

Sunday, October 23, 2022

Overcoming Deception

(Series: Life, Light and Love; a series on 1 John)

(Message Seven)

(1 John 4:1-6)

Scripture:

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. ²This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.

⁴You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. ⁵They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.

Message:

Tony Campolo, who was born in Philadelphia, tells how October 30, the night before Halloween, was designated as *mischief night* in his neighborhood.

He says adults braced themselves for all sorts of petty “crimes.” Windows were soaped; air let out of tires, etc. One year, he confessed, he and a friend devised a brilliant plan to break into a five and dime store – not to rob the place (Sunday School boys would never do that) but do something far worse... to change the price tags on everything in the store.

They imagined the following morning radios selling for a quarter and bobby pins at five dollars each. They thought about the chaos it would bring when the values people had previously understood were now way out of whack. What would happen to the store and what would the response of the owner be?

Tony never pulled it off, but it became the title of one of his books: “*Who Switched the Price Tags?*”

But it has actually happened - not in a department store or with the price of merchandise; but in our world - with the Truths and values we have long known and treasured. When we weren't looking, John suggests “false prophets” snuck in and **re-valued** our thinking, our priorities, and our Truth.

If we want to get the most out of life, we must learn to give priority to the things that are really important, i.e., we need to keep the main thing the main thing.

Jesus shares a similar story in Matthew 13:24-30. There he talks about a thief who appeared after a farmer had sown his crops. Instead of stealing the farmer's seed, he sowed his own seed. When the good seed broke the soil and began to grow, so did the bad seed.

The crop and the weeds (truth and untruth) began to intermingle until it became difficult to distinguish between them – between truth and fiction, between the urgent and the important, between the worthless and the invaluable. Our world is still working at changing the **price tags**.

NOTE THE INCEPTION OF DECEPTION (4:1, 3)

While Jesus was compassionate with truth seekers; he was “in the face” of deceivers.

John quotes Jesus: “*You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.*” (John 8:42-44)

Jesus is talking to religious people (people who say they love God and one another) warning **religious** people about Satan's deceptions. John and Jesus are aware that deception is an issue for those who would be godly. That is, Jesus knows **we** are vulnerable/susceptible to being deceived.

If there are some absolute universal truths, everyone will agree with them. Right?

Educators noticed a correlation between the removal of absolute-moral and values-based teaching in schools and the increase in juvenile crime, teenage pregnancy and drug use. So now everyone agrees we need values-based education. Right? No! Many still disagree.

With the fall of the Iron curtain, social scientists realized a government-controlled economy normally led to poverty, oppression, and loss of initiative. So the issue of socialism was now settled once and for all. Right? No! People still advocate for it.

For years, experimental education was all the rage. Traditional schools, some educators said, were preventing students from reaching their full potential. So the Westinghouse Experimental School was built in Boston. Walls were torn down; kids were given the latest computers; teachers were now *resource persons*. They invested millions and said to students, “Go and learn.” It failed. The building is empty.

The custodian was quoted: “*It was stupid. Everyone knows a boy, given the option of playing baseball or studying will pick baseball.*” So everyone agrees? Right? No.

There is a direct correlation between the increase in rape and sexual abuse and the use of pornography. So access to pornography is restricted. Right?! No. People still promote the right to proliferate pornography – even to minors.

Since people agree that a minor needs parental permission to have their ears pierced, they obviously need parental permission to have an abortion or a gender altering procedure. Right? No.

In spite of overwhelming evidence, the debate continues over whether humankind is inherently good or inherently bad. Where there is minimal police presence, crime has increased dramatically; on the global front, in all of recorded history, there has been only seven years of world-wide peace (the absence on war of armed conflict).

We could go on. But the point is simple: the world can’t agree on the most obvious, basic, and absolute truths. So our world is a mess.

There are only **two possible responses.**

First, maybe there is **no** absolute truth. Truth is whatever you want it to be - *your* Truth. 2+2 could equal 3, or 4, or 22—whatever you want. So there are no moral, ethical or religious absolutes—except the absolute fact that there are no absolutes. That is logically ridiculous.

Second, there is **absolute** Truth, but someone appears to have been **tampering** with it; someone has changed the tags and we must (re)discover the Truth.

