

MANY DECEIVERS

Based on John 8:42-44; II John 1:7-8; II Peter 2:1-3, 3:17-18

A sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, April 24, 2016

This sermon is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “Christ Versus the Powers of Evil.”

In the gospel passage from John chapter 8, Jesus is talking to his opponents, who deny that He is from God, and Jesus says that they do not recognize the truth of Jesus because they are under the influence of Satan [*You are unable hear what I say because you belong to your father, the Devil. John 8:43-44*]; and concerning the Devil Jesus says, “He is a liar and the father of lies.” (John 8:44)

We talked previously in the sermon series about how people through the ages have conceived of the powers of evil, and have done so in various ways. In ancient times people generally thought of the dark powers as personal spiritual entities; they spoke of demons and the prince of all evil, the devil. When Jesus spoke to first century people, he naturally talked to them using their language and their concepts, and so he used the terminology of demons and the devil as he spoke to them about the powers of evil in the world; but this leaves open the question as to whether we are supposed to carry forward these same first century concepts about demons and the devil into today. Modern theologians still talk about demonic powers; but they generally understand those powers not in the first century fashion but rather as impersonal forces of evil that arise out of human sinfulness.

So when it comes to the figure of Satan, there are two basic ways in which Christians today will typically conceive of Satan. Some think of the Devil as a personal being, actively at work for ill; others think of the Devil as a symbol of the whole overarching power of evil. But however you choose to think of the Devil, there are two central spiritual truths to which Jesus gives expression in this passage. The first is a principle that has been our focus in the previous two sermons in this series—there are powers of evil at work in the world. Evil is not just an idea, or a judgment we make about things; evil is a force that can take hold in people. When Jesus says to his opponents, “You belong to your father, the Devil,” he is saying that they are in the grip of a power of evil. The second major principle expressed by Jesus has to do with how the power of evil works—that evil is advanced and sustained through lies. As Jesus said concerning the Devil, “He is a liar and the father of lies.”

We can see this principle at work throughout human history. Some of the greatest evils in history have been facilitated by great lies. Think for example of Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union—the tremendous evil of those regimes was facilitated by the enormous use of propaganda. German and Soviet citizens were fed a constant dose of huge lies in order to keep them in line with the regime. Everyone in the Soviet Union, for example, was told that they were living in a wonderfully democratic, peace-loving workers’ paradise. When the Soviet Union finally fell apart in 1991, there were a number of contributing

factors, but certainly one key element was the rise of the information age. More and more Soviet citizens became aware of the real truth of their circumstances, and could no longer tolerate them. As Jesus said, “The truth will set you free.” (John 8:32)

The conjunction of evil and lies continues to be seen today, in a glaring fashion, in radical Islamist terrorism. The belief system of radical Islamism is a virtual web of huge lies. But of course lies have an effect only if they do not appear to be lies, at least to the willing hearer. Lies must masquerade as the truth. This of course is precisely what we see in radical Islamism, which pretends to be religious truth.

Thus a major theme in the New Testament is the problem of spiritual deception—that people can be led seriously astray by lies, especially lies that are purporting to be the truth of God. Jesus warned that “false messiahs and false prophets will appear, and perform signs and wonders, to deceive . . .” (Matthew 24:24) Paul in one of his letters wrote, “There are many rebellious people, full of meaningless talk and deception . . .” (Titus 1:10) Peter warned, “There will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord. Many will follow their depraved conduct. In their greed these teachers will exploit you with fabrications.” (II Peter 1:1-3) That applies almost word for word to Islamist terrorism.

Finally, the apostle John, in our passage from II John, said, “Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully.” (II John 1:7-8)

This last passage presents the interesting term, “antichrist.” The word appears in the Bible only in the letters of John, in this passage, and in the first letter of John where he says, “Many antichrists have come.” (I John 2:18) In recent decades, a popular idea promoted often in fundamentalist churches has been the notion that there will be one end-times Antichrist, who will deceive the whole world. But this clearly is not what the Bible says; the Biblical teaching is that there are many antichrists all over the place all the time. An antichrist, quite simply, is someone who claims to have the truth—as Christ is the truth—but who in fact moves contrary to Christ and promotes falsehood; it is what Jesus was talking about when he warned of “false Messiahs and false prophets,” and said there would be many of them, and Peter carried the idea forward when he spoke of “false teachers” among you. Along this same line, John uses the term “antichrist” and the term “deceiver” as meaning the same thing, and says, “many deceivers have gone out into the world.”

