

Colossians 2:4-10 (1984 NIV)
Discerning the Deceptive

4 I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments.

5 For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how orderly you are and how firm your faith in Christ is.

6 So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him,

7 rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

8 See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.

9 For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form,

10 and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.

Introduction

This story once appeared in the newspapers (*The Straits Times*, 11 Feb. 2003). On a busy Monday morning, many people passed by a man sitting on a bench at the playground. In fact, he had been sitting there since Sunday night. He seemed to be sleeping so peacefully that no one would want to disturb or even notice him.

An old man doing his morning stroll stopped and rested on the bench for about 15 minutes beside this man. A mother carrying a crying baby walked past. Yet, this sleeping man did not stir. In fact, the sounds of people rushing to work did not rouse the man from his peaceful slumber.

However, one resident felt strange that this was so. He alerted the police who arrived shortly. To the surprise of many who had seen the man, the police found him sitting ... dead for hours on the bench.

Something very wrong had happened in a public place. Yet, the many who were passing and rushing by did not even notice. Indeed, this speaks loudly of the lack of discernment in contemporary living because many are so busy with their own things.

The Colossian Church in Paul's time also suffered from this sad lack of discernment. Something quite wrong was brewing within their community. Yet, they were not aware of the dangers. Paul had to write and alert them.

The Colossian believers were at a point where they wanted something more than what they had learned. In where they were, they had lots of opportunities to learn about different religions and philosophies. Being a Greek city under Roman rule, and where many Jews had chosen to settle down, the Colossians had no shortage of ideas.

The believers there were also seeking more spiritually. Perhaps, they had heard so much of the same Gospel that they now wanted to know something more ... and new. After all, they were just trying other ways to seek more of God. What's wrong with that?

Therein lies the danger. When the same Gospel message does not seem to be quite enough, spiritually deceptive teachings have found fertile ground to take roots. That's the key danger that Paul was trying to address in this letter to the Colossian Church.

It is the same danger today. When God's people are tired of the familiar Gospel and start to look for new spiritual adventures, they inevitably will be seduced by deceptive ideas.

Tiredness of the familiar Gospel is an indication of being stressed out. People want some new ideas to freshen themselves up again spiritually. Yet, they are too tired to give themselves to the discipline of discerning what's godly. They would rather give themselves to the convenience of enjoying what's good. They fail to realize that very often, the greatest enemy of what's godly is what's good. This is one key reason for the lack of spiritual discernment in our time today.

We are exposed to a great diversity of ideas. The spirit of discernment is more needed today than ever before. And Paul exhorts us to discern and counter the deceptive today. He called on the Colossian Christians, and he calls on us today to

I. Beware (v. 8a).

Paul said to the Colossian believers with an urgent word of caution in v. 8—“Beware lest anyone cheat you ...”

There were many great ideas floating around in the city of Colossae. The Colossian believers were looking for some answers to their deepest questions about life and their relationship with God. They wanted to draw closer to God and know Him better. It was as if this doubting thought became more and more etched onto their minds—“Christianity is great ... but it doesn't seem quite enough to answer some concerns and to meet my needs.” So they looked at the wisdom of their own day, and it looked all so rational and practical.

Paul saw that they were sincerely seeking for a fuller experience with God. However, he saw that they were going about it the wrong and dangerous way.

Their desire was valid but their approach was leading them further away from rather than closer to God. They were like people crying out, “We are very thirsty.” And someone who seemed willing to help responded, “Here, drink some good salt water.”

Hence, Paul had to step in and cautioned, “Beware lest anyone cheat you ...” Now Paul was not being paranoid here. The danger of the Colossian believers being led astray by some false teachers was very real. Paul had to warn with a loud and urgent “look out!” He warned them to look out lest someone would cheat them. The word “cheat” literally is “to kidnap and hold hostage”.

The Colossian believers had been saved by God’s grace from darkness into light. But now they were facing an enemy that threatened to recapture them and enslave them once again in the darkness of false teaching. The Colossians were in danger of mistakenly giving this someone a god-like status and submitting to him. This someone would seek to enslave and control them after kidnapping them from the truth of God. Through his teaching, he would heighten their sense of insignificance and helplessness like hostages without rights and freedom of their own.

