

The Steps to Self-Deception

Proverbs 14:12; John 7:17

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Rev. Greg L. Price

How is it that people can be so sincere in what they believe and yet be so wrong? For it is evident every day that people who hold contrary positions as to the truth cannot both be right and yet they seem so sure that they are right. This sermon is not intended to cast saints into a vicious cycle of doubt, worry, and fear concerning the state of their soul. But it is intended to cause all who hear this sermon to examine themselves so as to know wherein is their only hope of eternal salvation. In fact, I would pray that all who are justified by faith alone would find much encouragement to their faith from this sermon.

On the one hand, I must also challenge you that you not rest your salvation in your mere sincerity, sorrow for sin, zeal, knowledge of the truth, acts of obedience, acts of mercy, your baptism, or your church. On the other hand, I pray that you may have the blessed grace of assurance of faith, but on the other hand, I pray that God exposes self-deception where it may blind you to your true spiritual poverty before God (just as Jesus exposes the self-deception of those elders and members in the Church of Laodicea in Revelation 3:17).

Let us, therefore, prayerfully consider from our text in Proverbs 14:12 the following two points: (1) The Self-Deception of Mere Sincerity; (2) The Consequence of Self-Deception.

I. The Self-Deception of Mere Sincerity.

A. This warning from God concerning the danger of self-deception is so important for us to hear that the Lord not only mentions it here in Proverbs 14:12, but brings the same proverb (word for word) to our attention again in Proverbs 16:25. Here is a red flashing light at a train track wherein God declares that we must give heed if we would live.

B. “There is a way which seemeth right (or straight) unto a man.” Here Solomon speaks of a course of life or a path of religion which seems so right unto a person. However, it is right not in an absolute sense, but right in an apparent sense (literally, “There is a right way before the face of a man” i.e. in the man’s own eyes, from his own personal perspective it appears to be the right way to live, it seems to be the right religion or philosophy to believe). In fact, there is nothing in the Hebrew word for “right” in Proverbs 14:12 that would give us the impression that such a person is intentionally walking contrary to the truth and just doesn’t care. To the contrary, the words used in this proverb would lead us to conclude that it is his intention to walk in the path that appears to him to be right. Here is a well-intentioned, sincere person that has not only been deceived, but has also deceived himself into believing a lie. He has willingly received a lie for the truth.

1. It would seem that King Saul believed he was right in allowing the army of Israel to keep some of the animals captured from the Amalekites for the purpose of offering them to the Lord as burnt offerings (even though God had previously told him to destroy everything without exception—He made an exception where God made no exception). It was a way which seemed right to Saul under the circumstances. For to praise God by keeping some of the animals for burnt offerings, how could that be wrong—Saul no doubt reasoned? But God declared it was not only wrong, but rebellion against Him to do so (1 Samuel 15:22-23). Dear ones, it is not what feels right to you, or seems right to a majority of the people that is right. What is right to do in any circumstance must be measured by the infallible standard of God’s Word (Isaiah 8:20).

2. The very last verse in the book of Judges describes so well what was responsible for various acts of disobedience during those backsliding times: “every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25). Rather than following the alone infallible standard of truth (God’s written Word), the people were a law to themselves and were led by their own fallible standards of what was right and what was

wrong. As a result we find them repeating this cycle wherein they did what was right in their own eyes; God then sent a nation to chasten Israel; they then repented of their sin; and finally God sent a deliverer. Then Israel started the same process all over again.

3. God says all men are naturally inclined (due to the corruption of their soul) to doing what is right in their own eyes: "All the ways of man are clean in his own eyes" (Proverbs 16:2). "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes" (Proverbs 12:15). That is why the Lord commands you not to lean upon your own mere understanding: Proverbs 3:5-7. The Jews of Paul's time were very zealous for God says Paul, but not according to a true knowledge of Scripture (Romans 10:2). Paul even says about himself that he sincerely believed that he was obligated before God to persecute Christians (Acts 26:9-11).

4. Or consider the deception that is prophesied to come upon the world through the son of perdition, the man of sin, the papal antichrist in 2 Thessalonians 2:8-12. They fall into self-deception because they took pleasure in unrighteousness and did not love the truth (even the gospel of salvation). But the elect we are told by Christ cannot (in fact, it is impossible that they) be absolutely deceived by the lying signs and wonders of false teachers (Matthew 24:24).

C. What are the various fallible standards that so often distort the truth so that man believes a lie and is led into self-deception? Mark these, dear ones, so that you do not fall into self-deception by leaning upon one of these fallible standards. They may not cost you your soul, but they will cost you your growth in Christ.

