

SESSION 6: AVOIDING DECEPTION

THE SOURCE OF DECEPTION

In speaking of the coming days of trouble, Jesus warns his followers, *"Watch out that no one deceives you."* (Matt. 24:29). Obviously, deception of the disciples is possible, and Jesus wants them to not be caught off guard. The word for "watch out" in the Greek is a command. Jesus is emphatically saying: Pay attention! See clearly! Keep watch! What is it we are to watch for?

How could deception creep into the church?

Honestly, as an evangelical pastor and a Seminary professor, I am most comfortable looking for bad biblical doctrine and poor teaching. I try to search my own heart for how I might be deceiving myself. I pray often that the Lord would give me eyes to see right from wrong, and to show me how to lovingly lead others in the narrow way. But I seldom think about watching out for a real Deceiver. Washed in my left-brained tradition, I can forget what Jesus so clearly knew—the battle is a spiritual one against a clever foe, Satan. A foe who is always dishonest, always untruthful, and always double-dealing.

Deception has been one of Satan's favorite tools forever.

It is his nature. He *"masquerades as an angel of light"* (2 Cor. 11:14). He *"blinds the minds of unbelievers"* (2 Cor. 4:4). In Revelation 12:9 we read, *"And the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world..."*

Deception of the world is what our Enemy does. Jesus reveals the core of Satan's nature as he rebukes the religious leaders of his day: *"He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies."* (John 8:44)

Why are we so slow to grasp that deception and lies are major tools used against God's Church and Kingdom?

A CULTURE OF SELF-FULFILLMENT

The biggest lie sown into today's American soil is that everyone can discern their own truth. No truth is absolute but that which is found internally. Truth is relative and wrapped in personal experience and perspective. Each must do what feels best for them. It is not a new lie from our

Andrew's Keys from Session 6

- WEDGE ISSUES
- CULTURE OF SELF-FULFILLMENT
- PRESSURE TO COMPROMISE
- APPROVED CHURCH
- BUILD COMMUNITY
- GUARD THE WORD
- CHOOSE TO SAY WHAT GOD SAYS
- BE ON GOD'S SIDE

"There always is this fallacious belief: 'It would not be the same here; here such things are impossible.' Alas, all the evil of the twentieth century is possible everywhere on earth."

■ Aleksandr
Solzhenitsyn, 1974

enemy. In Judges 21:25, we see God's people swirling downward until, "*the people did what was right in their own eyes.*"

Sociologist Carl Truman, in *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, writes, "When it comes to how we think of ourselves, we are all expressive individualists now, and there is no way we can escape from this fact. It is the essence of the world in which we must live and of which we are a part ...that message is being preached from every commercial, every website, every newscast, and every billboard to which people are exposed on a daily basis."

THE OVERWHELMING PRESSURE TO COMPROMISE

In such a culture so misled, the Christian message of submission to a God-directed path is not only "odd" but almost incomprehensible. Christians believe that truth is an external thing to follow, created by God and written down for us in the Bible. This makes no sense to an America which has lost its faith in all externals (like schools, institutions, traditions, government, history, churches, and police). Self-actualization and happiness trump everything. Self is supreme, and if you disagree, then you are the enemy.

In such an environment, there is intense pressure to bend to the culture's way. Those who don't agree are met with anger and disdain. As pressure grows, the Church of Jesus has always faced a choice. Often in history, the church divides when under pressure. Some churches become "more acceptable" to the society by watering down beliefs and compromising biblical values. Andrew notes that a compromising mindset can sound godly, "If I avoid certain issues, I can protect my ministry—which is bearing fruit." They can become "approved" by following the society's edicts. The commanding heights of our culture will applaud these progressive churches, while vilifying those who do not fit their narrative. None-the-less, history shows that compromising churches eventually lose their purity and their witness.

In contrast, churches which do not compromise always face tougher sanctions and more persecution. To survive, they are often forced to meet secretly. The first century church met this way. We see this throughout history and around the world. This remains the way many of our brothers and sisters are worshiping today. The BBC estimates that 100 million Christians in China celebrated Easter in 2017, most meeting secretly in rural homes and city apartments. Open Doors estimates that in 2021, half a million Christians were meeting secretly in North Korea. Today, in Iran, the underground church now may contain one million believers. As persecution grows, the true church continues to thrive.

