

BE CAREFUL THAT YOU ARE NOT DECEIVED!

1. By a False Foundation for Your Life

- trusting in wealth and prosperity - Job 15:31
- measuring your life by the world's standards - 1 Corinthians 3:18

... By a False Foundation for Your Life

It's easy to get distracted, to take our eyes off Jesus and to focus on people or possessions.

The passage in Job makes reference to those who focus their attention on riches and possessions. You will need to read the context, since this specific verse points only to the "dead end" of this focus. The entire passage emphasizes the uselessness of trusting in what is ultimately "worthless" - all the prosperity and wealth the world has to offer. The wicked - those who trust material blessings, rather than the Giver of those blessings - will eventually perish, with no recourse.

The world has many "standards" for measuring one's life - and it claims that these standards of measurement are the expression of "wisdom." This "worldly wisdom" (compare to James 3:14-16) is nothing more than a counterfeit, for it sees reality upside-down: It looks at God's wisdom - which is wiser than the *best* of man's wisdom - and calls it "foolishness"! (Compare to 1 Corinthians 1:18+.)

There are many ways that we can unknowingly adopt the world's standards of "wisdom" (which is actually *false* wisdom). This specific passage in 1 Corinthians focuses on the so-called "wisdom" of following human leaders. On the surface, this seems like a good thing to do, especially since the leaders they were following were good ones. The "fatal error" occurred because this focus on human leaders caused them to take their eyes off God - the one who should have been their primary leader. They needed to follow the example of the Bereans, who checked everything - even the words of good leaders - by comparing what the leaders said to what the Scriptures say (Acts 17:11).

The cure for this type of deception is found in Hebrews 12:2. We must focus our attention on Jesus. The specific context of this passage has to do with enduring trials and persecution. Deception may not be an easily-recognized trial, when compared to some of the trials the Hebrews were enduring. But it is a trial nonetheless, and needs to be combated the same way as the more-visible types of trials and persecution.

2. By a False Relationship with God

- false teachings - Luke 21:8; Colossians 2:4; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3
- false miracles, signs and wonders - 2 Thessalonians 2:9-10 (see also Matthew 7:21-23)
- listening to the Word, but not doing what it says - James 1:22-27

... By a False Relationship with God

The word is "religion." It's easy to let "religion" overtake one's relationship with Jesus. Yet it's not "religion" that Jesus wants, but love and obedience! Some of the most religious people in the world have had the least obedience to God, and the least love for God and people.

The religious leaders of Jesus' day were very religious. They practiced all kinds of ceremonies and rituals. They fasted and prayed, and everyone knew that they lived the best of religious lives. Yet Jesus reserved some of his harshest rebukes for such people (Matthew 23). They neglected love and obedience - things that God considers *much more important* than religious activities (Matthew 23:23-28, for example). Jesus warned the crowds that their righteousness

would have to be *greater* than the righteousness of such people, or they would *never* have a part in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:20). (This surprised the people, who held these leaders in high-esteem.)

Here is a selection of Old Testament passages which have the same focus:

1 Samuel 15:22 - Obedience is more important than religious activities. (In the Old Testament, sacrifices had a significant role in the religious activities of the people.)

Mica 6:6-8 - God wants justice, mercy and humility, more than anything else.

Isaiah 1:13-14 - God was sick and weary of their religious activities. Read the context, to find out why.

Psalms 51:16-17 - "Sacrifices" of the heart (such as humility) are more pleasing to God, than are animal sacrifices. If the right heart attitude isn't present, the "religious rituals" (such as animal sacrifices) become quite offensive to him.

Jeremiah 7:22-23 - God's first commands, when he brought Israel out of Egypt, were regarding obedience, rather than sacrifices. This is what was most important to him. The people, however, chose the sacrifices (and other religious activities), and ignored the obedience.

Isaiah 58 - Why didn't God pay attention to their religious activities, such as fasting? Because he wanted a "fasting" that originated in the *heart*, and resulted in a change in their conduct.

Such problems didn't exist only in Jesus' day and in the days of the Old Testament. The apostle Paul warns us that in the "last days," there would still be people (and increasingly so), who would act "spiritual" (or godly), yet have lives that denied the life-changing effect (power) of *genuine* godliness - 2 Timothy 3:1-5.

Such people won't necessarily stop with merely *imitating* godliness. Often they will go as far as to oppose and attack those who truly desire to obey God. This is because counterfeits often hate what is genuine.

Jesus warned his disciples about people who would try to kill them: Such people would think that killing them was doing a favor for God (John 16:1-4)! The apostle Paul is a good example of this. He was very religious (Philippians 3:4-6) and at the same time zealously persecuted (and even helped put to death) Christians (Acts 7:54-8:1; 22:3-5)! Of course, he changed his ways, once Jesus saved him.

Ultimately, we must remember that people - even religious people - are slaves to sin. It is only when a person submits to God - to the teachings of Jesus - that he can become free from this slavery. The cure for this type of deception can be found in John 8:31-32.

