

Impersonators, Pitchmen and Con Artists / Colossians 2:6-8; 18-19

See to it that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming "I am the Messiah," and will deceive many people. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. But all these are merely birth pains. The real problems start when you are handed over to be persecuted and put to death. At that time, many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other...And many false prophets will appear and deceive many people...but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

If I had half a cent for every time I've heard the most common aphorism in the English language over the course my life, I would be Warren Buffett by now. Equally, if I had to dispense half a cent to my favorite charity for every time I've voiced it, then the National Foundation for Ending Male Pattern Baldness would need no more donations from anyone. That aphorism is this: "there are two things you can be sure of in life: death and taxes....Church, I must confess to you this morning that the events of the last two years, all of which we've seen like eagles and heard like owls, have forced me to the conclusion that the time has come for an addendum to that aphorism. I recommend this one: "there are also two types of people you will encounter in life: truth-tellers and deceivers." And, unfortunately, real problems can happen when both occupy the same space on the planet....Show me a space on the planet with olive branches; and I'll point you in the direction of the Manchineel Trees nearby trying to poison their oil. Implore me to cast my eyes to the spot where Balms of Gilead are packaged and shipped worldwide; and I'll equally implore you to notice the venomous asp about to make it through customs with them unnoticed. That's because where there are saints, servants and good neighbors handing out doves and grape juice to those who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, there will also be impersonators, pitchmen and con-artists trying to steal their pattens with a charming smile and war in their hearts....The Church in Colossae to which Paul wrote had everything they needed to be effective in their commission to be olive branches in a world dominated by Manchineel Trees. Ephapras, a disciple of Paul, founded the church with Jesus Christ as their chief cornerstone. They were more prosperous and generous than the churches Paul planted combined. But they had a cinch in their spiritual armor. Somewhere along the way, the church had abdicated their responsibility to practice discernment. Consequently, they were about to be held captive against their will by charming impersonators, pitchmen and con-artists with nothing but war in their hearts. And because they were, only a truth-teller like Paul, who was himself mastered by the perfect truth-teller, could prevent them from degenerating into venomous asps themselves. His message was simple: if you abscond your responsibility to discern by allowing someone else to do it for you, including preachers, then you will be held captive to someone or something other than Jesus. Turn with me to Colossians 2. And lets read verses 6-8 and 18-19.

⁶So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. ⁸See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ. ¹⁸Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen; they are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind. ¹⁹They have lost connection with the head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.

Requirements for Discernment

1. Connection Requirement (6;19)

- **Christmas Light Evolution:** (1) Every year people spend hours hanging lights getting ready for Christmas; (2) Today's Christmas lights manage to work even if several bulbs in the line are out; (3) But the Christmas lights of yesterday, the retro Bulb lights manufactured by Westinghouse, didn't work like that; (4) If one bulb was out, they were all out.
- **Main Idea of This Point:** Discernment always begins with proper connections to proper roots and proper extensions. Proper roots and proper extensions foster righteousness that breeds wisdom, discernment, and radiance. Improper roots and extensions foster folly, deception, and darkness.

- **What Epaphras Taught Them:** (1) In him; (2) And then used image of how things grow in the natural world and equated them to how God works in our lives: (a) rooted; {leads to} (b) growth {leads to}; (c) strength; (3) But it all centers on what they were taught by Epaphras: In Him, Christ Jesus.
- **What They Were Being Taught By Others:** (1) In them; (2) The best way to read Paul's letters is in a mirror; because the point he's making is specifically because the opposite was happening; (3) They were being lead astray; which is equivalent to (a) being rooted {that leads to} (b) growing {that leads to} (c) being strengthened into something else; (d) Again, it all centers on what they were being taught.
- **Application:** You are being rooted, grown, and strengthened into something: (a) a truth-teller; (b) or a deceiver. That's the implication here.