Beware! Such spiritual kidnappers were there in the Colossian Church. Beware! Such spiritual kidnappers are also here today. Their scheme is very subtle—they work best when we are most dissatisfied with our spiritual life. We profess that God in Jesus Christ is sufficient for our needs. But what happens if our needs are not met? We look at someone’s experience with God and find it so rich and exciting. So we desire for the same experience but somehow we don’t seem to get it. What then are we tempted to do? We feel that since we lack it, it means that we are lesser Christians walking on the wrong road.

Indeed, when spiritual frustration and misleading ideas come together, all of us can be cheated. We can be spiritually kidnapped and held hostage by deceptive ideas. These promise us new adventures in our faith life. But they actually lead us to misadventures that wreck our faith journey.

And Paul warned the Colossians about the one who would come and cheat them; one who would spiritually kidnap them and hold them hostage. And Paul goes on to warn us today just as he did to the Colossians then, and his warning is that ...

II. The deceptive cheats with ideas not according to Christ’s teaching (v. 8b).

Such a cheater would use philosophy according to the tradition of men to lure people away.

The term “philosophy” had a broader meaning in the ancient city of Colossae than what the modern mind usually understands. It was not restricted to the intellectual thought systems of the Greeks and Romans at that time. It could

also refer to religious and magical practices prevailing then. These religious and magical practices probably had to do with eating, drinking, festivals and holy days, as well as ascetic morality (see 2:16, 22).

And Paul charged that such a cheat/spiritual kidnapper was addressing these issues using “philosophy ... according to the tradition of men” rather than according to Christ’s teaching (v. 8). These views arose out of the thinking of men. They then found a foothold in society, and were passed from generation to generation so as to appear popular and widely supported. People hardly dared question them because almost everyone believed them.

Today, many popular and widely supported human views are floating around. They may not have been passed down from ancient past. Nevertheless, they are wisdom that people hardly question. They have been passed from person to person so much so that almost all know and practice them. The rationale is this—such wisdom must be right because everybody is doing it.

One of such contemporary philosophy is activism. Basically, it demands that a person fill his life up with activities. Why? Because it makes a person believe this—“I am what I produce and accomplish. So I better keep on producing and accomplishing. Otherwise, I am nothing.”

The effect of activism is that it consumes one with a neurotic urge to keep doing, doing, and doing. He seeks significance from never-ending work rather than from the Lord. He feels guilty when he relaxes not because he enjoys work, but he is enslaved by it.

Activism has resulted in very traumatic experiences for many people—loss of self-esteem that leads to depression and despair. Activism provides us with a platform to perform. We feel utterly lost when that platform is pulled off from under our feet. We then feel trapped not because we have to perform, but we have nothing to perform. This need to prove oneself has resulted in people viewing acceptance and approval as highly conditional. Therein lies the great challenge to the Gospel message of God’s unconditional love. We think there’s a deficiency in divine grace because we look for sufficiency in human greatness.

When I was a seminary student, I did an internship of about two years at the International Baptist Church. I was still single and didn’t even have a girl-friend. I put in all I had both in my studies and in church. I was involved weekly in youth ministry, discipleship, and evangelism, and preached from time to time. I enjoyed every bit of all this busyness.

When it was time for me to leave for another ministry setting, the pastor wrote me a letter of commendation on behalf of the church for my contribution. One copy was sent to the seminary and another was given to me.

One evening, I was reflecting and praying to the Lord with this letter in my hand, and feeling very much drained in body, mind and spirit. Gradually, I felt a deep sense of rebuke from the Lord.

It was as if the Lord was telling me, “John, you may be feeling good because you have this letter in your hand. But this human commendation is nothing if you keep running like this. You will end up running on empty. Yes, you need to serve. But even more importantly, you need to take and make time to rest in me. Only then will you experience that I love you not only because you are my servant, but because you are my son (child) as well.”

