

ONE

HOLLOW AND DECEPTIVE PHILOSOPHIES

By Tom Ascol

Sometimes I wonder how anybody makes it to heaven. Think about all the warnings the Bible gives to those who are walking with God through this world. We are constantly being opposed by that unholy trinity of the world, the flesh, and the devil, which means we have enemies around us, within us and above us.

In both Old and New Testaments, the Lord has seen fit to issue repeated warnings to His people to be on their guard against dangers that surround them at every step of their journey to the Celestial City. We are repeatedly warned about the deceitfulness of our own hearts, the strategies of the devil, and the enticements of the world.

In the Old Testament false prophets were regularly a threat to God's people. Moses gives specific instructions to resist false prophets and "worthless fellows" who will try to lead the people astray in the land of promise (Deuteronomy 13:12-13).

Jeremiah 9:6 says such false teachers heap “oppression upon oppression, and deceit upon deceit,” and they refuse to know the Lord. In Jeremiah 23:16 the Lord says, “Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord.” Jesus plainly warned about such people in Matthew 7:15, “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”

Psalms and Proverbs are filled with calls to be on our guard against those who would lead us away from God, especially when they come to us with smooth talk and flattering words (Proverbs 26:23-26; Psalm 55:21ff).

Paul warns about such smooth talkers in Romans 16:17-18, where he writes, “I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive.”

Peter says that the devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour, so we must be sober-minded and watchful (1 Peter 5:8). He admonishes us in 2 Peter 3:17, to “take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability.”

In one of the most touching scenes in all of the Bible Luke records Paul’s final words to the elders of Ephesus in Acts 20:28-30. He told them: “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.”

Later, in the last letter we have from him, just a few months before he died, he tells Timothy in 2 Timothy 4 to preach the Word. Then he tells him why that is so important in vv. 3-4, “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will

accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.”

I could multiply such passages as these and you are probably as familiar with them as I am. But as we reflect just on these that I have noted—the very words of God to us—doesn’t it highlight just how serious the danger is that confronts us? It is true—the world is filled with devils and they *do* threaten to undo us.

One of the reasons that I love Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* is because he so graphically and helpfully depicts the life of a Christian as a dangerous journey. Yet, I fear, that we tend not to think of the Christian life that way today. We much prefer to think that we are safe; we are OK; that we really don’t have much to fear about our spiritual lives and therefore don’t really need to beware—to be careful.

Such complacency has set up modern evangelicals to be played. What I mean is that we are in the midst of a very subtle, intentional, and deadly maneuver by the devil that is designed to lead pastors, evangelical leaders and churches away from allegiance to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the authority and sufficiency of His Word.

Theologian Kevin Vanhoozer has wisely noted that pastors and churches today must particularly brace ourselves for a particular kind of spiritual warfare, “For,” he says, “we wrestle not against flesh and blood, matters in motion, but against isms, against the powers that seek to name, and control, reality.”¹

That is precisely what I see going on today. There are godless ideologies that have spread throughout Western civilization in recent decades with a vengeance and with their agenda to “name and control” reality. In other words, they are telling us what we are supposed to see; naming it and defining it for us, and then demanding that we reorder our lives on the basis of this new, supposed reality.

1. Melvin Tinker. *That Hideous Strength: How the West Was Lost* (Welwyn Garden City, UK: Evangelical Press), 2018, 33.

In recent years many of these ideologies have been smuggled into many evangelical churches and organizations through the Trojan Horse of what is commonly called, “social justice.” In the name of racial reconciliation, honoring women and showing love and respect for the sexually confused, evangelicals have welcomed in ways of thinking that undermine the very teachings of God’s Word that actually do promote true love and true justice through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The devil has been very effective in confusing people about what constitutes real justice and what actually working for justice entails. We are being played precisely at this point. God is the only true source of justice. He is the righteous One who has created this world and He has defined justice for us in His Word. Yet, in the name of seeking justice many evangelicals are being told that we must see the world and work for certain outcomes on the basis of ideas and ideologies that are contrary to Scripture.