1. **The Deception of Antiquity.** The Deception of Antiquity argues, "Because a practice has been used or a principle has been believed for so long a time, it must be right." The Church of Rome argues that it is the only true Church of Christ because of its antiquity. But dear ones, it is not how old a Church is that proves whether it is the true Bride of Christ, but whether it is faithful to the doctrines, worship, and government given by Christ to the Church in the Holy Scripture. Heresy has always existed along with the truth since the time of Christ and the apostles. If age is alone considered, heresy has as much of a claim to antiquity as does the truth. Nevertheless, antiquity and history do have proper uses in our studies of the truth in distinguishing the orthodox from the unorthodox, and the faithful from the unfaithful, so that we may identify ourselves with those who walked in the good old paths of righteousness and truth while testifying against all those who departed from those old paths. But antiquity and history (in themselves) are not infallible guides to the truth. Antiquity and history must be subjected to the infallible standard of God's written Word.

2. **The Deception of Experts.** The Deception of Experts leads us into self-deception with such words as these: "Who do you think you are to question the experts as to what is right or wrong? The experts are always right whether in biology, psychology, religion, politics, ethics, philosophy, medicine etc. Only they have the authority to tell you what is right or wrong." When the experts are challenged to prove their principles from an infallible standard of truth, they rant and rave and resort to malicious lies, misrepresentations, and name-calling. However, there is only one infallible Expert and that is God speaking in the Holy Scriptures. All other so-called experts (whether familial, ecclesiastical, or civil) are subordinate to the wisdom of God revealed in Scripture. Of course, that is not to say that God can only instruct us directly through the Scripture (apart from any teacher, minister, or elder). For Paul states that Christ gave as gifts to the Church apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers "for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ till we all come in the unity of the faith.... That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness whereby they lie in wait to deceive" (Ephesians 4:11-14). The Deception of Experts comes when teachers, ministers, bishops, and popes are not subordinate to the Scriptures.

3. **The Deception of the Majority.** The Deception of the Majority will lead many into self-deception by making it sound so reasonable to be led by the will of the people. How many times have we heard, "Majority rules." But dear ones, does the will of the people determine what is right or wrong? A

majority of the people supported Hitler's Third Reich. A majority of the people once supported a racial slavery in this country. A majority of people would seem to support a women's "right" to have her child murdered. A majority of people believe that all false religion ought to be preserved and protected by the civil magistrate. It will not be long (unless God intervenes) before a majority of the people will also believe that sodomites may be legally united in marriage. Although voting has its place in the political process and at times in the Church as well, a vote for that which is immoral and contrary to God's Law never has a lawful place within a nation or a Church. It is not a majority that rules. To the contrary, it is our Sovereign God and His Word that rules. It is not the will of the people that determines right from wrong. It is the Moral Law of God that determines right from wrong.

4. **The Deception of an Erring Conscience.** The Deception of an Erring Conscience will bring self-deception by making us feel that something is right when it is really wrong and that something is wrong when it is really right. However, the conscience is no more a dependable guide to truth than is antiquity, experts, or the majority. For it too is fallible. Our conscience must be submitted to the supreme authority of God's infallible written Word if it is to properly lead us into truth (just as antiquity, experts, and the majority must be). We testify with our Confession of Faith against the Deception of Antiquity, Experts, the Majority, and the Conscience that "God alone is lord of the conscience and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship" (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 20:2).

D. But the question then is raised, What about various professing Christian Churches that claim to appeal to the Scripture as the infallible rule of faith and practice and yet come to contradictory conclusions as to what is true? Does this fact, disprove our contention that Scripture is the alone infallible rule of faith and practice? Absolutely not! The problem is not with the infallible standard of Scripture, but with us who are sinful, fallible men. Let us be warned that we who profess faith in Jesus Christ may yet be led into self-deception even when we sincerely make our appeal to the Scriptures. Again it may not be a self-deception that leads to eternal death, but nevertheless, a real self-deception that leads to blindness to the truth. How do professing Christians and professing Christian Churches set themselves up for self-deception?

1. We may be self-deceived through our ignorance in understanding the revelation of God. Rather than being discouraged by this, we should rather be encouraged to diligently study the Scripture (using all the tools available to us in our libraries). But mere study is not enough to rightly understand the Word of God, for this is not just an intellectual exercise. Without the Spirit of God leading and guiding us into truth, we will fall upon our own understanding and incline ourselves to self-deception.

2. We may be self-deceived through our preconceived biases and cherished preferences. To the degree that we are led in our study of Scripture by what we want to find in it, to that degree we will likely find what we wanted to find and fall into self-deception. If we would avoid self-deception, let us not force the Scripture into our own wants and desires. Rather let the Spirit of God speak forth His good pleasure to us through His Word.

3. We may be self-deceived through our pride in refusing to listen to teachers and ministers more wise and knowledgeable than ourselves whom Christ gave to the Church as an aid to our understanding. There is the tendency in many of us to want to find something in the Scripture which no one has ever found and to exalt our own intellectual gifts and abilities in the presence of others. But God declares that there is safety in a multitude of qualified counselors (Proverbs 11:14). This is always a helpful check and balance to our own vanity and pride.

