

Dealing with Disinformation, John 8:44-45

Caleb Nelson | Harvest Reformed Presbyterian Church | May 2022

Proposition: Christians can learn to spot lies by abiding in God's word and being disciples of Jesus.

- I. The Enemy: The Devil, John 8:44
 - A. The Dragon's Activity
 1. Murdering
 2. Lying
 - B. The Dragon's Fertility: Father of Lies
 - C. The Dragon's Spawn
 1. Nominal Believers, v. 31
 2. Those Who Want what Satan Wants, v. 44a
 3. Those Who Refuse to Believe Jesus' Truth, v. 45
- II. The Truth: Jesus, John 8:45
 - A. Believe Jesus Because He Speaks Truth
 - B. Resist Satan's Lies
- III. Telling the Difference
 - A. How Satanic Lies Work
 1. They May Directly Contradict the Truth, Gen. 3:4
 2. They May Put the Truth into a False Context, Gen. 3:5-6, 22
 - a) Keep the Facts, Change the Narrative, 3:5-6
 - b) Keep the Narrative, Change the Metanarrative
 - B. How the Christian Can Resist Satanic Lies, John 8:31-32
 1. Get to Know the Truth
 - a) Abide in God's Word
 - b) Be True Disciples
 2. Get to Know the Narrative of God's Character and how He is Working Right Now
 3. Get to Know the Metanarrative of Creation, Fall, Redemption, Consummation

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, one of the big topics that has surfaced in our society in recent years is the problem of misinformation. I can't tell you how many people have said to me, "I don't know what to believe any more." Believe me, I have felt that way myself. Yet brothers and sisters, we as Christians follow the truth. We are personally, professionally, and corporately committed to truth. We believe that the truth is summed up in a particular person named Jesus Christ. And we also believe in the existence, power, and activity

of an opponent of the truth, an anti-truth operative called “the Adversary” or “the Devil” in English or “Satan” in Hebrew. We of all people, then, should be misinformation and disinformation experts, to use the bureaucratic lingo of the day. In simpler terms, it is our calling to be able to distinguish the truth from the lie.

Now, here’s the thing: I’m not talking about technical claims, be they scientific, mathematical, or historical. The vast majority of people will never attain the skills necessary to independently verify such claims, many of which can only be checked by mammoth institutions supporting large teams of researchers. The Bible does not say “Follow Jesus and you will be able to know for certain how effective a particular vaccine is.”

Instead, I’m talking about something different, something we could call “narrative analysis.” I want you to be able to evaluate claims not in terms of technical science, mathematics, and history, but rather in terms of what these claims say about God, the world, and humanity. We as Christians are uniquely well-positioned to evaluate claims based on what they say about these larger things. A claim, for instance, that there is no crime in Sweden because of its wonderful Nordic social policies is a claim that you should find absurd — not because you’ve been to Sweden and seen crime there, but because you know that all human societies have some level of crime.

So we’re going to spend some time talking about the background here in terms of God and Satan. But we will spend the bulk of this sermon looking at three major ways to lie, and how to counter each of them. The ability to distinguish between lies and truth is key for everyone who claims to serve Jesus Christ, who is the Truth.

I. The Enemy: The Devil, John 8:44

This whole sequence in John 8 is absolutely masterful. Jesus’ conversation with the Jews is amazing in its insight, its claims, and its relevance. We don’t have time to discuss the whole thing today; I would merely point you to the climax of the scene, where Jesus declares His eternal pre-existence as the great I AM. But in between, He talks about freedom and truth, two key concepts that are supremely relevant to us and our society these days.

A. The Dragon’s Activity

What I want you to see first is Jesus’ accusation, hurled at the nominally Christian Jews to whom He was talking, that they have come from their Father the Devil. And then Jesus gives a quick character sketch of the Devil.

1. Murdering

The first thing He tells us about the enemy is that he was a murderer from the beginning. That is, Satan is in some sense responsible for the deaths of Adam, Eve, and the rest of the human race. We don’t know when his first murder was, but clearly, he has no respect for life, and never has had any.

2. Lying

What Jesus majors on, though, and what I want to major on this morning, is the Devil’s identity as a liar. In the book of Revelation, we see Satan portrayed as a giant red dragon. In popular lore, the dragon is known as a fire-breathing animal — an obvious metaphor for the damage lies can

do. Jesus says a lot about the lies of the dragon. The dragon does not stand in the truth — meaning that he does not build his life on the truth. He is founded on chaos, on lies, on a foundation he made up himself. And inside there is no truth either. His mind is full of self-delusion and lies. In fact, whenever he speaks his own stuff comes pouring out of him. Lies are generated inside his being and emerge from his mouth.

