

“The Devil’s Schemes: Deception”

February 4, 2018

Ephesians 6:10-13

SI: We’re spending 12 weeks or so looking in depth at a few verses at the end of Ephesians, chapter 6 verses 10-20.

Paul ends his letter with this passage to make the point that everything he has said about living the Christian life has a context. The context is warfare.

The Devil and demonic forces are shooting at you and trying to bring you down in all the areas and relationships where you are trying to live as a Christian.

Paul tell us to be aware of that conflict and take a stand against the Devil’s schemes. That’s what we’re focusing on, the Devil’s schemes.

INTRO: When I became pastor here 21 years ago, there was a family who was worshipping with us. They never made a commitment to join, but attended. Then at some point they left and I lost track of them.

Then about 10 or 12 years later the wife showed up in my study one day.

She told me that all these years they had been in another church.

Her husband had really liked the pastor, really felt a connection with him.

A teaching pastor stressed: If Christians lived by faith, expect financial blessing.

“Then I will make your way prosperous, then you will have good success.”

If you give up homes, fields for the gospel, will receive 100 fold in this life.

She said that her husband believed that teaching and he gave a sizable amount of their income and assets to the church.

But they didn’t reap 100-fold returns. The pastor seemed to be living pretty good.

Something happened. As I recall her husband confronted the pastor and the pastor turned the tables on him and said the problem was obviously he didn’t have enough faith.

They felt confused and used and ended up leaving.

She expressed regret that they hadn’t stayed here. So I said: Please come back!

But she said her husband was so disillusioned he wasn’t going to church anymore, and she didn’t want to go without him.

So I prayed with her and she left and that was that. I never heard from her again.

The Devil’s primary weapon is the lie. Liar and the father of lies.

We’ve been categorizing his lies, and focusing on three big ones.

Lie of temptation—sin is not so bad.

Lie of accusation—your sin is so bad God won’t forgive you.

Today, lie of deception.

New Testament also calls it false teaching or heresy.

It's significant how often and how strongly the Apostles warned about this. We read earlier Paul's warning to Timothy.

The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.

Here's more of Paul

"I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them." Acts 2:29-30

Here's Peter

"But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them . . . Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute." 2 Peter 2

John

"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"

Of the three strategies of the Devil that we're focusing this last strategy probably won't grip you with the same immediacy as accusation and temptation.

Accusation and temptation operate in areas of our feelings and desires.

You've felt temptation. You've heard accusatory voices.

The strategy of deception is mostly an attack on your intellect.

It comes to you in the realm of ideas.

It's the Devil's use of biblical and theological arguments.

So you might be inclined to think this doesn't apply to you.

You may say it's too analytical. You might say that about this sermon.

But it does apply to you, just not directly.

Satan's goal is to harm individual Christians, make ineffective and unproductive, rob them of comfort and peace, fill them with sighing, complaining, doubting.

In this strategy he gets them through secondary fallout.

He attacks the church through deception, it filters down to individual.

Look at this under four points. Instead of using word deception or false teaching, I'm going to use Peter's word heresy.

1. Heresy's essence
2. Heresy's history
3. Heresy's harm
3. Heresy's resistance

MP#1 Heresy's essence

We need to get a clear idea of what heresy essentially is. What is false teaching?
I'm going to give you a definition by Alister McGrath.

He's a Christian theologian from northern Ireland, Oxford professor.

Wrote a good book a few years ago about heresy.

This is not a short, snappy definition.

I'm going to build this definition in several layers, so hang with me.

A heresy is a teaching that originates inside the church.

It's not an argument against Christianity from the outside, by atheists.

In all the passages I read a moment ago, the Apostles were warning about people inside the church. From own number men will arise and distort the truth.

There were false prophets in Israel, false teachers among you.

Heresy self-identifies as Christian. It maintains connection with the church and maintains the outward appearance of Christianity.

Sometimes there are people who tell how they grew up in the evangelical church but then realized that it was all false and wrong and they reject whole thing.

Maybe they write books trying to disprove Christianity. That's not heresy.