2. Vigilance Requirement (8a)

- **Neglected Bougainvillea** – (1) Bougainvillea's beautiful plant on the face of the earth; but they require a lot of attention and vigilance to keep beautiful; (2) When we bought our house in 2010, I saw the most God forsaken plant I've ever seen; (3) Took it out within two days; (4) Asked my neighbor what it was: "a bougainvillea neglected and destroyed by looper caterpillar"
- **Main Idea of this Point:** The Colossians were not only created in the image of God, they were also knew creations in Christ when Paul wrote. That's a beautiful picture because it denotes freedom in Christ to be who you are before him as someone He purchased and restored to the way he originally created them to be prior to the fall. And vigilance is required to protect that.
- **What Happens When We Forget to be Vigilant:** (1) See to it that no one – (a) leading astray always starts with a whisper of deception by someone else; (b) And to be effective in its influence, it must be enticing and appeal to your ego or a need in some way. (2) Holds you captive – (a) the word in Greek is "kidnapped" (b) Most spiritual kidnappings occur the same way as those in the world: with the dangling of a treat that appeals to your passions, pride and convictions – especially noble ones, in some way
- **How It Happens in the Church:** (1) By appealing to your sense of decency and morality in some way. That's how error gains traction. It wouldn't be effective otherwise. (2) Example One: The Galatians had a problem with immorality in their world; where people were compromising their virtue and purity. As a result, they developed a strict sense of legalism, judgmentalism and suffocating fundamentalism that alienated them from Jesus; (3) Example Two: So bothered by the legalism and judgmentalism they saw around them, the Corinthians went in the exact opposite direction. Everything is permissible and fine as long as we talk about love. As a result, they cheapened the grace of God. (4) We react to things "in the flesh," especially in the Church, in those ways depending on our personality. (5) Be careful because both are errors.
- **How It Happens in the World:** (1) The exact same way. (2) For example, how are your emotions triggered when you hear these phrases: (a) All Lives Matter; (b) Black Lives Matter; (c) Blue Lives Matter.
- **The Reality:** I know of no one who doesn't think every single life matters. But the friction comes from the phrases themselves. All of them trigger our sense of virtue in our emotion.

3. Evaluation Requirement (8b)

- **Tomato Sandwich on a Hot Summer Day:** (1) One of the most glorious creations on this earth is a tomato sandwich with salt, pepper and mayonnaise. (2) My first problem is I'm color blind so it's hard to spot ripe tomatoes at the grocery store. (3) My second problem is your problem: Florida is home to a lot of good things, but good tomatoes isn't one of them. (4) the only way I can evaluate them is to act like a kleptomaniac in the produce isle at Publix. (5) But it works.
- **Main Idea of the Point:** Discernment requires an ability to recognize how "hollow and deceptive" philosophies move from soundbites to practice. All error rooted in deception will manifest itself in one of three ways.
- **Error Manifests Itself In Human Tradition:** (1) they arise from the thinking of men, find a foothold in society and are passed along from generation to generation so as to appear popular and widely supported. (2) The problem is just because something is widely supported and popular, it doesn't mean it's right.

- **Error Manifests Itself in Returning People to Natural Self-Centeredness and Childish Behavior:** (1) The phrase “elementary spiritual forces of this world” is another way of saying “the doctrines of demons.” (2) Ideas you have that force you to behave like a selfish child is right where the devil wants you to be. (3) Children love to show off. They seek attention. They love to dominate others. They love to fight and squabble among themselves. They love to say mine. You don’t have to teach them that word. They already know it. (4) When we behave in this way, we have essentially regressed back to of childhood, right where the devil wants us to be.
- **Error Manifests Itself in Spiritual Words That Are “Not According to Christ:”** (1) Taking the name of the Lord and using it for yourself; (2) thereby demoting Jesus, and elevating another in His place.

4. Appearances Requirement (18-19)

- **Making Shadows on the Wall:** (1) I did this to my sister as a kid to scare her; (2) She was scared of the dark and putting my hands to the light in her room and making the image seem scary
- **Main Idea of the Point:** Appearances are often not what they seem
- **G.K. Chesterton:** *"Nine times out of ten, it is the crude word that condemns evil, and the refined word that excuses it."*
- **The Colossians Valued Refinement and Decorum Above Truth-Telling and Fell Victim to Deceit:** (1) As a result, they accepted teachers who had “false humility” and could wax eloquently with “idle notions.” (2) Consequently, they began to value those whose words were smooth like butter, but had war in their hearts (Ps 55:21)
- **Paul Valued Truth-Telling Above Decorum, Even If It Meant Being Unrefined in Presentation:** (1) He says people like this can “disqualify” you; (2) That’s the worst insult for an Ancient People who prided themselves in their Olympiad Games and competing in them with integrity.