B. The Dragon’s Fertility: Father of Lies

But perhaps the scariest of all the things Jesus says about Satan is that he is the father of lies. Now, we talk about the “father of the chicken sandwich” and “the father of embalming.” That means that these people were the first known individuals to assemble a chicken sandwich or to embalm a corpse according to the modern method. Well, then, when Jesus tells us that Satan is the father of lies, what does that mean? That he is the first known individual to utter an assertion contrary to what he knows to be the case. Before Satan, there were no lies in the world. But as the mightiest archangel before the throne of God, Satan told a lie. It was a massive lie, and so far as we know it was a lie to himself – the lie that he would be like the Most High God.

Ever since, the seed of the serpent have been lying. They have been telling lies to themselves and to others. The dragon is very fertile; he has a numerous seed of baby dragons, and there has always been enmity between them and the woman and her seed.

Jesus goes on to say some pretty harsh things about the seed of the serpent, the offspring or spawn of Satan. This should not surprise us, of course. The spawn of Satan were never going to be the world’s best people. But they are truly terrible individuals – and they are responsible for much of the world’s misinformation and lies. Yes, Christians can and do lie as well. But the seed of the serpent don’t regret their lies, or try to tell the truth. They delight in lying.

C. The Dragon’s Spawn

1. Nominal Believers, v. 31

In mentioning that these nominal Christians are not children of God but children of the Devil, Jesus is saying that they are not Christians at all. Yet John describes them in v. 31 as “those Jews who had believed in Him.” Thus, the best category in which to put these people is not regular Jews, nor Christians, but nominal Christians.

2. Those Who Want what Satan Wants, v. 44a

What does Jesus say about Satan’s spawn? First of all, He says that they want what Satan wants. They share the desires of their father. What does Satan want? He comes to steal, kill, and destroy, Jesus tells us elsewhere. He desires to usurp the place of God. He wants to sow chaos instead of creating order; he wants to negate all that God has done, undo the “very good” spoken over creation. He is motivated by hatred of God instead of love of God, need instead of bounty, fear instead of love.

The spawn of Satan, which is how God refers to unbelievers both here in John 8 and in Genesis 3, are filled with diabolical desires. They want the wrong things. That motivates them to lie.

3. Those Who Refuse to Believe Jesus’ Truth, v. 45

Indeed, Jesus adds, it motivates them to reject the truth when they hear it from outside. They don't believe Jesus because He speaks the truth. He doesn't say "even though I speak the truth," but "because I speak the truth." They reject Him because it is truth they hear coming out of His mouth.

II. The Truth: Jesus, John 8:45

Now, this worst-case-scenario or in-principle portrait of unbelievers is not the only thing to say about unbelievers. Satan's seed know many true things and can speak much truth. But Jesus says that in principle, in terms of which camp they live in, they are liars. They live in the Devil's territory where lies are valued, rather than in God's territory where truth is supreme.

A. Believe Jesus Because He Speaks Truth

At the highest level, we know that we ought to believe Jesus because He speaks the truth.

B. Resist Satan's Lies

And we ought to resist Satan's lies.

Now, I know you all know that and want to do that. But saying "Jesus is truth and the Devil is a liar" is no help at all in navigating the misinformation environment in which we walk every day.

III. Telling the Difference

So how do you tell the difference? Do you evaluate by fringe vs. mainstream, and decide that the *New York Times*, being the queen of the mainstream media, must be maximally true and that Infowars, being as fringe as it gets, must be maximally false — or vice versa? Some unfortunates have actually gone down that path.

But Jesus never said that His followers would definitely be fringe and Satan's mainstream. Fringe and mainstream do not correlate well to true and false. They only correlate to who has the loudest voice in a particular setting. And so, rather than just say in general that we need to believe Jesus and not believe Satan, I want to look at the key case study of Satanic lying in Genesis 3. There I think we will see some two major ways in which Satan's lies work, and how we can leverage these ways to overcome lies and find the truth.

A. How Satanic Lies Work

1. They May Directly Contradict the Truth, Gen. 3:4

This is the one we all know, understand, and hopefully are on the lookout for. God says "In the day that you eat of it, you shall surely die."

Satan says, "You shall not surely die."