"Does the church have a future in our generation? I believe the church is in real danger...We are facing present pressures and a present and future manipulation which will be so overwhelming in the days to come that they will make the battles of the last forty years look like child's play."

■ Francis Schaeffer, 1970

KEEPING OUR FOCUS TO AVOID COMPROMISE

I have often told my children, "Keep the main things the main things." Living the Christian life in an anti-Christian world can be demoralizing, and the fallen nature of this world can lead to great pain. In this video, Andrew offered several main things which are necessary for Christians to endure persecution and hardship.

We must build a community of like-minded believers.

As society embraces deep-seated individualism, fewer Christians are intricately connected to a faith community. A 2017 study by Barna concluded that less than one out of every five Christians believes that spiritual maturity requires a connection to a community of faith. To survive when a culture opposes us, we need believers around us. We need to be accountable, prayed for, and encouraged by friends who see the world through biblical eyes. When we have deep relationships with those who know the hope of Christ, we can give each other comfort and speak words of life and hope (2 Cor. 1:3–7; Rom. 12:15). Hebrews 10:24–25 says, *"And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."*

"Our relationship with each other is the criterion the world uses to judge whether our message is truthful - Christian community is the final apologetic."

■ Francis Schaeffer, 1970

The Bible has no concept of individual spirituality. Christianity is not something personal or private, with nothing to do with others. This is, again, a modern way of thinking. The Bible often reminds us that we need each other. For example, God saw that it was not good for Adam to be alone and made Eve as a companion (Gen. 2:18–25). Two or three are better than one (Eccl. 4:9–12). Jesus prayed that His followers would "be one," even as the Trinity is one (John 17). To follow as his disciples, we are to love God and love each other (Matt. 22:34–40). Jesus said that his followers would be known by their love for one another (John 13:34–35).

In Christ, we are made to be children of God (John 1:12). That makes us members of a large family, with Jesus as the big brother of many siblings (Romans 8). The New Testament is filled with commands on how God's kids are to treat one another, written in the plural "you." In the American south, it could be translated as "all y'all." Clearly the Christian life is meant to be lived in human relationship.

We must guard the Word.

Our community must be built around God's Word. The requirements of the Bible have become offensive in our society, and to many groups we interact with. The Bible clearly calls us to a certain identity, to obedience in public and private, to fidelity in marriage, and to the exclusivity of Jesus. Many people want to downgrade its authority and dilute its teachings. Andrew notes, "I have seen many people drift away from their faith because they are surrounded by the wrong circle of friends. Friends who are not committed to the authority of the Bible."

You cannot have Jesus and renounce the Bible. Jesus believed in the Bible and built his life and teachings around it. Jesus repeatedly cited Jewish scripture to settle a debate. He would make his point by stressing "*it is written*" followed by an Old Testament citation. Jesus believed in the equivalence of "Scripture says" with "God says," and he shows the highest view of the Old Testament when he affirmed, "*the Scripture cannot be broken*" (John 10:34). Unrecognized on the road to Emmaus, he speaks to two disciples who are forlorn at his death. His answer to their grief is sharing the Messianic truth of the Old Testament: "*And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself*" (Luke 24:26-28). Jesus built his life around the truths of the Bible. If Jesus based his message and ministry on the Bible, have we, as his followers, any other choice? We must hold tightly to the thing which has defined the orthodoxy of the Church for 2000 years.

We need to say what God says.

I confess that I sometimes find this a difficult part of my life around non-Christians. I genuinely love meeting new people. Every person is valuable and has something to offer me. Every person adds something. The Lord has used serving alongside Catholic nuns, Hindu lepers, Senators, gay scholars, and soap-box preachers to teach me things.

As a peacemaker, I work hard to build bridges and find common ground with every individual I meet. Jesus was comfortable around everyone, even those that seemed ungodly and wayward. I know I am imperfect. Therefore, I always seek to be respectful and kind, and give people a great deal of grace. I know I need to earn the right to speak into people's lives. I know that those I meet carry many wounds, and that the journey to faith is a long and varied one marked by enduring love.

