

The Deceiver and the Deceived

by Ward Fenley

Some claims are made (and I have made this claim at times as well) that Elijah mocking the prophets of Baal, Christ calling the Pharisees "brood of vipers," "white-washed graves filled with dead mens' bones," and Paul wishing the Judaizers would castrate themselves, are all justifications for us to do the same to those who fall into the same category. In the one instance we have a real prophet confronting pagans; in Christ's circumstance, He was dealing with those who outright denied Him (made no claim to believing Him), not to mention He was not just a prophet, He was *the* Prophet, and of course almighty God; and again, in Paul's instance he too was a prophet, inspired Apostle, and evangelist, all of which were specifically given to him by God to authoritatively name blasphemers, and pseudo-Christians. Does Christ give us that right in the 21st century? Some people do feel (and I have felt this at times) like we have the same obligations as those men of faith in ancient times.

A concern with that view arises when it is applied to professing believers in Jesus Christ and His shed blood. Obviously there are the troubling issues of doctrines that Paul claims purport "another Jesus" and "another gospel." And of course Paul's context was usually Christianity trying to tie itself with circumcision and works-righteousness. Paul described certain false teachers as transforming themselves into angels of light and ministers of righteousness. He said that they preached another Jesus. The whole context of the New Testament has this as the primary problem: that is, Christians had to deal with those who crept in among them preaching Jesus plus circumcision. The audience was primarily Jewish Christians who were still wondering about the significance of circumcision and were continually confronted by people who had "crept in privily" to spy out the Christians' liberty in Christ. They had malicious intent, and there was certainly a "falling away" that took place in the first century. Some translations read, "apostasy." Those were professing Christians who had bought into the lie of those who crept in. Galatians clearly teaches that there were at least two groups: those who crept in to spy, and those who might have given heed to the message of the spies:

Galatians 2:3-5 But not even Titus who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised: (4) and that because of the false brethren privily brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage: (5) to whom we gave place in the way of subjection, no, not for an hour; that the truth of the gospel might continue with you.

This concept is hard for us to comprehend. Were there really people who deliberately crept in to actually bring those who were gullible into bondage? Jude seems to think so:

Jude 1:4 For there are certain men crept in privily, even they who were of old written of beforehand unto this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

In an evangelically Christianized culture this is hard to grasp, not just theologically but practically as well. Could some be so bold? Certainly in Paul and Jude's day it was so. Obviously the New Testament writers believed it and warned against it. It

was a problem and it was infecting many who were claiming to be a part of the body of Christ. Acts seems to speak plainly of this intentionally deceptive group of Pharisees:

Acts 15:1-5 And certain men came down from Judaea and taught the brethren, saying, Except ye be circumcised after the custom of Moses, ye cannot be saved. (2) And when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and questioning with them, the brethren appointed that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question. (3) They therefore, being brought on their way by the church, passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles: and they caused great joy unto all the brethren. (4) And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church and the apostles and the elders, and they rehearsed all things that God had done with them. (5) But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees who believed, saying, It is needful to circumcise them, and to charge them to keep the law of Moses.

It is astonishing to think that a sect would actually have it in their hearts to deliberately mislead God's people, so much so that they would preach Jesus, albeit "another Jesus":

2 Corinthians 11:4-15 For if he that cometh preacheth another Jesus, whom we did not preach, or if ye receive a different spirit, which ye did not receive, or a different gospel, which ye did not accept, ye do well to bear with him. (5) For I reckon that I am not a whit behind the very chiefest apostles. (6) But though I be rude in speech, yet am I not in knowledge; nay, in every way have we made this manifest unto you in all things. (7) Or did I commit a sin in abasing myself that ye might be exalted, because I preached to you the gospel of God for nought? (8) I robbed other churches, taking wages of them that I might minister unto you; (9) and when I was present with you and was in want, I was not a burden on any man; for the brethren, when they came from Macedonia, supplied the measure of my want; and in everything I kept myself from being burdensome unto you, and so will I keep myself. (10) As the truth of Christ is in me, no man shall stop me of this glorying in the regions of Achaia. (11) Wherefore? because I love you not? God knoweth. (12) But what I do, that I will do, that I may cut off occasion from them that desire an occasion; that wherein they glory, they may be found even as we. (13) For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, fashioning themselves into apostles of Christ. (14) And no marvel; for even Satan fashioneth himself into an angel of light. (15) It is no great thing therefore if his ministers also fashion themselves as ministers of righteousness, whose end shall be according to their works.

Again, there were two types of people addressed: there were those who were actually pretending to be apostles of Jesus Christ; and there were those who may "bear with it." The Gospel Paul taught was clear: Christ and Him crucified plus nothing. The first attack on Paul's Gospel in history was these false apostles. They were the first ones to introduce Christ and Him crucified plus works in order to obtain eternal life. They were Pharisees pretending to be Christians. Their goal was to intentionally deceive Christians by adding a variable into the Christian message: Christ and Him crucified *plus works* = salvation. Had they simply preached their doctrine of justification by works without Christ, that would have been obvious. But

instead, to make it palatable, they added *Jesus* into their message. This seems so foreign to us because we are used to people who actually believe that the message of the Gospel is Christ and Him crucified plus works. We find it difficult to fathom that the Pharisees deliberately snuck in to deceive God's people and bring them back into bondage:

Acts 15:10-11 Now therefore why make ye trial of God, that ye should put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? (11) But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in like manner as they.

The primary subject of concern throughout the Gospels and the epistles is the subject of self-righteousness. The message the Pharisees brought to the church was Christ plus works. The Pharisees didn't want Christ at all. But in order to gradually dissuade believers in Christ away from Christ, they kept Christ in the message. Therefore, to those whose faith was not grounded in Christ, their deceptive message was appealing. The Pharisees did not actually believe what they were preaching. They despised Christ altogether. But they would have been immediately driven out had they brought in Moses and Moses alone.

