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Deceptive Philosophy



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Deceptive Philosophy

Thomas K. Johnson

Text: Colossians 2: 1–10

„I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those in Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of completer understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. 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. So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. 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. For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.“

A couple years ago my wife and I were in a taxi in Prague when an interesting song came on the car radio. The refrain claimed, „You and me Baby ain't nuttin but mammals, so let's do like they do on the Discovery Channel.“ The song was quite repetitive, and the refrain seemed to recur about a thousand times: „You and me Baby ain't nuttin but mammals, so let's do like they do on the Discovery Channel.“

I have to admit that I find these words rather vulgar and crass, making me hesitate to quote them in a worship service. Maybe you feel that way too. But something very important can be learned from this song: if people do not believe the message of the Bible, they strongly tend to believe something else. In the case of these musicians, they use a story, probably Darwin's story, and use it to interpret life. Out of that story then comes a definition of what human beings are (nuttin but mammals) and an ethic or prescription of how people ought to live (like the animals on the Discovery Channel – probably a reference to unrestrained sexual activity.) This is a whole worldview or philosophy of life. And the people who believe this philosophy of life cannot help but proclaim their message, inviting other people

to believe it too. It arises out of their need to understand life and the world, but this philosophy of life prevents them and others from coming to faith in Christ. Conversely, breaking up this philosophy of life may prepare them to receive the gospel.

What we encountered in this song is very similar to what we encounter all the time and almost everywhere. When we check out at the supermarket we normally see a whole row of different magazines, each offering a philosophy of life. When we turn on the radio or TV we encounter a variety of talk shows in which different people compete to convince us of their philosophy of life. When I drive or walk past a school I am reminded that the teachers do far more than teach our children reading, writing, and mathematics. They are also usually teaching them how to live and understand themselves and our world. Schools normally teach a whole philosophy of life, whether one that promotes the faith or one that hinders the faith.

It is in this light that we should read Colossians 2:8. „See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy.“ Paul wrote these words in a context in which some believers were threatened by a particular philosophy of life that arose in their time and place. But more important than the particulars of that philosophy of life is the general principle that believers need to be careful of deceptive philosophies of all sorts. And the „philosophy“ that Paul is talking about is not necessarily the technical studies that occur in a university philosophy seminar. „Philosophy“ in the ancient

world referred to the whole attempt to understand the world and find direction in life. In this sense, philosophy is everywhere. All the time we are bombarded with a variety of philosophies of life. To avoid being taken captive by a deceptive philosophy, we need to learn to practice an active, critical Christian discernment. We need to learn to think Christianly in response to the ideas of our time.

This sounds like it may take some effort, so we must ask why. Why is it so important that we learn to practice critical Christian discernment? The answer is that spiritual deception is a very large problem. Paul writes as if people are commonly threatened or maybe controlled by spiritual deception. In Col. 2:4 he writes, „I tell you this so that no one may deceive you with fine sounding arguments.“ And in other places he writes similar things.

When we think of spiritual deception, our minds quickly turn to the many false, deceptive religions around. In the city of Prague, where we live, one often sees a Hare Krishna band marching through the city center, and there is a Hare Krishna restaurant just a few hundred meters from our apartment. We are all very aware of the huge problems related to Islam and its hold on the lives of millions of people. Encountering Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses is a common experience. It is common and proper to point out that deceptive religions all seem to share one characteristic, they all seem to be a form of self-salvation or works righteousness that seeks to earn God's favor. The proud attitude that claims we do not need a Savior or the grace of God is so central to

our sinful hearts that similar ideas come up in many forms. However not all the deception we face is so clearly „religious“. And here Paul warns us against deceptive philosophy, not only against deceptive religion. Much of the truly destructive deception in our world is not narrowly religious. It may have to do with how we understand daily life and how we should relate to other people.

I heard a reliable story of a Christian man who heard or read that the way to significantly improve his marriage was to practice a radical openness of expression with his wife. He interpreted this openness to mean telling his wife all of her weaknesses and all of his frustrations with her. His wife was emotionally devastated when he followed this philosophy. You can easily imagine that it threw their marriage and family into a serious crisis. It was one of the stupidest things he could do. And in following this philosophy he disregarded the direct biblical commands that we are to forgive each other's sins and bear with each other's weaknesses. These commands assume it is often easy for us to see each other's weaknesses and faults, especially when we have very close contact, such as in marriage and family. Further, this man specifically disobeyed Col. 3:19, „Husbands, do not be harsh with your wives.“ He followed a deceptive philosophy and seriously damaged his marriage and family.

I know a man, an American living in another country, who became convinced that polygamy is morally acceptable and that it can be defended on biblical grounds. After being gone for several

days, his first wife was quite surprised to learn that she now had to share their house with his second wife. This second wife was about the age of their daughters. It is no surprise that his marriage and family were devastated by his actions, actions inspired by a deceptive philosophy. And that deceptive philosophy was regarded as respectable in the country in which this occurred.