We are being played, manipulated, maneuvered, and deceived. Proponents of hollow and deceptive philosophies are telling us what we must see, think and do if we are to be faithful in pursuing justice in the church and the world.

PAUL’S WARNING TO THE COLOSSIANS

In Colossians 2:8 Paul specifically warns us not to allow anyone to deceive us in this way. I want to look at that verse in this chapter in order to understand what is going on and what we must do about it.

In the letter of Colossians Paul begins with an introductory expression of thanksgiving and prayer for the church. He then launches into a profound explanation of the supremacy of Christ in 1:15. Beginning in 1:24 he describes how that awareness of Christ informs his own ministry as an apostle and minister of the gospel. Our text is found in the middle of that description. Paul gives an admonition in vv. 6-7; then a warning in v. 8; followed by reasons to heed the warning in vv. 9-10.

Colossians 2:6–10 (ESV) — Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.

I like the way that JB Lightfoot renders v. 8. He puts it like this:

Be on your guard; do not suffer yourselves to fall prey to certain people who would lead you captive by a hollow and deceitful system, which they call philosophy. They substitute the traditions of men for the truth of God. They enforce an elementary discipline of mundane ordinances fit only for children. Theirs is not the gospel of Christ.²

In this text Paul calls on us to be so grounded in Jesus Christ that no one can take you captive with hollow and deceptive philosophies. Paul sticks with his theme of the greatness and sufficiency of Christ as he admonishes us in vv. 6–7 “walk in Christ.” Just as we received Christ by faith—taking Him at His Word—so we are to live in Him, being rooted, built up, and established in the faith just as we have been taught the faith from the beginning of our relationship with Christ.

In v. 8, he warns us not to be taken captive by hollow and deceptive philosophies which are not according to Christ. Then in vv. 9–10 he buttresses his argument by reminding us that in Christ the whole fullness of deity dwells and we have been filled in Him. In other words, why in the world would you let anyone lead you astray from the simplicity and fullness that is in Jesus!

Let’s look at v. 8 more closely: “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according

2. Joseph Barber Lightfoot. *Colossians and Philemon*, Crossway Classic Commentaries (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1997), 89–90.

to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.”

This is the goal of our spiritual enemies. They want to take us captive. Paul uses a very rare word, used only here in the Bible and rarely anywhere else. It means to plunder; to take the spoils that come from being victorious in battle. This term indicates that Paul sees the threat as spiritual warfare. He says we must not allow this to happen: “See to it!” “Watch!” “Be on guard!”

This is what a Lieutenant says to his platoon as they move through enemy territory. Paul says that we must take care that *no one* takes us captive. He may have had specific people in mind who were propagating dangerous ideas in Colossae. But we must remember that such teachers spread deceptive philosophies as instruments of the devil, whether wittingly or unwittingly. And the devil’s desire is always to take people captive to do his will (2 Timothy 2:24-26). Paul says: Do not let this happen! Be on your guard.

So the goal of our spiritual enemies is to take us captive. But what methods do they employ? The methods of our spiritual enemies are philosophy and empty deceit. Now this is not a prohibition of all philosophy. While this is the only time Paul uses the word, we should not understand Paul to be rejecting philosophy in general. What he has in mind is a system of teaching used by the enemy to capture God’s people. He is saying there are ideas at play, intellectual arguments, which will lead people astray from the living God. Moreover, he is pointing out the problem with a specific kind of philosophy. One that is empty deceit.

The description is tightly woven. All three words are qualified by one definite article. There is one idea here. That is why I take Paul to refer to any hollow and deceptive philosophy. It is a way of thinking that is spiritually bankrupt. It is a way of thinking that is deceptive—that is, it sounds impressive and helpful. But in reality, it is deadly. Three sources of this hollow, deceptive philosophy are identified. Each one is introduced by the same preposition: “according to.”

First, this hollow, deceptive philosophy is according to human tradition. Now again Paul is not putting down all tradition. He speaks of tradition favorably in 2 Thessalonians 2:15. The problem is that it is merely