NOTE THE **INCIDENCE OF SUPERNATURAL DECEPTION (4:1b)**

There is nothing worse than a an overly idealistic and naive Christian. Christians ought to be the most realistic, rational, balanced, practical, down-to-earth, loving and persevering people in the entire world.

Sadly, John knows Christians can be led astray by smooth talking idealists: “*What they say sounds so good, it must be true!*” Let me give you some examples:

“God understands my divorce, he wants me to be happy.”

“It is okay, because God loves me, and he promised to forgive me.”

“My spiritual life is good enough.”

“Life is about me.”

“Promises are made to be broken.”

Scripture teaches that not everything that sounds good is good; **deception** is **rampant** in our world.

That is why we need to study the **Bible** – here in worship, in small groups, and alone – so we know the Truth.

The Bible is known as the “canon” from the Latin word meaning “to measure.” Truth must be constantly measured and re-measured because we are vulnerable.

It’s amazing how many people continue to fall for the Nigerian money scam, how many seniors ride the bus each day to a nearby casino to win big; how many buy land unseen; and how we believe everything we see on the internet and hear on TV.

We are a gullible people - including in areas of faith.

Sadly, for many people, the Truth they hear on a Sunday morning is the only Truth they hear all week – and increasingly, most people never hear that.

The Scripture is primary source of Truth. We need to be as the Bereans – a group of Christ-followers Paul encountered in Greece. Luke writes in **Acts 17:11** – “*Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.*”

We too need to be seekers and searchers of the Truth.

NOTE THE INTOLERANCE TOWARD SUPERNATURAL DECEPTION (4:1b; 3a)

After what John has been saying about love the last few chapters, you might think John would suggest we “just love the deceivers” (after all, they’re probably nice people and they mean well). But John’s persona changes dramatically. He becomes intolerant.

Listen to what the Torah (Deuteronomy 13:1-5) says about deception:
“If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, “Let us follow other gods” (gods you have not known) “and let us worship them,” you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. The LORD your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul. It is the LORD your God you must follow, and him you must revere. Keep his commands and obey him;

serve him and hold fast to him. That prophet or dreamer must be put to death, because he preached rebellion against the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery; he has tried to turn you from the way the LORD your God commanded you to follow. You must purge the evil from among you." Now that is intolerant! But God says this intolerance is necessary!

John says we are to be intolerant of untruth that maligns God; of lies, distortions, falsehoods that deny who Jesus is, what Jesus did, and what he requires of us.

People, including Christians, are increasingly intolerant today – not of untruth, but of people who don't look like they do, think like they do, or do what they like to do.

In our world, we disagree on immigration, the war in Ukraine, the impact of inflation, the limits on abortion, school curriculum, student debt forgiveness, the effects of climate change, the levels of taxation, how to vote – to name a few.

In our churches, we disagree about how much money we should give, about the number of hymns and worship songs we sing, about the role of women in leadership, and about our role in the community.

And our disagreements divide us because we major in minors and failed to keep the main thing (the Truth; Jesus Christ) the main thing.

We're often **intolerant** of things we should **tolerate** (especially people; we are called to love one another); and sadly, things we should be **intolerant** of we often **tolerate**.

We often fight about stuff that doesn't really matter while we're lukewarm (perhaps exhausted from our minor battles) about standing for the Truth. We take the Lord's name in vain, gossip about other believers, rob God of our tithes and offerings, undermine the authority of our spiritual leaders and forget to make Jesus lord of our life.

The revealed propositional truths of Scripture are not baggage – they're non-negotiables. They are the fuselage and wings of the aircraft. It won't fly without them.

In a recent sociological study involving people over the age of ninety-five, they discovered that they regretted not paying proper attention to the things in life that were of greatest importance. When asked, "If you had to live your life over again, what would you do differently?" their number one answer was: "I would reflect more."

We must continue to study and reflect on the Scriptures together, so we will not be deceived.

NOTE THE **INSULATION** AGAINST SUPERNATURAL DECEPTION (4:2-3)

Paul offers a similar standard: *“I tell you, no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus be cursed,” and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.”* (1 Corinthians 12:3)

When there is heresy and deception, it is almost always about **Jesus Christ** (i.e., in the area of Christology; it almost always undermines the core of the Christian faith).