What kind of weapon did the serpent choose when he attacked Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden? Was it a nuclear weapon? A chemical or biological weapon? No, the serpent chose the most powerful weapon available: WORDS. He used words to try to destroy Adam and Eve and their children, because words control people and reign over their lives. Any other weapon comes at a person from outside, but words get into our minds and hearts and take control from within. In several places the apostle Paul talks about evil principalities, powers, authorities, and rulers that control people's lives. While it is difficult to know very precisely what each of these terms is describing, at least one of these words is probably referring to ideas that reign over the lives of people, perhaps words that are used by demonic powers to control and destroy people and prevent them from coming to faith. We can call them „reigning ideas.“

A couple years ago I was sitting at my desk, thinking about what I heard from my university students. I realized that there is a pattern to the ideas that seemed to be reigning over their lives, and that this pattern is very similar to what one reads in the magazines and books in

Europe. So I grabbed an old envelope and quickly started to write a list of the ideas that seem to be reigning over their lives. Here is that list. These ideas keep people from coming to faith and often distort the lives of people. Ask yourself if these ideas might be reigning over the lives of people you know.

1. *Humans are primarily economic animals, and therefore the way to happiness is by means of wealth. Of course, Karl Marx taught that people are economic creatures, but even in our time of market economies a remarkable number of people seem to agree with Marx on this very fundamental point.*

2. *The Sexual Revolution of a generation ago was a good thing and a healthy transition. This basic idea has some corollaries: Divorce is mostly harmless; love is only romantic attraction; having sex with someone is not very significant. One philosopher has even suggested that having sex with a person is no more significant than playing a game of tennis with that person, though not many people will make such extreme statements.*

3. *All religions are the same. Of course, any introductory book on comparative religions shows that all religions are not the same, but yet every one seems to "know" that all religions are more or less the same.*

4. *Serious religious faith makes people violent. The people who say this type of thing are usually thinking about something from the Middle East and are over generalizing, not recognizing that the biblical faith may be very different from other faiths. Nevertheless, „everyone knows“ that a serious faith makes people violent.*

5. *Right and wrong are only human instincts or a social convention. Obviously right and wrong have nothing to do with God or the nature of the universe.*

6. *Darwin told the whole story of human nature and destiny. Forget the fact that many scientists have long rejected Darwin's mythology, he gave us the big picture to understand what and who we are.*

7. *Real faith is opposed to serious learning or education. A couple years ago I had an interesting little email dialog with a student who wrote a philosophy essay for one of my classes. She mentioned in passing that faith and learning are always in conflict. In an email I asked for documentation of that claim, and she quickly said she was not so sure about that claim any longer. But her paper reflects the first impression of millions of students.*

8. *People are sinless. Pay no attention to the fact the main stories in our newspapers are about the various „Cains“ killing the various „Abels“, and then claiming to do something good. For the last three hundred years western philosophy and education has often taught that humans are „basically“ good, meaning that sin does not exist.*

9. *Christianity is entirely about rule keeping.*

10. *If you want to have a miserable, messed up life, just keep the arbitrary, random rules recorded in the Bible.*

Please keep in mind that I do not believe any of these ten ideas. And they do not necessarily form a consistent philosophy of life. But they seem to be ruling over the lives of many people today, including the lives of many of my neighbors and students. These deceptive philosophies

make people do destructive things and they prevent them from coming to faith in Christ. Ideas have consequences.

How are we to get free from the power of crazy ideas that reign over our lives? We are not the first people to ask that question. In many ways this was the central question of the so-called „Enlightenment“, the „Age of Reason“ of about three hundred years ago. At that time many philosophers and educators were seeking a way to get free from deceptive, silly beliefs that often destroy the lives of people and societies. And the main answer they proposed was to practice pure, objective reason. Of course there was a lot of variety among the different Enlightenment writers, but overall our Enlightenment ancestors generally agreed that the way to get freedom from destructive ideas that reign over the lives of people is to be „reasonable“. In response to that I would say that it is far better to be reasonable than to be unreasonable. Practical and theoretical reason are gifts of God. But reason alone is not enough to set us free from destructive reigning ideas. We need something far more powerful. What is the solution?

In Col. 2:3 Paul says that in Christ are „all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge“. And he makes this claim in the very context of getting free from deceptive philosophy. He clearly assumes that the way to freedom from destructive, deceptive philosophies is through the wisdom of God in Christ.

In the Bible we are given an overall philosophy of life that tells us who we are, what our world is, what the meaning of

life is, and what is wrong with us and the world. All of life is interpreted in light of creation, fall, and redemption, and in addition we are given God’s wisdom on a hundred and one topics. If we pay close attention to what we find in scripture, and if we think hard in light of what we read in scripture, we can begin to think God’s thoughts after him. This is not only for theologians and Christian philosophers. This is the calling of every believer and fits with being created in the image of God. In this way we can find freedom from the various philosophies that would take us captive.

Let’s think back to some of the deceptive, reigning ideas mentioned a few moments ago and evaluate them in light of the wisdom of God in Christ.