But in my bridge building, I cannot agree with things that are against my faith. I cannot call "right" what God calls "wrong." I cannot be inauthentic to the Lord I serve. God determines what is true, not man. The world is changing quickly, and there is little graciousness left in our culture. When we speak out about what we believe, even kindly and with gentleness, there is little room for our biblical positions. A few years ago, someone threw a fire-bomb through the window of the "judgmental" church I was serving at because we didn't agree with having a pornography store on our block. Later, a blog I posted about a young woman's miracle went viral, bringing with it a storm

"Jesus did not let any institution interfere with his love for individuals. Jewish racial and religious policies forbade him to speak with a Samaritan woman, let alone one with a checkered moral background; Jesus selected one as a missionary. His disciples included a tax collector, viewed as a traitor by Israel, and also a Zealot, a member of the super-patriot party. He praised the countercultural John the Baptist. He met with Nicodemus, an observant Pharisee, and also with a Roman centurion. He dined in the home of another Pharisee named Simon and also in the home of an 'unclean' man, Simon the Leper.

For Jesus, the person was more important than any category or label. I know how easy it is to get swept away by the politics of polarization, to shout across picket lines at the 'enemy' on the other side. But Jesus commanded, 'Love your enemies.'"

■ Phillip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace*

of threats and attacks about a God who heals some and lets others die. The cancel culture of anger is real, and growing in America, not just in Iran or China.

We must say about ourselves what God says. We must say about good and evil what God says. We must say about God what he says about himself. Andrew notes:

If you do this, it will put you at odds with the mainstream of our culture. It will put you at odds with the progressive church. Even many evangelical church leaders are hesitant to speak truth... The Bible says that God will judge people and punish sin. Many will say this is a message of hate, which twists God's character, because he's a God of love who doesn't judge. But I must say what God says about himself. I don't have to understand. I don't have to defend God. What I must do is come into agreement with him.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR REFLECTION

- 1) Deception is defined as "the act of causing someone to accept as true or valid what is false or invalid." What examples of deception do you see today?
- 2) One outlook on community is, "When I get close to people, I get hurt." Is this true? Why?
- 3) How, in practical ways, do we guard the Word?
- 4) To be on God's side requires a choice. How and when must we make this choice?

ACTION STEPS

- ✓ Look back at our "LEARNING FROM" boxes about persecution around the world. Place yourself as a Christian in each country (North Korea, Ethiopia, Iraq, Canada). Honestly, how would you fare?
- ✓ Pray for new strength for yourself and for all Christians around the world to stand up with courage.

LEARNING FROM AMERICA

"There was a 'neutral world' roughly between 1994–2014 in which traditional Christianity was neither broadly supported nor opposed by the surrounding culture, but rather was viewed as an eccentric lifestyle option among many. However, that time is over. Now we live in the 'negative world,' in which, according to Aaron Renn, Christian morality is expressly repudiated and traditional Christian views are perceived as undermining the social good...

Tough choices are increasingly before us, offense is unavoidable, and sides will need to be taken on very important issues. Recent events have proven that being winsome in this moment will not guarantee a favorable hearing.

One important example came in 2017. When the Kuyper Center for Public Theology selected Tim Keller as the recipient of the 'Kuyper Prize for Excellence in Reformed Theology and Public Witness,' many students, faculty, and alumni of Princeton Theological Seminary (which is where the Kuyper Center holds its annual conference) protested. Though Keller had spent decades cultivating a thoughtful and compassionate approach to public witness, many simply could not abide Princeton honoring someone who transgresses progressive orthodoxies on sex and gender. The award was rescinded."

■ James R. Wood, *First Things Journal*, 5/6/2022

- ✓ Pray specifically, "Father, give me insight into Your Word, will, and ways. Help me to align myself with your Word and to build relationship with others who also want to live according to your truth."

FOR DEEPER STUDY AND TEACHING—GOD'S USE OF DREAMS TO WARN HIS PEOPLE

At Pentecost, Peter recites the Prophet Joel when he says, *"In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy."* (Acts 2:17-18).

The biblical God is one who cares for his people. To get their attention as difficult days approach, he promises he will *"pour out my Spirit on all people."* Notice that Joel and Peter, both led by the Spirit moving in them, see a widespread movement of God as the last days approach. Spiritual wisdom—through prophecies, visions, and dreams—stream to both the old and young, and both to men and women. God is sending a widespread warning to awaken his church and to warn his people to be ready. It is happening now around the world.

