

Deceptions Of The End Time

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Human nature is incredibly self-deceptive. Sometimes the truth hurts, and our hearts—"deceitful above all things and desperately wicked" (Jeremiah 17:9)—will avoid admitting the truth at all costs. The heart is so deceitful that it will often not admit it *can* be deceived!

These days, deceit is the name of the game. People seem to operate under the notion that lying is okay under two conditions: 1) It does not harm anyone (an impossibility), and 2) it helps to promote a "good" cause (usually someone's personal agenda, career or financial situation). Millions will confess that white lies, of course, are harmless, and that they have told hundreds of them without any ill effects.

Surveys conducted by leading polling firms frequently report on a rising tide of deceit in public and private. Falsifying tax forms, though fraudulent, is so common that the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) assumes each tax return is incorrect. A game called "Balderdash," the object of which is to deceive the other players, is available in toy stores all over the nation. And how many of us live by the motto, "Believe only half of what you read"? In today's world, perhaps it is time to update even this to, say, 20%?

In early May, a leading Charlotte businessman, chief executive of Transamerica Reinsurance, resigned from his lucrative and influential position because someone discovered that he had submitted false information on his résumé many years ago. His lies, more than a decade past and probably forgotten, reached out and bit him, costing him his career, his influence and his reputation.

We have come a long way from the time when a man's word was his bond, when a contract could be sealed with a handshake. Verbal promises are meaningless today. Even advertisers fill their commercials on the radio and television with legalese to ward off lawsuits for false advertising! What has this world come to?

The end time!

"... and Deceive Many"

Just as soon as His disciples asked Him, "What will be the sign of your coming, and of the end of the age?" Jesus brings up deceptions: "Take heed that no one deceives you. . . . Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many" (Matthew 24:3-4, 11). He is saying that an increase in lying and deceit will be a hallmark of the end time.

Jesus speaks particularly of religious deception, especially of those who "will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many" (verse 5). Most likely, He did not mean those who acclaimed themselves to be the Messiah, but those who would use Jesus' name to preach falsehood. Every "Christian" church of this world professes Christ as Savior, but do their ministers preach the truth He brought? Are many "Christians"—1.9 billion strong around the world in 1996—being deceived by a false gospel? This prophecy is fulfilled every Sunday around the world.

But it affects not only Christians. The other religions of man are no more honest than this world's Christianity. Regarding the ninth commandment, Judaism's "great" rabbis of the past have made exceptions to allow for deceit and lying. For example, they would allow a Jew to lie to Christians and other "heathens," but it was a great sin to lie to another Jew. The Talmud maintains and endorses falsehoods about Jesus, vilifying Him with names and alleging He was illegitimate.

Islam fares no better. It purports that God chose Ishmael over Isaac and the Arab peoples over the Israelites, but it uses large chunks of Israelite history to fill out its past. It claims Mohammed is a greater prophet than Jesus, and that he ascended to heaven on his horse from the site of the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Its adherents believe that killing infidels will earn them a place in heaven, spawning worldwide, state-sponsored terrorism.

The many Eastern religions range from polytheism and animism to abstract, existential philosophies. None teach the truth about the great questions of life. For example, regarding life after death, Eastern religions run the gamut from nihilism to reincarnation, while none preach the Kingdom of God. Some espouse living a moral life, and others take a more epicurean stance, but none teach all of the Ten Commandments. Billions of people have been and are being deceived by these false faiths.

The latecomers to the smorgasbord of this world's religions are the New Age groups. They often blend, or syncretize, traditional beliefs with some form of mysticism, spiritism or rank demonism. Some of these call Jesus one of the "enlightened masters" or call Him an embodiment of Lucifer or, like some of the Gnostics, believe He was "the first emanation [creation] of God." Whatever the case, such religions have deceived millions and led them farther away from the truth of God.

Jesus' instruction, however, is simple: Be vigilant not to be deceived. Through the apostle Paul, He teaches, "Test all things; hold fast what is good" (I Thessalonians 5:21). In I Timothy 6:20, he writes, "Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and vain babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge."

In his next letter to Timothy, Paul expounds further:

Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. That good thing which was committed to you, keep by the Holy Spirit [which] dwells in us. (II Timothy 1:13-14)

Once we have proved what is right and true by the faith and love of God, we must never let anyone persuade us otherwise! We have the strength to hang on to it through God's own power.

Secular Deception

Dishonesty is not confined to religion by any means. This whole world is based on a lie! Satan said to Mother Eve, "You will not surely die" (Genesis 3:4), and humanity has been deceiving and being deceived ever since!

Many of us in God's church, trying to live by the commandments, are simply unaware of the extent of dishonesty in our society. Recent research, however, shows that the average person tells a lie every eight minutes! That is seven lies per hour, 112 per 16-hour day, and 40,880 per year! At that rate, the average individual would lie over 2.8 million times over a seventy-year lifetime. Does mankind follow the way of "the father of lies" or not?