This has been one of my most sobering wake-up calls from the Lord. Before this, I viewed myself very much as a “servant of God”. But after this encounter with the Lord, I have come to view myself very much as a “son (child) of God” as well.

I think many Christians today have unconsciously sold themselves to the philosophy of activism that stresses all doing and little being. They often see themselves as doing like a “servant of God” rather than being like a “child of God”. In other words, they think, feel and live not like a family member, but like a performer.

But the philosophy of activism so often dominates our faith life. We identify ourselves more readily as “servants of God”, and that immediately sets us off to do something. Yes, God is indeed worthy to be served, and deserving of our best service. However, we need to identify ourselves also as “children of God” so that we can intentionally rest being in the Father’s love.

- If you are employed, God wants you to do your best at work. But God doesn’t say He will only love you if you make more money than the guy next door.
- If you are a parent, God wants you to do your best. But God doesn’t say He will only love you if your kid goes to an elite school.
- If you are a student, God wants you to do your best. But God doesn’t say He will only love you if you score straight A’s.

I remember this touching story told by a colleague when I was still teaching at the Singapore Bible College (SBC). He was a Malaysian who had served in a Chinese church in the US for many years. The Lord then led him back to Asia and serve in SBC.

He had a son who was a little slow academically. He enrolled this son in a local school when it was time for the boy to begin primary education. The young boy found it very difficult to cope with the local education system. One day, he came home to the father and crying because he just couldn’t keep up in class.

And my colleague told me what he did. He embraced his dear son tightly in his arms, and said gently to him, “Son, it is okay. You go do your best in class. But regardless of how you’ve done in class, you come home to daddy as my son whom I will always love.”

And you know what this did to the young boy? I believe I don’t have to tell you.

Human philosophy can tell us that we are only worthy because of our productivity or achievements. But God in Jesus Christ is telling us that we are worthy of His love because we are His children. Yes, He wants us to serve and do well for His glory. But ultimately, God loves us because we are His children created in His image and redeemed by Him in Jesus Christ. He loves us because we are persons, not mere performers in His sight.

Beware of a philosophy according to the tradition of men that pressures us to perform like production machines, but devalues our personhood as a member of God’s family. Why are you and I significant before God even if we have achieved nothing noteworthy in the eyes of the world? Because you and I are each a child of God redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ. That’s how precious each of us is in God’s sight. Don’t ever let anyone or anything undermine that.

Paul warned the Colossians of an “empty deceit ... according to the basic principles of the world”. He charged such philosophy as hollow and deceptive, promising much but having really nothing to offer. That is what’s wrong with it then, and even today—i.e. it dismisses God’s revelation in Jesus Christ and claims one-upmanship for the ideas of the finite human mind.

Thus, Paul charged that such philosophy was not according to Christ, but according to the “basic principles of the world”. What did Paul mean by this? Well, the word “principles” can be translated as “elements”. Literally, it bears the meaning “to be in line”. Some scholars understand “principles” to refer to things or people lined up as in a hierarchy. They interpret Paul as referring to the line of heavenly bodies governed by a hierarchy of fallen angels. These powers correspond to the spiritual powers of darkness mentioned by Paul in Eph. 6:12.

I would understand Paul as talking of “basic principles of the world” with the intention of correcting the belief that human beings were under the control of cosmic powers that try to control a sinful world. Thus, Paul was charging that the deceptive philosophy advocated dependence on dark spiritual powers rather than on Jesus Christ. Apparently, someone was spreading some false teaching about the Person and work of Jesus Christ among the Colossian believers. Perhaps, such a teaching claimed that Jesus couldn’t be truly divine since He had an earthly body; that Jesus Christ was less than the cosmic powers controlling this fallen world.

