to be a personal insult that he wouldn't take their money. But there's something else at work here. The false teachers did get paid, and they were downright greedy, as false teachers usually are. But Paul refused to operate that way. And he says this would continue to be his policy because he wanted to distinguish himself from them. He wasn't an amateur; he was a servant.

I think behind this is something we see a lot of today. Some of the largest churches in the world teach what I would call the Prosperity Gospel. They say, "Jesus became poor so we might become rich. We're not meant to suffer. God hasn't destined us for anything but riches and health. Suffering, pain, and poverty aren't the portion of a true believer because Jesus died to purchase those things for us." And of course, the leaders who preach this stuff are very clear about where you should give your money!

Do you know what this is about? It's all about two kinds of leadership. As we saw last week, there's servant leadership and selfish leadership. Authentic leadership is servant leadership. Selfish leadership is a bogus imitation. If deception begins with a departure from Christ, it continues

with an attachment to the wrong kind of leader. This is always true in cults; unfortunately, it's also true in some churches. The focus is the leader rather than Christ. He becomes the ultimate authority; there's no room for other opinions. He's totally unaccountable and answers to no one; he can't be questioned. He has a unique connection to God. And because of that, he deserves special treatment, including a fat bank account. He deserves to be pampered. Without him, the group falls apart. He's the glue that holds everything together. There's some twisted aspect to human nature that wants an infallible leader. We'd rather depend on someone else to do our thinking than be responsible for our own actions.

How can this kind of deadly deception happen? It starts with the abandonment of simple and sincere devotion to Christ. Then there is attachment to the wrong kind of leader.

Attraction to Satanic Deception

Finally, there's an attraction to a satanic delusion.

For such people are false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve. vv. 13-15

Paul is using irony all through this passage. Here he comes right out of the closet with a frontal attack. There's a time to say it like it is. He says these guys are false and deceitful. They disguise themselves as apostles of Christ and servants of righteousness. That means they know what they're doing. Their deception is intentional. They try to look like something they're not. Jesus called them "wolves in sheep's clothing." And we're told we shouldn't be surprised when they do this because they're acting like their master. Satan is a master of disguise, so are they. Satan masquerades as an angel of light, so do they. An angel of light is a beautiful thing! If Satan were here right now, you and I would be tempted to worship him. When we think of the serpent in the Garden of Eden, we normally think of an ugly snake. Most of us don't care for snakes. But that word serpent means "shining one." This wasn't a slithering, slimy reptile. This was an incredibly beautiful creature.

He's not only beautiful but also cunning. Remember how he got to Eve? He didn't come right at her and say, "I want you to sin against God." He didn't throw out the truth; he twisted the truth. He was cunning! He said, "Eve, what's this business about God not letting you eat from any of these wonderful trees?" (BTW — God didn't say that. God said, "Help yourself! It's all for you to enjoy! Just stay away from that one tree. Eat that one, and you'll die.") Satan didn't say, "I want you to do this awful thing." He said, "God is withholding something wonderful from you. What kind of God would do that? He knows if you eat it, you'll be like him. Don't you want to be like him? What is wrong with that?"

We think it would be so easy to spot someone like this. But it's not that easy. These people don't come knocking on your door, saying, "Good morning, I'm a servant of Satan, and I've come to ruin your life. I want to

destroy your family, your identity, and your career. I've come to take you to Hell with me." No! They come talking about Jesus and the Bible, not the Jesus of the Bible, but a different Jesus. They come offering a family, a community, and real love. They come with a moralistic message. They come with what looks like righteous deeds and promises of fulfillment. But their end will be according to their deeds.

This kind of ready deception could happen to any of us. It could happen if we were to abandon our simple and pure devotion to Christ and the gospel. It could happen by looking for the wrong kind of leader. And it could happen by falling for a satanic disguise that says, "You just need to try really hard to be a good person and be like Jesus." The question is, how do we protect ourselves and our church? Let me try to wrap this up by offering a few protective measures.

First of all, dive deeper into your understanding of Jesus and the gospel. The only way you'll be able to identify counterfeits is by knowing what the real thing is. There are some good resources out there like Greg Gilbert's, *What is the Gospel?* But my favorite is an old classic by J.I. Packer called, *Knowing God*.

Second, stay centered on Jesus and the gospel. The gospel isn't just for the purposes of evangelism but also for discipleship. You don't grow beyond your need for Jesus and the gospel; you grow deeper into your understanding and application of it in your life. If you don't stay centered on Jesus and the gospel, you'll fall into either pride or despair. You'll either think you have your act so together; you don't really need the gospel, which is pride. Or you'll think you're so bad that you are beyond hope, and you'll fall into despair. The gospel deflates pride because we know that we contribute nothing to our salvation. The gospel also defeats despair because we know his grace never runs out.

Third, insist on gospel-centered leadership. Gospel center leaders are humble—they know they deserve none of the recognition, power, or influence their position might afford them. They're willing to be held accountable. Their focus isn't on themselves but the Lord. They know they do not know it all. They rejoice in the ministry of others. They gladly move aside so others can use their gifts. They refuse to be pampered, extolled, or put their personal comfort above the needs of others. They refuse to allow people to dote over them. They know they're nothing but a sinner saved by grace.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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