A heretic or false teacher not someone who has left the church and says the Christian faith all bogus. There's a name for that. Called apostasy.

Apostates usually aren't a threat to the church.

Heresy says: We're Christians. Our teaching is biblical.

So it originates inside the church, it identifies as real Christianity.

And here's the essence—heresy modifies Christian doctrine in a way that ends up subverting the gospel and often leading to unbelief.

It's not outright rejection of Christianity. It's not outright unbelief.

But it often leads to unbelief.

Now, one more level of this definition.

Heresy usually begins as a sincere desire to present Christianity in a more effective or attractive way to the contemporary culture.

Most false teachers, not all, but most, are motivated—at least at first—by a sincere desire to make the Christian message more suited

to social norms, to ways of thinking, or to the felt needs of people.

So they change and modify Christian doctrines to accomplish that.

But they end up distorting, destabilizing, and destroying the gospel rather than preserving it.

MP#2 Heresy's history

When did heresy start in the church? It started very soon.

Paul wrote several letters to deal with heresy. He wrote letter to Galatians about 20 or 30 years after Christ's resurrection. There was a heresy in that church. Proponents called Judaizers. The Judaizers believed a lot of right things. Jesus, resurrection, faith. But they were concerned to make the Christian message more attractive to Jews. So they modified it and said Gentiles, in order to be saved, also had to be circumcised. Abraham was circumcised, Jesus was circumcised. How did Paul respond? He didn't say: This little modification doesn't matter. He said: That modification subverts the gospel. It's no gospel at all. It undermines the complete saving work of Jesus Christ. Goes so far as to say if anyone teaches this, let him be accursed.

How about the letter to the Colossian church? Written a little bit later. There was heresy being taught in that church too. Instead of making modifications to make Christian message more attractive to Jews, it made modifications to make it more attractive to Greco-Romans. It's hard to say exactly what the modification was, but it was something like this. The Greco-Roman world valued mystical experiences and secret knowledge. So there were people in the Colossian church who affirmed that you are saved by faith in Jesus, but that's just the first step. That's Christianity 101. If you really want to go on to deeper and mystical things, then here are these other spiritual disciplines—and they had a variety of things, special studies, diets.

How did Paul respond? Did he say: Well, as long as you say you are saved by faith in Christ, then if these things help you move to a deeper level ok? No. He said teaching is subverting the gospel. See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ. By the way, some scholars say the phrase "basic principles of this world" is a reference to demonic powers. Deeper, mystical experiences apart from Jesus.

This has been the pattern of church history ever since. Teachers and leaders in the church, identifying as Christians, modifying doctrines with mostly the good intention of making the Christian faith and message more attractive. There was an early Christian heresy called Docetism. Greek word to seem. They taught that Christ was divine, but Jesus wasn't. Jesus just seemed divine. Christ came upon the man Jesus and kind of inhabited him at certain times. When he would do miracles and when he would teach. But when the man Jesus did earthy, physical things, like go to the bathroom, and especially when he suffered and died, Christ left him.

That seems weird. Why would they teach that?

Because Greek thought drew a hard and fast line between divine and human. Christian message much more attractive to Greeks if they could put their faith in a purely spiritual Christ and not have to deal with messy human Jesus.

Why does Apostles Creed say? Crucified, dead, and buried? Of course he was. To answer Docetism. He just seemed to be crucified. No. He really was.

There was another very popular heresy called Arianism after teacher Arius.

It was also dealing with this Greek separation of divine and human.

The way it did so was to say that Jesus Christ was not God but a created being.

Jehovah's Witnesses are a modern day version of Arianism.

There was a heresy that ripped the church apart called Donatism, church leader.

It taught that there are certain sins that cannot be forgiven.

Because of some complicated political and ethnic dynamics, that made the Christians message much more appealing to a large segment of people.

There was a heresy called Pelagianism that recognized in the culture

a deep human desire for self-fulfillment and self-affirmation in the culture.

So it modified Christian teaching about Adam's fall, reinterpreted it to affirm that every person born like Adam before the fall, clean, free, sinless, and capable of perfect moral choices and self-expression.