That's why Paul had to affirm strongly in v. 9 that in Jesus Christ "dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily". The whole Person of God dwells in Jesus Christ when He was bodily on earth. Hence, one would be "complete in Him" (v. 10) in that when he received Jesus Christ, he too would have received the whole Person of God (the fullness of the Godhead) in him. There was no need for something more than what he already had. What was needed was a fuller understanding and living out of Christ in a person. Jesus Christ was completely God's presence and God Himself. He was not a lesser or a different god. Paul reminded the Colossians that they were "complete in Him (i.e. Jesus Christ) who is the head of all principality and power" (v. 10). Paul wanted to stress that these other powers were subservient to Jesus Christ. The Colossians must continue to worship Christ because only Christ alone was worthy of all worship.

The kind of hollow, deceptive philosophy with its source from dark spiritual powers was not only real in Paul's time. It is also influencing the minds of Christians today through the channels of human ideas. There are cults today that attack the Person and work of Jesus Christ. There are teachings today that claim to make Christians more spiritual yet with lots of moral flexibility. What emerges then is a kind of spirituality without real morality. And that's a very attractive thing—let lose your lusty desires yet still be holy.

In times of uncertainties, many are seeking answers to questions like:

- What is the meaning of life?
- Why are we here?
- Where are we going?
- What on earth is happiness in such a gloomy world?

There is a growing hunger for spiritual fulfilment and emotional well-being. And many gurus have felt "divinely" inspired to lend some help. They feed their wisdom and guidance to the spiritually hungry in many ways—lectures, videos, workshops, retreats, and books.

One who professes to be Christian has written an international bestseller in which he advocates the following ideas:

- Monogamy demands sexual exclusiveness. Conclusion: monogamy is evil because it segregates, and thus, denies equality.
- Monogamy implies that one person can own another exclusively. Such ownership is possessiveness that breeds deep-rooted dependencies, childish emotions and insecurities. Conclusion: monogamy is wrong and carries serious psycho-emotional consequences.
- Monogamy implies that one person can only love one member of the other sex at a time. Conclusion: monogamy is

- dangerous because it breeds jealousy—one woman may be jealous of another because she cannot love the other's man.
- Both man and woman is not sexually monogamous by nature because they have repeatedly failed to maintain monogamy in all societies. Conclusion: monogamy is oppressive as it is a standard beyond human reach.
- Sexual fidelity is a false god. It misleads people to worship it as the be-all and end-all of love. But in reality, it stops people from new possibilities of additional relationships. Conclusion: Sexual fidelity is selfish because it stops a person from intimacy with others outside the marital relationship.

(The Less Traveled Road and the Bible: A Scriptural Critique of the Philosophy of M. Scott Peck by H. Wayne House and Richard Abanes, pp. 85-86)

What are these teachings telling us? Free sex is okay and it can even make you a better person emotionally, relationally and spiritually. Spirituality without morality—it's a very attractive invitation. In fact, someone in social work once told me that when he suggested no sex before marriage at a young people's seminar, they thought he belonged to the age of dinosaurs!

Why? Because the popular voice today is not saying "no sex before marriage" but "safe sex before marriage". Do all you want, but don't get caught—that's the message out there today.

I hope that you know with certainty what the Bible actually teaches about sexual purity outside marriage and within it. When a single person commits sex with one not married to him, the Bible denounces it as fornication. When a married person commits sex with one not married to him, the Bible denounces it as adultery (see Eph. 5:3).

Conclusion

When God's people are tired of the familiar Gospel and start to look for new spiritual adventures, they inevitably will be seduced by deceptive ideas. We are exposed to a great diversity of ideas. The spirit of discernment is more needed today than ever before. And Paul exhorts us to discern and counter the deceptive today.

We are called to beware of seemingly wise teachings that are not according to the true Gospel of Jesus Christ. Some ways for us to take precautions are:

- One, ensure a close relationship with God through our daily walk with Him.
- Two, know the Word of God through personal study of the Bible.
- Three, fellowship with believers who are strong in knowing and living the faith, and who can help us walk on the straight and narrow path of God.

- Four, examine all teachings and practices prayerfully to see if they are really true to Scripture.
- Five, have regular devotion time as a family—parents can use this opportunity to help young, impressionable minds to be guided and led by the Word of God.

Pray that the Lord will grant us the wisdom to discern and counter the deceptive, and live victoriously for Him each day. Amen!