This is a pretty straightforward case. It's easy to recognize a lie like this — a lie that simply states the truth but puts a "not" in front of it. The Devil, of course, is a master of this kind of thing. God says "Jesus is my Son" and the Devil "No He's not." God says "Don't commit adultery" and the Devil says "Actually, please do commit adultery."

Now, in terms of the misinformation we're exposed to from the world, some of this is easy. When the world says "Abortion rights are vital for a just society" we say "That's a Satanic lie. Actually, abortion rights are one of the most unjust things society can possibly do."

Folks, this level of misinformation is relatively easy to counter. If you know the truth, you will know right away when Satan and his seed are contradicting it.

Yet here's the thing: Simply contradicting the word of God still works to turn people away from the truth. It worked on Adam and Eve and it's worked on their descendants ever since.

So don't just say "Oh, there's no threat to me from direct contradiction of the truth." Yes, there absolutely is. But the threat is not that you will fail to recognize that it's a contradiction of the truth. Eve knew that the Devil was telling her something different than God had told her. The threat is that you will believe the lie instead of the truth. Motivated by our own desires for something to be true, you and I are at risk of believing even straightforward lies.

In our John 8 passage, Jesus talks about how to counter this attack. We'll get there in just a minute. But first, I want to talk about the much more subtle attack. Indeed, this next point is why I'm preaching this sermon to you. I expect you to know everything I've said thus far. To this point, this sermon has been review. But now comes the payoff, the thing you may not have realized.

2. They May Put the Truth into a False Context, Gen. 3:5-6, 22

As our way into this thing, I want you to compare two statements, one from Satan at the chapter's beginning and the other from God at its end. Satan tells Eve, "God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen 3:5). That's a direct contradiction of the truth, right?

Actually, no. Because listen to this, from the end of the chapter: "Then the LORD God said, 'Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he stretch out his hand, and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever' -- therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden, to cultivate the ground from which he was taken" (Gen 3:22-23).

Did you hear that? It was a lie that they would not surely die. That was a direct contradiction of the truth. But the Devil's second statement was not a direct contradiction of the truth. In fact, it is endorsed practically word-for-word by God Himself.

Now, how do we understand that reality? At one level, it is sufficient to say that every good lie has a lot of truth in it. Absolutely. But that does not help us to understand where the lie comes in. What was false about the statement that "God knows that in the day you eat it you will become like God, knowing good and evil"?

a) Keep the Facts, Change the Narrative, 3:5-6

The answer, my friends, is the context. The Devil put the truth about the fruit, that it would impart knowledge of good and evil, into a different narrative.

Now, in certain circles it's become popular to speak of controlling the narrative, changing the narrative, flipping the script, and other references to some kind of story. In general, these phrases point to the reality that the context in which information is imparted determines whether that information is true or false — whether the one imparting the information is a liar or a truth-teller.

Satan is a liar. He speaks the truth about the fruit at the factual level, but in his mouth the statement is still a lie. How?

Well, in the narrative as Moses tells it, God had placed a test in the garden. God wanted to see whether Adam and Eve would obey Him thoroughly and without question, whether His commands made perfect sense to them or not. In God's story, in other words, the words of the Serpent are a *temptation* and are something to be fought, resisted, and rejected. The story God wanted Adam and Eve to willingly star in was the story of triumph over the wiles of the Serpent, culminating in the termination of the test and promotion to a consummated and heightened form of life with Yahweh.

The Serpent changed the narrative. In fact, it was in changing the narrative that his lie consisted. He didn't change the facts regarding what the fruit would do — but he embedded them into a story in which God was a killjoy, deliberately crippling Adam and Eve, keeping them from the full enjoyment of this world and its contents. In Satan's telling, God knew something about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He knew that it would be an unparalleled blessing to our first parents, and so He deliberately attempted to keep them from it. "God knows this, you don't know it, and so you ought to act on the knowledge that God has withheld from you because He is so mean and skullduggerous."

Do you see how that worked? The lie is found not in the facts communicated, but in the context in which they are placed.

Let me see if I can give a couple of other examples from everyday life. Let's say that at the office Christmas party you meet your boss and his wife. A few weeks later, you run to a sandwich shop near the office for lunch. There, you see the boss having a passionate conversation with an extremely good-looking woman. You try not to be a suspicious type, but a few comments you've picked up around the workplace have led you to rate your boss's chastity a little lower than you would like. Later that day, though, you find out that the woman was not his latest fling, but was actually his new boss, with whom he was having a disagreement over a business lunch.