4. We may be self-deceived through our willful disobedience of what we already know to be right and true. When we do not live up to the light of knowledge already given to us by the Lord in His Word, we are unlikely to be given more light in the truth. For why should the Lord give us more light, if we are suppressing or ignoring the light He has already given to us. It is far more likely the case that we will be turned

over to self-deception as a discipline by the Lord, if we do not live a life of integrity seeking and endeavoring (by God's grace) to live as consistently in the truth that we know (whether in public or in secret). If we would avoid the darkness of self-deception, let us learn to live (whether we are in public or in secret) in the light of God's all-seeing eye. Let us humbly and quickly learn to repent of our sin and error and seek the fatherly forgiveness of God. For the darkness of sin (and especially the willful sin in our lives) will indeed blind us to the truth, but the light of loving obedience in our lives will be rewarded by the Lord in opening our eyes to the truth. Carefully note the words of the Lord in John 7:17 ("If any man will DO his will"); James 1:22-25.

E. Perhaps a question that weighs upon us with even greater gravity is this: How can I know that I have not simply deceived myself as to being a Christian? Is there a more important question than this one? Is there a question with greater consequences at stake than this one? For clearly there are those who will have deceived themselves on the last day (as we see in Matthew 7:21-23). Let me give you some criteria by which to evaluate whether you have deceived yourself as to the state of your soul. Consider the following truths from God's Word and the questions that come afterwards.

1. The Triune God alone speaks with absolute and infallible authority, and He has spoken in Holy Scripture, which is the alone infallible rule of faith and life. I ask you: Is this your firm conviction? If even your own conscience speaks contrary to Scripture, then your conscience must bow and submit itself to God speaking in Scripture.

2. All men by nature deserve the eternal condemnation of God for the guilt of Adam's sin, the loss of original righteousness, the corruption of one's own soul, and for one's own personal sins. There is nothing that a person, who is dead in his trespasses and sins, can do to save himself/herself. I ask you: Do you understand and acknowledge your hopeless and helpless condition if salvation depends upon you?

3. God out of His infinite mercy and grace sent His Divine Son to fulfill all the righteous demands of His broken law and to atone for the sins of all the ungodly who embrace by faith alone Jesus Christ as their only hope of eternal salvation. It is not your faith, your repentance, your love, or your new obedience that saves you. It is the object of your faith that saves you i.e. Christ and His perfect righteousness. It is not the strength of your faith that grants judicial forgiveness for all your sins (past, present, and future), but the object of your faith that does so i.e. Jesus Christ. I ask you: Is there anything in you or anything done by you that you believe is meritorious before God or will incline God to save you? Or do you look entirely outside of yourself and look with the eye of faith to Christ and His righteousness alone as being meritorious before an infinitely holy God? Do you not only believe that Christ is able and willing to save sinners in general who come to Him, but that he is able and willing to save you in particular, if you come to Him and drink of the waters of eternal life that He freely offers you?

4. God is not finished with those who are justified, but promises to gradually subdue the evil desires, profane words, and abominable actions that yet reveal themselves in their life and to gradually manifest pure desires, edifying words, and lawful actions by applying all the benefits and promises of salvation purchased by Christ. This is not perfectionism in this life, but sanctification in this life. I ask you: Do you desire not only to escape the eternal condemnation in hell, but to be conformed to the glorious image of Jesus Christ? Do you desire to grow in your hatred for sin and in your love for righteousness? Do you desire to increase in your love for God and the brethren? Do you hunger and thirst for the truth of God to be illuminated to your understanding that you might not only know it, but do it?

5. Dear ones, I would submit that you who embrace by faith these truths with your mind, your will, and your desire cannot deceive yourself as to the true state of your soul. Despite the deception of the conscience that would take your eyes off of the biblical truths just mentioned, you can proclaim in faith even when you do not feel it with the strength and sense of faith, "Christ is my righteousness and salvation. I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust. Surely he shall defend me from the snare of a tyrannical conscience. He shall cover me with his feathers, and under his wings shall I trust:

His truth shall be my shield and buckler against all the assaults of my erring conscience.”

II. The Consequence of Self-Deception.

A. “There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.” The death here mentioned has in view far more than an untimely physical death. It looks to eternal death in hell. This is the end of the road to all those who deceive themselves as to the eternal state of their soul and imagine that they are worthy to enter heaven and escape hell. With such an end awaiting those who are self-deceived about their salvation, how can you, dear ones, lightly dismiss this all-important message from God? Let not His gracious warning fall upon a sleepy mind, a neglectful will, or rebellious desires this Lord’s Day. Flee to Christ who alone is THE WAY, THE TRUTH, and THE LIFE.

B. Don’t deceive yourself into believing you still have a lot of time to live the life you want to live before you repent and make things right with God. That is exactly what the devil would want you to believe and how he would deceive you. Now is the day of salvation is what the God of truth says. Don’t wait. Turn from your sin and in faith to Christ alone. Remember the warning given by God to the Israelites who wandered in the wilderness and who heard the gospel preached unto them, but did not mix the gospel with faith by reaching out and receiving the free gift offered to them. Let us not be those who gather on the Lord’s Day to hear the gospel preached, but sleep through the sermon or tear the sermon apart from beginning to end, but miss that which is absolutely essential: By faith receive Christ and His righteousness that is offered to you in the gospel. Amen.