1. In light of the biblical account of human life, is it likely that money, and the things money can buy, will make people happy? In the Bible we read that God created us for a relationship with himself, for relationships with other people, and for serving him in his world. So we would expect that people would find happiness in doing these things. And when I observe people, and when I read in the social sciences, this is what I see. So when I hear people say that the way to happiness is money, what do I say? „I don’t think so.“

2. Many people say that divorce is a very trivial thing. But we see in the Bible that God created marriage to be a life-time partnership and gave some rules to protect marriage. So it is no surprise to observe among acquaintances and to read in the social sciences that divorce leaves people miserable for years, feeling lonely, rejected, and depressed.

And if there are children involved, they often feel so severely abandoned that they have all sorts of problems. So when we hear or read that divorce is minor, what should we say? „I don't think so.“

3. People are deceived by the claim that any serious religious faith makes people violent. But what do we see in the pages of the Bible? The apostle Paul was a violent man, but after he came to faith in Jesus he became anything but violent. He was still a fiery, vigorous leader, but he endured violence from others and did not practice violence. Think of his beatings, floggings, and stoning. And look at the people in your church. What is the effect of a deep faith? Is it violence? A real faith changes the lives of people, but it makes them more loving, just, loyal, and kind, not violent. When we read the claim that faith makes people violent, what should we think? „I don't think so.“

4. We hear people say that Christianity is all about keeping silly, arbitrary rules that will make life miserable. But what we see in the Bible is that God has given us some rules, important rules that we need that help keep life from becoming dysfunctional. They are like guard rails that keep us from falling off a cliff. But these rules are not exactly the center of our faith. The center of our faith is to know God and his forgiving grace in Christ. The rules are always secondary, though needed. So when we hear the claim that Christianity is all about keeping arbitrary rules, how should we respond? „We don't think so!“

I prefer in the last few paragraphs I have tried to give an example of what we all need to do all the time. We need to learn to practice an active, critical, Chris-

tian discernment. This means listening to what people around us have to say, and then evaluating it in light of the overall biblical philosophy of life, in light of particular biblical texts, and in light of human experience. There is no reason we have to agree with what everyone has to say; if we carelessly agree with what everyone says, we will find ourselves captive to destructive, reigning ideas.

In 2 Corinthians 10:5 Paul says he „takes ideas captive to Christ.“ It is valuable to see the contrast between 2 Cor. 10:5 and Col. 2:8. In one place he talks about being a captive to deceptive philosophy; in the other text he talks about taking ideas or deceptive philosophies as captives. This makes clear an important choice we all must face: either we will be taken as a captive by a deceptive philosophy, or we will take deceptive philosophies as our captives. In the realm of reigning ideas, there will always be captives and captors. Our choice is whether we would prefer to be the captives or the captors. There is really no other alternative.

How do you take an idea captive to Christ? The first and most important step is to become willing and ready to evaluate the philosophies of life we encounter, in music, magazines, radio, TV, school, or wherever in light of our biblical faith. If what we hear and read does not fit with the biblical message, we can simply say, “I don't think so.” Those with gifts of discernment will want to say a lot more, but just saying „I don't think so“ sets us free from captivity.

Perhaps God could have made us like computers – you just drop in a CD or a

floppy disk and new information or programs are installed, while the computer stays more or less passive. But God did not create us like that. He created us to be actively thinking, evaluating, discerning, learning, and exploring. And all these activities should be done before God with open Bibles and for his glory, in order to honor him with our entire lives.

In Proverbs 1:7 we are told, „The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.“ It is very striking that it does not say that the fear of the Lord is the end or stopping point of knowledge or wisdom. After telling us the beginning of knowledge, the Proverbs go on to exhort us repeatedly to pursue knowledge, run after wisdom, and love learning. And these are commands of God. God wants us to learn to think Christianly, to be gaining wisdom, to be practicing active discernment, for our entire lives.

I am used to giving my university or seminary students an assignment of what they must do in the coming weeks. So that is how I will end this sermon. What you must do is to identify two or three ideas that seem to reign over the lives of people that you see. These ideas will not be „how to“ ideas, such as „how to“ repair your car or „how to“ bake a better loaf of bread. They will be ideas about how we should live or what is the meaning of life or how we should relate to other people. Once you have identified some reigning ideas, you should write them somewhere, whether on paper or on your computer. This makes the idea more specific. And then you should begin to evaluate the idea. Ask if it fits the overall biblical phi-

losophy of life. Ask if it agrees with any specific biblical texts on the subject. Ask if it really fits with life experience. And if it does not, then begin by saying „I don't think so.“ But do not stop there. Move to talking about the results of your work of discernment with Christian family members or friends, in your church or fellowship group. But even there is not the place to stop. Also talk about your work of discernment with non-believing colleagues, neighbors, and friends. Perhaps you could say, „I heard a song that says we are nothing but mammals, but I think we are created in the image of God.“ Or perhaps you might say, „A lot of people think money is the way to happiness, but I think there is a different route to happiness.“

What can we hope to accomplish by such active, Christian discernment? First it will help set us free from deceptive philosophies. Second, it will help set our fellow believers free from destructive, reigning ideas. And finally, it may help set unbelievers free from captivity and take a step toward real faith. What if a discerning believer had asked those musicians, „Do you really think we're nothing but mammals?“ Maybe their song could have said, „You and me, Baby are much more than mammals, so let's live for the glory of God.“

The author



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