The facts didn't change. You saw what you saw. But the narrative in which they were embedded changed. You at first created a narrative in which your lecherous boss was having an affair; corrected, you found out that he was being told that the department would do things differently from now on.

What matters, in other words, is what story is being told. Who are the characters? How should their actions and words be interpreted? Is the serpent an anonymous philanthropist with a message of liberation through the knowledge of good and evil? Or is he actually a psychopath with a taste for chaos and death who is encouraging you to eat the razor, to ingest the fentanyl, to do something totally self-destructive and evil?

So brothers and sisters, in order to be on the lookout for Satan's lies, I urge you to be aware of the narrative context of any facts you receive. That includes the plot, the setting, and especially the characters. Obviously information from the Serpent should not be accorded the same treatment as information from God, even if it is in important ways the same information.

b) Keep the Narrative, Change the Metanarrative

However, there is another facet of these Satanic lies that we need to know. Again, to review, one kind of lie is simply to directly contradict the facts. A second kind is to keep the facts but change the narrative in which they're embedded, typically by impugning the character of God or of the righteous more generally. But a third kind is to use true facts, and even a true story, but embed it within an even larger false story.

That even larger false story is what scholars have taken to calling "the metanarrative." Essentially, this is the same move as the previous one. But it is even sneakier because it changes not the narrow context, but the wider or even the widest context.

Let me give an example. We all agree that 28.6 opioid deaths per 100,000 people is horrible. That was US death rate in 2020 from those drugs. Meanwhile, Sweden's opioid death rate in 2020 was about 12 per 100,000. We American Christians like to think that opioid deaths are largely the fault of our godless society. No doubt they are. But Sweden's society is even more godless than ours, yet has a lower opioid death rate. This kind of information leads people to say that the widest context, world history summarized as Creation, Fall, Redemption, Consummation, is of no value in understanding the world today. You can say as much as you like that we are simply stuck in the "Fall" part of the story, but how exactly does that help anyone move toward better outcomes here and now? In other words, the argument goes, seeing this world as a fallen place that can ultimately be saved only by God's intervention in Jesus Christ is counterproductive. It leads us to stop doing what we can because we shift the burden of responsibility onto God.

This line of thinking ultimately ends with the conclusion that the Christian faith, and the transcendent more generally, is irrelevant to life in this world and thus can safely be dispensed with. Anything that can't be captured by sociology, economics, and political science can and should be ignored as having no real impact on this life. And as for the life to come, what do we know about that? As Confucius reportedly said when asked about the afterlife, "Not yet know life; how then know death?"

Brothers and sisters, do you see how the narrative has been changed in this instance? We have essentially declared the transcendent off-limits. It is not a fit subject for human inquiry or belief. Rather than accusing God of character flaws, as Satan did in his successful first lie to humans, this move quietly shelves Him.

In other words, brothers and sisters, the entire secular project with its insistence that this world be interpreted exclusively in immanentistic terms, with morality replaced by psychology and theology replaced by democratic norms and values, is a Satanic lie. The lie is not that there is an immanent, this-worldly (or "secular") realm; the lie is that the immanent realm is the sum total of reality. I'm not saying that the immanent doesn't exist; I'm saying that it doesn't exist cut off from the transcendent.

In other words, Satan can present accurate information about global climate, or about the character and beliefs of politicians, or even accurate information about Christian theology. So long as he presents it within an entirely secular framework, however, that sees “religious studies” as the history of what people have said about God, or “conversion” as psychological phenomenon common to many cultures and religions, or even talk about the “Devil” as merely a symbolic name for the negative tendencies of certain individuals or societies, the information has effectively become a lie.

This is not to claim that Christians can have exhaustive knowledge of how the knowledge of God relates to particular social problems. We Christians invented the secular, actually, because of insistence on the faithfulness, order, and regularity of God. Non-Christian cultures have continued to mix religion into daily life and politics because the secular realm is a Christian concept. But when the Devil is able to change the metanarrative, discarding creation, fall, redemption, and consummation as historical categories, then people reading the Bible are no longer a threat to him.

So how do we resist the Devil’s lies?