"The Bible indicates that God revealed His will to selected people through dreams or visions in Scripture...God may communicate through dreams or visions even today, but we need to carefully check any such guidance we receive with Scripture and godly counsel to be sure it is from the Lord."

■ Billy Graham

In the video, Andrew mentioned a dream I have had. I think I might be one of Joel's "old men." I certainly qualify as old. For my whole Christian life, God has spoken to me in normal ways: primarily through Scripture, prayer, worship, and the wisdom of wise Christians. Remember, I am a reformed evangelical who believes we best hear God in the pages of his Word. Personally, I have never heard God's auditory voice. I dream often, and most of my dreams have more to do with pizza than God. But, in an unexpected way, God has given a few dreams which stand apart in my soul. Each were so vivid that I could remember every detail and every moment, even until today. They feel exceptional, very different, and far more clear than normal dreams I have had. I have studied dreams in the Word. The Bible is filled with dreamers. I have heard, I believe, from God in my dreams. I am reminded of Job 33:14-16,

"For God does speak—now one way, now another—though no one perceives it. In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on people as they slumber in their beds, he may speak in their ears."

For many years, only my closest family, friends, and mentors knew of my special dreams. Recently, as I have shared these dreams with other wise scholars and devoted Christian leaders, there seems to be a consensus that God is speaking. They have encouraged me to find truth in the dreams, simply asking me to listen to the Lord's voice, and share them when I feel led. I share them when pressed by the Spirit, when I am asked, or when I have them anew. People react or interpret them as they will. I know I am an imperfect receiver of God's Spirit. I hold them loosely.

Andrew shared about one of my dreams in this video. In this dream, he and I, as directed by Jesus, are building a wall of sand to protect us from a massive tidal wave which we can see on the coast. Let me add some details from my journal:

A large black-green tidal wave is at the shoreline, a tsunami ready to strike. It is massive—perhaps twice the size of the 80-foot cliff where a church and a town are perched. As they meet inside the church, people and the town are unaware that they are so near destruction. The huge wave literally “hangs in the air.” Not quite frozen, it is defying gravity, splashing, and swirling dark waters, as if almost alive, but not yet falling on the people. And then I understand. The Lord is holding the dark wave back. He is keeping the evil away. His power has paused the wave to avoid the destruction for a moment...

Seeing the wave in the distance now, I heard a voice say to me, “You must build a tower of sand to be protected, and to guard my Word, for soon the wave will be released.” It seemed odd—sandcastle walls seem unable to stand against such a wave. But we began piling up sand into a tower, like kids on a beach, and it grew more and more solid around us. It seemed to me that the wall was the community of Christians, one grain upon another. The dream has us waiting inside this hand-built tower for the wave, at peace.

In 2004, I served as a grief counselor with a medical team on the coast of India, attending to those caught in the destruction of the Indian Ocean Tsunami. I cried with many, many families who had lost their children in the wave. I can’t help but remember beach after beach covered with broken treasures and children’s flip-flops. I know firsthand what devastation a Tsunami can cause.

Andrew and I, with many other Christian leaders, believe a spiritual Tsunami is off the coast, rolling toward America. Thankfully, God cares about his people. He wants us to survive the coming wave of persecution. The Pentecost passage from Joel continues a few verses later (Joel 2:32): *“And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the Lord has said, even among the survivors whom the Lord calls.”*

So, what do we do when we sense darkness, persecution, or trouble ahead? When we feel the heat? We share as the Lord leads, we pray for wisdom, we strengthen our souls, and we continue in faith as life unfolds. 1 Peter 4:19 is clear: *“So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.”* Quoting from Rod Dreher, we stagger onward rejoicing:

We live liturgically, telling our sacred Story in worship and song. We fast and we feast. We marry and give our children in marriage, and though in exile, we work for the peace of the city. We welcome our newborns and bury our dead. We read the Bible, and we tell our children about the saints... We work, we pray, we confess our sins, we show mercy, we welcome the stranger, and we keep the commandments. When we suffer, especially for Christ’s sake, we give thanks, because that is what Christians do. Who knows what God, in turn, will do with our faithfulness? It is not for us to say. Our command is, in the words of the Christian poet W. H. Auden, to “stagger onward rejoicing.”