Unfortunately, the deliberate lie the Pharisees brought to the local church took root and has remained strong even to this day. Professing Christendom is laced with a Christ-plus-law Gospel. They don't realize that what they believe was initially brought into the local church as a deliberate deception. Sadly, many who have embraced the true Gospel of Jesus Christ and Him crucified plus *nothing* have come against those who actually believe the lie as if they were intentionally deceptive instead of coming against the unintentionally deceived. Is it possible that we have been unnecessarily harsh with those who have believed a lie and treated them as if they were intentionally lying? It seems there is a difference by the way Paul speaks:

2 Corinthians 11:2-4 For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. (3) But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. (4) For if he that cometh preacheth another Jesus, whom we have not preached, or if ye receive another spirit, which ye have not received, or another gospel, which ye have not accepted, ye might well bear with him.

Paul here treats them tenderly. He is concerned that they could become corrupted from the simplicity in Christ. But toward those who are intentionally deceptive, Paul could not use stronger language:

Galatians 5:11-12 And I, brethren, if I yet preach circumcision, why do I yet suffer persecution? then is the offence of the cross ceased. (12) I would they were even cut off which trouble you.

Jude describes those same deceivers:

Jude 1:4-19 For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into

lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ. (5) I will therefore put you in remembrance, though ye once knew this, how that the Lord, having saved the people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed them that believed not. (6) And the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, he hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day. (7) Even as Sodom and Gomorrhah, and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire. (8) Likewise also these filthy dreamers defile the flesh, despise dominion, and speak evil of dignities. (9) Yet Michael the archangel, when contending with the devil he disputed about the body of Moses, durst not bring against him a railing accusation, but said, The Lord rebuke thee. (10) But these speak evil of those things which they know not: but what they know naturally, as brute beasts, in those things they corrupt themselves. (11) Woe unto them! for they have gone in the way of Cain, and ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward, and perished in the gainsaying of Core. (12) These are spots in your feasts of charity, when they feast with you, feeding themselves without fear: clouds they are without water, carried about of winds; trees whose fruit withereth, without fruit, twice dead, plucked up by the roots; (13) Raging waves of the sea, foaming out their own shame; wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever. (14) And Enoch also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these, saying, Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints, (15) To execute judgment upon all, and to convince all that are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodly committed, and of all their hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against him. (16) These are murmurers, complainers, walking after their own lusts; and their mouth speaketh great swelling words, having men's persons in admiration because of advantage. (17) But, beloved, remember ye the words which were spoken before of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ; (18) How that they told you there should be mockers in the last time, who should walk after their own ungodly lusts. (19) These be they who separate themselves, sensual, having not the Spirit.

These did not believe in Christ at all. Their goal was calculated. Their objective: to gradually move believers out of faith, completely away from Christ, and back into apostate Judaism.

We have been quick to ascribe the strong words of Jude and Paul toward intentional deceivers to those who are simply deceived. This is not to say that the deceived are not in unbelief. Christ plus works profits nothing:

Galatians 5:1-2 Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage. (2) Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing.

Paul was honest with the Galatians. He let them know the if their faith was in Christ and works, then Christ profited them nothing. But he did not use the strong language he and Jude used to describe the deceptive Pharisees. It is imperative as we consider the effectiveness of our communication that we understand these important elements before we verbally stone people. First, the New Testament writers were inspired and knew that these deceivers had crept into the local church. But the only place in the New Testament the apostles actually confront these men is

in Acts when it first happened. How did the apostles know this? They knew this because the apostles were the first to preach the Gospel. The deceiving Pharisees came from Judea and the apostles knew that these Jews were false prophets:

Matthew 7:15 Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.

Outwardly they looked like true believers in Jesus Christ but they were still those Jesus addressed as offspring of snakes. As we have seen, they are called false apostles, false brethren, and false prophets. Knowing their motives, their intentional deceit, and their craftiness in literally spying on God's people, it is understandable why the apostles were firm with them. It is entirely inappropriate, however, when we, who are not inspired apostles, use the harsh language the apostles used toward the Pharisees to confront those who are actually deceived. Granted, there are those who are purposely deceiving people for various reasons, using the name of Jesus for financial gain, or power. There may even be some like the Pharisees, deliberately trying to bring Christians into apostate Judaism. But do we have the insight into their hearts to make the judgments the inspired apostles made? If we answer that question honestly, then we have to conclude that we do not have the right to use such harsh language unless we know for certain that they are maliciously deceiving people with another Jesus and another Gospel. In fact, it would be a rare occasion if we were to find out someone was intentionally trying to deceive God's people. There are examples of "televangelists" using the name of Jesus for their own gain being exposed, but again, these are rare occasions.

As we consider those who are genuinely deceived, we must remember the words of the late Dr. Walter Martin: "It is possible to be sincere, but sincerely wrong." We must not assume the deceived are insincere. We may at times *feel* they are. But this is a feeling. There may even be times we *know* they are. Sometimes we convince ourselves that we *know* something about someone's inner intentions. Sometimes we may believe a person's apology is insincere, and we demand another one. It may be true that the apology is insincere, but it is not our place to assume evil. It is our place, however, to assume that what a person is teaching is sincere even though it is wrong. If that is the case, then we treat them as Paul commands: "speak the truth in love." And as Peter commands: "Be ready to give an answer...with meekness and fear." We must ask God for wisdom, discernment, and most importantly love and tenderness when dealing with those who are sincerely believing "another Jesus." It is our love that will make the truth we speak more attractive.