Inevitably, people come to know Jesus before they come to understand the doctrines. Few people accept the doctrines (teachings) of the Christian faith - authority of the Scripture, virgin birth, or atonement – before they meet and accept Jesus.

John is saying: *“If our relationship with Jesus is right (that is, if he is the main thing) then eventually, everything else will fall into place.”* On the other hand, if you can quote the Bible, sort out doctrinal complexities, recite the Catechism, articulate your theological worldview, but don’t have a personal, growing relationship with Jesus, you are prime target for deception.

John reminds us again and again: The issue is **Jesus**. The issue is always **Jesus**. Jesus is the Truth, the main thing.

Do you want to know where someone stands? Ask them what they think about **Jesus**.

If you want to stand strong in the Truth, stay close to Jesus Christ. Love him with your whole heart; make him Lord of your life; honor him in everything you do!

Anyone, anything, any teaching that suggests Jesus is (just) a good man or a good teacher is deceiving you; don’t believe any of it.

How is your relationship with Jesus? Are you spending time together in his Word and in prayer?

NOTE THE **INEFFECTIVENESS** OF SUPERNATURAL DECEPTION (4:4)

The word **“overcome”** is used in 1 John **six** times (more than any other book except Revelation; 17 times). John writes, *“The one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.”*

John doesn’t say that with a supreme personal effort and due diligence there’s a likely possibility we might be victorious over deception in this world.

John says the victory is already **won**; through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have already **“overcome!”**

Nothing could so encourage the beleaguered Christian community and give it the courage to face the ongoing persecution than to know the battle had already been won!

Paul told us (cf. **1 Corinthians 12:3**) that there is a built-in, supernatural filter in every believer that allows every believer to distinguish truth from deception. That means I/we don't have to correct every error or stamp out every heresy or counter every lie. I/we simply have to stand for the truth, live out the truth, and teach the truth.

Here is a principle: "In His time, the truth will be heard, **accepted**, understood, and **applied** by God's people." Here is an important corollary to that principle: "In His time, error and deception will be heard, rejected, understood, and discarded by God's people."

While history and tradition are not authoritative, it is important to listen to and remember what believers have been saying for years because Truth perseveres. God's people sense deception and toss it; they recognize Truth and stake their life on it – and many gave their life for it. Biblical Christianity has stood the test of time.

We see through deception because we have a built-in, God-given filter- His Holy Spirit.

NOTE THE INVALIDATION OF SUPERNATURAL DECEPTION (4:5-6)

The simple teaching of 1 John is this: believers listen to Truth and don't listen to error. An unbeliever listens to error and doesn't listen to truth.

The issue is not polemics (arguments); the issue is heritage (lit.; "parenting"). The issue is, who is your father? Who is your model? Who is your inspiration?

God calls us to himself; when he does his teaching is understood and validated in our lives. We don't have to manipulate, coerce, or guilt anyone.

Testing those spirits – these deceptions - is so **crucial** because deviating from the Truth is so enticingly popular—but far more dangerous to our welfare than physical persecution. Those who walk close with **Jesus**, i.e., in the Truth, John says, will see through deception.

There is not your truth and my truth. Truth is Truth! Truth is Truth all the time!

God, by His Spirit, made us as receptacles of His Truth. We aren't called to hit people over the head with it – merely to receive it, believe it, live it and share it. We don't have to be fanatical, just hold up Jesus crucified and see who is drawn to him.

There is an old eastern proverb that says, “*When the student is ready a **teacher** will appear.*” There is truth in that. But this is absolutely true: “*When The Teacher appears, when the Galilean Rabbi returns, God’s people must be ready and living in the Truth.*”

We have been forewarned. Forewarned is forearmed.

Prayer:

Father, our world is a mess. The world is out to deceive us about Jesus, to substitute untruth for Truth, to promote our intolerance of others rather than our intolerance of lies.

We thank you for Jesus who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. We thank you for his willingness to die for our sins and be raised on the third day from the dead.

We thank you for gifting us as followers of Jesus with His Spirit that allows us to keep our focus on him and discern between Truth and falsehood.

Father, give us the strength and wisdom to continue to follow Jesus and live in his Truth.

In Jesus’ name – our life, light, and love – we pray. Amen.

© Dr. Douglas Kamstra
Covenant CRC
7171 Willard Ave. SE
Grand Rapids, MI 49548