3. By a False Perception of Self

- thinking you are better than others - Galatians 6:3-5
- claiming to be without sin - 1 John 1:8
- thinking that the sins of close acquaintances will have no affect on you - 1 Corinthians 15:33

... By a False Perception of Self

We have a tendency to be filled with thoughts of self-importance and superiority over others. It comes so natural that we often don't even realize that we are doing it! For instance, we may think we deserve something, and not even notice that it means depriving that "something" from others. We may be trying to get other people to focus their attention on *us*, or to do things for *us*, at a time when our desire should be focused on building *them* up. On the other hand, if we don't get what we think we deserve, we sometimes have a tendency to be filled with self-pity or something similar.

This attitude does not restrict itself to our interaction with *people*; we can also have it when we interact with *God*. How often do we complain, or think that we *deserve* better circumstances than we have? How often do we try to get *God* to do things *our* way, rather than focusing our attention on *us* learning to do things *God's* way?

Self-exaltation can be expressed by what we *don't do*. Every time we *don't* express love for God and neighbor (and we have the opportunity to do so), we are exalting ourselves above *both* God and neighbor. On the other hand, it can even be present when we *do* accomplish good things - such as when we are eager to help others when *they* need it, yet are too proud to accept help, when *we ourselves* need it.

Another sin related to this false perception of "self" is the tendency we sometimes have, to overestimate our own spiritual and moral strength, especially when it has to do with sin and temptation. How often do we act as though we are immune to the types of failures that frequently beset others? How often do we consider ourselves to be strong and others weak? How often do we focus on other's failures, and downplay our own? [This tendency may also be related to a false perception of *sin*. (See the next section.) Sometimes a person who thinks he is better or stronger fails to recognize the seriousness of his own sins.]

How can we combat this potential deception? We need to remember that *everyone* who exalts or lifts-up himself will eventually be lowered or humbled by God (Matthew 23:12). We need to focus on this truth, and be willing to admit our weaknesses, rather than covering them up. We should be like the apostle Paul, who was willing to be *truthful* about his strength - admitting that it actually came from God, and was *not* inherently a part of his own nature. If we are tempted to think that we can accomplish great and mighty things on our own, we ought to spend more time thinking about what Psalm 131 says. We are *not* "super heroes."

4. By a False Perception of Sin

- blaming God for your temptations (especially when you choose to give-in to them) - James 1:13-17
- thinking you can have a sinful lifestyle and still inherit the kingdom of God - 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; Ephesians 5:3-6
- thinking you can sin and *not* reap horrible consequences - Galatians 6:7-8

... By a False Perception of Sin

All sin is horrible, but we often tend to think that some sins are "not that bad." We tend to play with sin, to "flirt" with it, and then expect to *not* be hurt or affected by it. We ignore Jesus' warning that, "by your fruit you will be recognized." Sometimes we even "redefine" sin, so as to make it look more acceptable.

When we are caught sinning, we tend to make excuses or shift the blame to others. Ultimately, our intention is to *not* accept the responsibility for our actions. If we trace our excuses to their ultimate conclusion, we are actually blaming God, as did Adam, when he claimed that it was "the woman *you [God] gave me,*" who caused him to sin (Genesis 3:12).

Interestingly, when someone else sins against us, we normally want "justice." But when we sin against them, we act as though it's not as important an issue. God, on the other hand, doesn't show favoritism (Romans 2:11).

There are many ways that we can be deceived or tricked by sin. We need to learn that sin is deceitful, and can trap us, without us ever knowing it. When we go on sinning, sin changes our perceptions; and we may even lose the awareness that it *is* sin. It also lowers our resistance to further sin. Because of this, many people get trapped in sins they never dreamed they would get into. Sin conquers a soul, one imperceptible step at a time.

We need to remember that sin goes beyond merely a list of bad actions. Sin starts in the heart and is part of our nature. Sinful actions and attitudes are merely an expression of the heart and its values. Because of this, the heart is where changes must begin.

A good place to begin is to admit the truth about ourselves. Start with the verse, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13). We can also say, as did King David, after he sinned, "create in me a clean heart and renew a right spirit within me" (Psalm 51:10). We can also explore the Scriptures, to learn what *God* values... and make those things the foundation for *our* values.

QUESTIONS for Self-Reflection

For each type of deception mentioned above, ask yourself the following questions:

What are some of the ways a person can become deceived, in this specific matter? (Some ways are obvious, but we should also focus on the ways that are *less* obvious - ways it may be easier for us to become deceived without realizing it.)

What is the perspective (or action) of the person who is *not* deceived? How will he respond differently from the deceived person?

How do *you* compare to the deceived and the undeceived persons?

- If you have been deceived, how must you change your perspective (or actions)?
- If you have *not* been deceived, what are some safeguards you can have, to make sure it won't someday happen?

Remember this: Deception normally happens to people who are convinced that it *won't* happen to them. That's what deception is all about. That's why it is so deceptive!