B. How the Christian Can Resist Satanic Lies, John 8:31-32

1. Get to Know the Truth

The obvious answer here is that first of all you have to know the truth. Jesus insisted on that when talking to the nominal Christians who were acting like the spawn of Satan because they actually were the spawn of Satan. How do you know the truth?

a) Abide in God’s Word

Jesus says first of all that we need to abide in His word. To “abide” means to remain somewhere. You have to hang out in the word of God. What does that mean? It means that you need to know what the word says. You need to constantly be filling your mind and heart with God’s word. You need to read the Bible, listen to the Bible, talk about the Bible, understand the Bible, study the Bible. Imagine abiding in *The Lord of the Rings*. What would that mean? It would mean immersing yourself in Tolkien’s world every day, never leaving Middle-Earth. When someone does that with a work of fantasy, to the point where he learns Elvish and wears a Bilbo Baggins costume all day long, we call that strange. You need to come out of Middle-Earth and get your head into the real world, we would say.

But the opposite is true of abiding in the word of Jesus Christ. There, it is the *New York Times* and the *Epoch Times* that are the fantasy world, at least in part. They may have a lot of true things to say. But the person who is genuinely committed to the real world is the person whose head is in the Bible. I’m not saying that you should learn Hebrew and dress like the prophet Elijah. But I am saying that the Biblical history, precepts, and narrative should be the shaping influence on your mind. You should be able to tell me about anything “What does God think of this?” faster than you can tell me “What does the Democratic Party think of this?” or “What does the faculty of Harvard think of this?”

b) Be True Disciples

Jesus adds that if we abide in His word, then we are true disciples. This is key. What is a disciple? Jesus defines it in the Great Commission as someone who is taught to obey everything He commanded. The people whose head is in the Bible all the time, who have been taught to obey Jesus across the board, in all of life — these people are the true disciples.

And it is these people to whom He utters the promise that they will know the truth.

How do you combat misinformation? By learning and obeying God's word. Not by carefully finding accurate news sources. Though that may be important, it is far from being the most important way to stand against misinformation. The most important thing, it turns out, is to stick to the word of God and keep the commandments of God. Then you will know the truth. Jesus doesn't say that you will know all scientific, mathematical, or historical truth. But He does say that you will know enough truth to live well. You will know enough truth to notice when the serpent directly contradicts the truth.

2. Get to Know the Narrative of God's Character and how He is Working Right Now

But the second thing you need to know is not just the truth that God said don't eat the fruit. You need to know the further truth that God is not out to get you. Essentially, the Serpent has been telling various versions of the same lie that he tried on Eve ever since. He tells us that God is not good, that God is a killjoy, that in this story that's being told, God is the primary threat rather than the ultimate defense.

How do you know whether a particular narrative is Satanic? It all comes down to whether God is the villain in the tale.

Yes, that's the ultimate test for whether the facts have been kept while the narrative has been switched out. Ask yourself, "Who is the villain in this piece?" If it's God, then you know the story is Satanic. By the same token, you also need to ask who the hero is. Typically, in a misinformation story (aka a *lie*), "humanity," "the universe," "the system," or some other euphemism for Providence will be the villain, and the hero will be you and the other creative souls like you who dare to stand up against the system, the universe, the crowd, etc. Satan challenged Eve to stand up and grab for her freedom. Challenge the villainous deity who has trampled you and kept you from this wonderful knowledge of good and evil!

So in the second level of misinformation, God, or something obviously from God such as an anti-abortion law, gets cast in the role of villain. The hero in that level of the narrative becomes the person who is willing to stand up against God's villainy and assert human freedom for good and evil over against God's demand that we stick to the good.

3. Get to Know the Metanarrative of Creation, Fall, Redemption, Consummation

But the third level of misinformation goes beyond casting God as the villain and instead tells a story that appears to contain no reference at all to God. Now, instead of being the antagonist, He has become simply irrelevant. Creation, fall, redemption, and consummation is no longer the metanarrative. Instead, in the metanarrative surrounding this level of misinformation, humanity

just is, and saving it just needs to happen. God will not save us. God will not destroy us. Instead, we will save or destroy ourselves.

Well, any story that posits that humanity is destroying the earth and that we have to save it is a misinformation story. How can you tell without going out and checking? Just look at the structure. In this third level of Satanic misinformation, humanity in general almost always fills both roles — hero and villain alike. People are destroying the world; people have to save the world.

How do you stand against this? By saying “Only God can save the world, and only God can destroy the world. We are fallen, but He will not let us destroy ourselves.” Practically speaking, that means that on many things we punt to Providence. We can’t control North Korea or many other places. But we can put our trust in God.

You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. Know God, know His word, obey Him, and pay attention to the casting: Who is the villain? Who is the Savior? If the villain is God, and the Savior is not Jesus, you’re reading misinformation. Amen.