Certainly we encounter deceivers of various sorts all the time—in the political sphere, in the business world, even in the sports world. When we think of deception, sometimes we think of it essentially as trickery—someone is trying to pull a fast one on us. I heard once about a sign that was displayed in a store in New York City. The sign read: “Going out of business sale.” And underneath that it said, “Don’t be fooled by imitators who claim to be going out of business. We have been going out of business for longer than

anyone on this block.” If deception is trickery, then the answer is just to be smart enough not to be fooled by anyone.

But the more serious form of deception plays not so much to the head as it does to the heart. In the Bible, the first story about deception is the story of Adam and Eve, where the serpent says, “If you eat the fruit of this tree, you will become like God.” (Genesis 3:5) The deception plays to the human desire for self-exaltation. Political demagogues take this sort of approach—playing to people’s desire for power or revenge—and we see very much the same thing in religious deceivers. When we look at the so-called Islamic state, the deceivers who are running it are attracting followers to their lies precisely because they appeal to base human desires. To young Muslims who are struggling with frustration and anger and who cannot see any positive future, the Islamic State says, “Here is the way to power and pleasure and vengeance and everything you always wanted.”

This explains how people who seem to be intelligent—who have been studying for college degrees, or who have had responsible jobs—can end up in a religious cult like this whose ideas to us appear to be so obviously stupid and wrong. People do not join the Islamic State because of the brilliance of its thinking or its shining principles. People join the Islamic State because it appeals to their deep inner yearnings; or to put it simply, the Islamic State appeals directly to human sin. It is in sin that people desire revenge and power and domination over others, and the Islamic State offers all that to the fullest. Indeed, as we see repeatedly, the Islamic State appeals to the very worst human impulses—the desire to chop off the heads of one’s enemies and blow up the monuments of the people one despises and make sex slaves of foreigners—but in the deception that is at the heart of Islamic State teaching, those sinful impulses are redefined as religious virtues. It is this kind of profound spiritual twisting that the apostle Paul talked about in his letter to the Romans when he said, “They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, worshipping the creature rather than the creator. They have gone over to a depraved mind, doing what ought not to be done, becoming filled with every kind of wickedness—evil, greed, and depravity.” [Romans 1:25,28,29]

But the depravity of radical Islamist terrorism is so outrageous it can perhaps dull our senses to how other forms of spiritual deception can affect us. In our modern secular society, deception more often comes at us in subtle ways, but it still works by attacking not so much the mind but the heart. Some forms of deception appeal to our self-centered impulses; the materialism of our culture, for example, appeals constantly to our human desire for more. We are told that if we just had more of this or more of that, we would find happiness, and thus people are deceived into thinking that they will find fulfillment through endless grasping after more stuff or more status or more experiences or more something. Other forms of deception work on our human doubts and fears; we can be drawn into doubting God and feeling that we are just all on our own in this world. In

various ways, we can fall prey to lies. John was correct—many deceivers have gone out into the world.

The answer to every form of deception is Jesus Christ. As Jesus himself said, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” (John 14:6) It is in Jesus that we clearly see what is true; and Jesus provides not only an enlightenment of the mind, but, even more crucially, an enlightenment of the heart. Since deception, as we have noted, works on the weaknesses in the human spirit, the answer is to be found in spiritual renewal, and this is precisely what Christ brings. Christ comes to us with forgiveness and uplifting power, and enables us finally to live in the truth and goodness and promises of God. When we put our faith in Christ, we can stand firm against all the lies of the world around us; and as we do so, evil loses its power over us.

Martin Luther put it well: “Though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us, we will not fear, for God hath willed, his truth to triumph through us.”