In its typical fashion, Hollywood recently made a mockery out of this scourge of society in the comedy *Liar, Liar*. In the film, a young boy wishes his father, a lawyer, had to tell the truth for one whole day, and his wish is granted. The rest of the story shows how frequently people resort to deceptions to smooth their road through life. For most, as the movie portrays, lying has become a matter of habit and an accepted practice.

In many areas, lying has become an art form. We can see this clearly in the financial world where numbers and statistics are manipulated with Machiavellian flair. We tend to trust numbers because we think, "Aren't they rational and quantifiable? Numbers don't lie." But they do, and in the hands of talented people, they can do tremendous harm.

One example of this occurs in the U.S. government's employment statistics. The President will take credit for a huge reduction of unemployed workers by saying jobless claims decreased by so many percent. The truth is that these numbers fail to distinguish what kind of jobs these people are taking. How many of these people were laid off from full-time, well-paying management positions, yet took minimum-wage jobs at the local fast food restaurant? Thus, the economy looks rosy, but in reality, personal income is falling. The government does similar things with other statistical reports, such as inflation, consumer spending and foreign trade.

The medical and pharmaceutical professions do likewise. The American Cancer Society claims that a woman's risk of breast cancer is one in nine. In fact, there are many differing claims, most of them lower, including that a woman under 50 has a one-in-1,000 chance of suffering breast cancer. The truth is, writes Cynthia Crossen in her book *Tainted Truth: The Manipulation of Fact in America*,

the risk of breast cancer rises as a woman ages, so one in nine is the cumulative probability starting the day a girl is born and ending at an age so advanced—somewhere between 85 and 110, depending on whose figures you believe—that she'll probably already be dead of something else.

Of course, deceit begins at home. A national survey, conducted in 1984 for the IRS, reports that half of Americans have a "flexible" standard of honesty. For instance, they believe it acceptable to cheat large stores and insurance companies. They rationalize that since these big businesses make so much money—and are probably gouging the consumer anyway in prices and premiums—that they deserve a little back.

It does not end there. Sixty-three percent of the students at one Midwestern university admit they have cheated on exams. This not only includes peeking at the student's paper in the next row, but also buying stolen test keys and/or term papers.

The American Insurance Association estimates that one-fifth of insurance claims are fraudulent, most commonly in the form of the "disappearing deductible," where insureds raise the claim amount to cover their costs. The insurance company, in turn, raises its premiums to cover its losses due to fraud. Everyone loses.

In 1985 long-distance telephone companies reported losing 9% of their revenues to "fraudulent service switching," the practice of running up huge bills with one company and, without paying, jumping to another without fear of having their service disconnected. Now many companies require a 90-day agreement before switching service.

Not only are all these and many more examples of deceit and fraud costly to the nation's economy, they are also damaging to our moral and ethical foundations. Economies can rebound, but character at some point becomes set and repentance becomes more difficult. With such an atmosphere of deception, our children grow up thinking such things are acceptable and even necessary for success. Trust in one another declines, and soon trust in God suffers greatly. This kind of environment breeds discontent, distrust, rebellion and apostasy.

Lying Wonders

The apostle Paul prophesied of such an apostasy in II Thessalonians 2:3, 9-12, and he prefaces it with a warning against being deceived:

Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition. . . . The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

The great apostasy may already be fully underway, spurred by the rising tide of deception in society. With so much information available (Daniel 12:4)—along with so many ways to manipulate it—men find it extremely easy to deceive millions instantly. This is especially true for those who do not really believe the true source of knowledge, God and His Word. Thus, after subtle doctrinal changes, many of the brethren have fallen away.

The "coming of the lawless one," however, is still future. His rise to prominence and power will be accompanied by incredible miracles, but they will be false signs and wonders, lies produced by Satan to appear as if they are of God (see Revelation 13:11-15). He will use "all unrighteous deception," a hint that what he does and says will *appear* as righteous, yet someone who knows and loves the truth can see through it and avoid being deceived.

Satan will really pull out all the stops to deceive as many as possible, especially the called sons of God. The "lawless one" will be so slick that "all who dwell on the earth will worship him, whose names have not been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8). But, as Paul writes elsewhere, if we hold fast to "the pattern of sound words" that we learned, if we guard the truth, we will not be deceived.

Paul repeats these instructions to the Thessalonians in this context:

Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle. (II Thessalonians 2:15)

The key to resisting deception is being convicted of the truth! The truth is what was first revealed to the apostles. As Jude puts it, "Contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3).

As they saw the first-century apostasy coming, all the apostles warn about deceivers and urge the brethren to be certain of and stick to the doctrines of God. It is our surest hedge against being caught up in the deceptions of the end time that are already upon us.

In his old age, the apostle John summed up in a prophecy for today what is happening and what we need to be doing:

For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may receive a full reward. (II John 7-8)