Jumping ahead, in Europe and Great Britain and America in the 19th and 20th century the powerful heresy of Modernism.

Modern scientific people reject miracles.

So if we want to preserve Christianity, make it appealing for future generations— must reinterpret miracles as spiritual lessons, not say they really happened.

And it continues today. The church still deals with false teaching.

Let's just modify this one little part. Here are some Bible verses that justify.

And look how much more accessible and popular it makes Christianity.

And often it appears to. Heresies can draw huge followings.

But what's the effect?

MP#3 Heresy's harm

When we say we believe in God or we believe in Jesus Christ, what do we mean?

It doesn't just mean we believe God exists. It means we trust him.

We trust God as our heavenly Father who cares for us in all the turbulence and ambiguities of life. As Elisabeth Elliot said:

“I don't know the future, but I know the One who knows the future.”

And when we say we believe in Jesus Christ that doesn't just mean we accept his historical existence. We recognize him as someone we can trust body and soul, someone we can follow, we know will shepherd us and carry us home.

The Bible tells us all sorts of things about God and about Jesus we should believe.

It tells us the character of God, words of God, acts of God in history.

It tells us about the person, life, ministry of Christ, all he said and did.

It also tells us a lot about selves. Who we are. What we need. Why need God.

Why does the Bible tell us all these very specific things? These doctrines?

So we know God can be trusted. So we know Jesus can be trusted.

And so that we base our trust and our relationship with the Lord on what's real.

Paul wrote this to the Corinthian Christians.

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve.

What does that sound like to you? It sounds like an early Apostles Creed.

We believe this happened, and this happened, this means this, accomplished this.

Paul would be the first to affirm that it's all about trusting Jesus.

But that depends on knowing and believing the right things about him.

Here's the harm of heresy. By modifying doctrines to make Christian faith more accessible, more attractive, it presents a faulty view of God or Christ or self.

If you build a relationship with God based on that, works for a while, wheels off.

Take the couple I mentioned at the beginning of my sermon.

If you believe a false teaching that says God will make you rich if you do and say certain things and if you really have enough faith—wow, that attractive.

And to some degree it works. Power of positive thinking.

But what kind of relationship do you have?

For one thing, not biblical faith. Not trust. Belief able to manipulate God.

That's what your relationship with God like. Mechanistic.

What happens then, when like Job, the Lord gives and the Lord takes away?

You know what happens. You don't know and understand his true character.

You crash and burn. Listen to this verse in 2 Timothy about false teaching. Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus,¹⁸ who have wandered away from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some.

I don't think destroy the faith of some necessarily means they totally reject the faith or lose their salvation. It means some are so cast down in such a confused and miserable place, live rest of Christian life in the shadows. Separated from Christian fellowship, separated from the church, bitter. Which is all exactly what Satan wants.

MP#4 Heresy's resistance

Resist the Devil and he will flee from you.

Stand firm. Put on the full armor of God.

All these apply to deception, false teaching, and heresy.

Specifics: Two things.

First, the Lord Jesus Christ, as King and Head of the Church has established some institutional safeguards that he wants the church to take seriously and use.

I'm talking about church officers. Elders primarily.

When Paul was on his way to Jerusalem, met with elders from Ephesian church. Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.

Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.

So be on your guard!

Couldn't be more clear. One of the duties of the elder, watch over doctrine.

Refute false teaching that arises within the church. Hopefully that's rare.

Timely and providential that we are covering this today as install officers.

I didn't plan this coincidence. Lord worked it out.

Two things: Second one for every single Christian, whether an officer or not. Put on the armor of God. We'll get into the details. Means putting on Christ.

Knowing, claiming, and appropriating the Gospel for yourself.

If there's a common thread in all heresies, they somehow denigrate, degrade, lessen God's sovereign grace in our salvation and Christ's complete and perfect work of salvation.

And all heresies in some way lift us up a bit.

Give us some goodness or power or say-so or role in our salvation.

Develop a nose for that stink by breathing the aroma of the Gospel.