

"Sin has many tools, but a lie is the handle which fits them all."  
—Oliver Wendell Holmes

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## The Truth About Deception (Part One)

As part of Jesus Christ's prophecy regarding "the sign of [His] coming, and of the end of the age" ([Matthew 24:3](#)), He gives a prediction and a warning that requires careful consideration. In [Matthew 24:24](#), He tells the disciples, "For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect."

Because of the way this is translated, one can be left with the impression that it is not possible for the elect to be deceived. This concept is a close cousin to the theory of eternal security—the idea that once we accept [Jesus Christ](#) as our personal Savior, it is impossible for us to [fall away](#) (see [John 15:5-6](#); [I Corinthians 9:27](#); [Hebrews 6:4-6](#); [10:26-31](#); [12:25](#); [II Peter 1:10-11](#); [3:17-18](#); [I Timothy 1:19](#); [6:10](#)). Similarly, this verse is sometimes interpreted to mean that if we are one of the elect, our minds are perfectly and forever protected from deception.

That is a tantalizing thought, implying that we are spiritually invincible once we accept the blood of Christ and receive the Holy Spirit. Yet, if that were the case, the rest of the New Testament would consist of *vastly* different themes and warnings. In fact, Jesus begins this same prophecy in [Matthew 24:4](#) with the warning to His followers to "[t]ake heed that no one deceives

you"! If His followers were *unable* to be deceived, our Creator would have no cause to preface His prophecy in such a way.

In addition to Jesus' warning here, the apostles warn repeatedly and specifically against being deceived. For instance, in [Romans 16:17-18](#), Paul says to note those who cause divisions and [offenses](#) and avoid them—because "by smooth talk and flattering words they *deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting*" (verse 18; *Holman Christian Standard Bible*). If it were not possible for them to deceive us, we would have no reason to avoid divisive people. In [I Corinthians 3:18](#), he warns against deceiving *ourselves* by thinking that we are wise by the standards of [the world](#). A few chapters later, he again warns against deceiving ourselves by believing that the unrighteous will inherit the Kingdom ([I Corinthians 6:9](#)). He cautions in [I Corinthians 15:33](#), "*Do not be deceived: 'Evil company corrupts good habits.'*"

In [Galatians 6:3](#), Paul says, "For if anyone thinks himself to be something, when he is nothing, *he deceives himself*." He warns in [Ephesians 5:6](#), "Do not let anyone *deceive you* with empty words . . ." [Colossians 2:4-8](#) cautions against being deceived by persuasive words and cheated through philosophy and empty deceit. He begins [II Thessalonians 2:3](#) with the admonition, "Let no one deceive you *by any means*. . . ." Finally, in [Hebrews 3:13](#), the author warns against being hardened by the deceitfulness of [sin](#).

This is just a sampling of the many direct and indirect warnings against deception. It should be clear that the epistles' writers fully believed that it was possible for their audience—the same "elect" as in [Matthew 24:24](#)—to be deceived, and thus they wrote in the way they did. Therefore, [Matthew 24:24](#) is actually saying that, if there is a way to deceive one of the elect, the master deceiver will use it. In other words, we can take measures to guard against deception, but if one of the elect refuses to take heed, he will be deceived.

[Revelation 12:9](#) informs us that the dragon, also known as the Devil and [Satan](#), "deceives the whole world." If [God](#) had not freed us from slavery and given us eyes to see things spiritually, such would still be our state. Jesus gives a similar description of our [adversary](#):

You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it. ([John 8:44](#))

Here Jesus calls Satan the "father of lies." All of this world's deceptions have their origin in him, and wherever his spirit is present, destructive fruit, including deception, will be in evidence.

Satan has deceived the whole world, but it is important to note that he is not limited to a single deception. He does not have just one game or a singular tactic. The whole world is not deceived by [Christmas](#) and [Easter](#) and a triune godhead. One and a half billion Muslims have not fallen for these lies, nor have the legion atheists or followers of the various Eastern religions.

On the other hand, billions have not fallen for the deceptions of Buddha or Muhammad. So while universal deception exists, it comes in more forms, shapes, and flavors than we can categorize. Satan does not have to get the whole world to believe the same thing in order to have everyone under his sway. Thus, just because a person recognizes the deceptions in the various pagan holidays does not mean that he is not deceived or *cannot* be deceived—it simply means that those particular deceptions do not have any hold on him, at that point. Recognizing one lie does not mean that we are immune to all others.

Paul observes in [II Corinthians 2:11](#) that "we are not ignorant of [Satan's] devices." This does not mean that, once we receive God's Spirit, we get a copy of Satan's playbook, and suddenly we know everything that he is doing. Rather, Paul means that because we have been freed from spiritual slavery, we have eyes to see spiritually, and we can begin to recognize what is of God and what is not. We begin to have an understanding of some of the ways that Satan works, and we have the means to discern good fruit from bad. Though the danger of deception is lessened, it remains.

Next time, we will see a number of examples from human history and culture that can give us a glimpse into some of the ways Satan operates.

- David C. Grabbe

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## **From the Archives: Featured Sermon**

### **[The Sin of Self-Deception](#)**

by John W. Ritenbaugh

In our relationship with God, we must emphasize principle over pragmatism, because pragmatism inevitably leads to idolatry. Jeroboam, in setting idolatrous shrines and festivals at Dan and Bethel, appealed to the carnal desire for practical convenience (I Kings 12:26-33). These practical compromises eventually led to the desecration of the Sabbath and the holy days, ending in the captivity of Israel. When doctrine is diluted, it turns into outright idolatry. Like ancient Israel, we have to guard against the tendency to gravitate toward ministers speaking smooth and pleasant things at the expense of turning from the truth. If we are led into deception, it is because our carnal nature wanted it that way (Jeremiah 17:9).

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## **From the Archives: Featured Article**

### **[Let No One Deceive You](#)**

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

We live in a day of increasing knowledge—to the point that we are increasingly overloaded with information. Richard Ritenbaugh argues that these and other modern factors lend themselves to deception, yet this is one of the primary end-time trends that Jesus warns us against!

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