

# Deception: Discerning the Devil's Most Dangerous Device

by Dr. Steven Riser

## How do we know what isn't so?

The biblical picture of Satan is quite different from the popular one. In the Bible, he is not the comical cartoon creature with horns, tail, and pitchfork, ludicrously dressed in long red underwear. Rather, Satan is an adversary, who is clever, crafty, deceptive and dangerous (1 Pet. 5:8). Satan knows our weakness and exploits them to great advantage against us. The Bible does not speak so much about the power of Satan as of his extreme subtlety, trickery and deceptiveness. He uses clever wiles, deceptive devices, wily stratagems and deceitful designs.

He is spoken of as a roaring lion (1 Pet. 5:8). Paul wrote about the evil powers of darkness against which we struggle (Eph. 6:12). And it is in the darkness that we are easily attacked and deceived. Therefore, Paul said in 2 Corinthians 2:11, "*Lest Satan should get an advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices.*" Ignorance is not bliss, especially when it comes to knowing our enemy! One of the cardinal rules of military warfare is to **know your enemy**. The better we know what we are up against, the more likely we are to recognize how and when the enemy attacks and the more likely we will be able to resist the fiery darts of the evil one in the strength of the Lord.

In the old hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," Martin Luther alerts us to be on guard: "For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe; His craft and power are great, and armed with cruel hate, On earth is not his equal." When Christians learn to rest in the finished work of Christ, we will discover that Satan is a defeated foe! (Rev. 12:11; Col. 2:12). "*His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure, one little word shall fell him.*" According to Hebrews 2:14, one of the reasons why Jesus came was to destroy the devil. John says that, "*The one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one does not touch him*" (1 Jn. 5:18).

## What is the nature of Satan?

The names of a person frequently reveal the nature, activity and mission of a

person. Satan is known by almost 30 different names in Scripture, some of which are:

1. The adversary (1 Pet. 5:8, 9)
2. The god of this world (2 Cor. 4:4)
3. The prince of the power of the air (Eph. 2:1-3)
4. The accuser of the brethren (Rev. 12:10; Job 1:6-12)
5. The enemy (Matt. 13:39)
6. The tempter (Matt. 4:3)
7. The roaring lion (1 Pet. 5:8-10)
8. The father of lies (John 8:44)
9. The deceiver (Rev. 12:9)
10. The murderer (John 8:44)

**What are some of the primary objectives of Satan?**

1. To deceive us concerning the true nature of sin.
2. To cause us to doubt the truth of God's Word
3. To cause us to feel inferior and inadequate—low self-esteem
4. To tempt us not to trust in the Lord.
5. To discourage us concerning our progress in spiritual growth.
6. To disappoint through the inconsistency of ourselves and others.
7. To cause us to lose our vitality and credibility.
8. To encourage us to abdicate the Christian life.
9. To render us ineffective and unfruitful in our service of God.
10. To divide us from others through unnecessary and unresolved conflict.

**What are some of the weapons that Satan has in his arsenal?**

1. Fear/False Accusation/Condemnation
2. Doubt/Misinformation
3. Anger/Hostility
4. Worry/Anxiety
5. Guilt/False Guilt
6. Tempts and blinds by Deception/Lies
7. Discouragement/Disappointment
8. Deep Depression
9. Division/Conflict
10. Ignorance/Misconceptions

## **What do you suppose is Satan most frequently used and most deadly weapon?**

When you consider the above list, is there any common denominator? What about deadly device of deception? In John 8:44 Jesus said, *“You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire. 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.”*

Every time Satan speaks, his lies are intended to mislead and deceive in order to defeat us.

## **Do you know what you don’t know?**

No, you don’t know what you don’t know. There are two ways of not knowing: 1) being ignorant and 2) being deceived. Deception allows Satan to fly under the radar screen largely unnoticed. Instead of being deceived by the father of lies, when you discover who you are in Christ and learn to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, you will be free from the bondage of Satan’s lies (2 Cor. 10:5).

## **Why was Eve deceived?**

If I tempted you, you would know it. If I deceived you, you wouldn’t know it. If you know you are being deceived, then you are not being deceived. Eve was deceived because she believed the lie that God did not want what was best for her, but didn’t know it was a lie. We can see from Genesis 3 that deception was the primary strategy of Satan from the beginning. Perhaps some of us look down on Eve for being deceived by the serpent in the garden? But each time we sin we’re deceived by the same lie.

## **What is God’s Primary Means of Defense?**

We need only to see how Jesus responded to Satan’s temptations in the wilderness in order to identify God’s primary means of defense (Matt. 4:1-10). It’s no wonder that Jesus said in John 17:17, *“Sanctify them by the truth; Your word is truth.”* It’s no wonder that Paul said in Ephesians 6:14, *“Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist...”* The good news is that we have available to us the first line of defense—the Sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God (Eph. 6:17).

## **When are we vulnerable to Satan’s lies?**

We are most vulnerable when we are most ignorant. Jesus said that we are to watch (remain spiritually alert) and pray. We are vulnerable to Satan’s lies if we fail to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. We’re most equipped when we’re able to relate specific Scripture to specific temptations—like Jesus in Matthew 4:1-10.

## **What are the primary ways in which Satan will attempt to deceive you into believing his lies?**

The three principle enemies of the Christian are:

1. The Flesh—Yourself (self-deception) the process of misleading ourselves to accept what is false as true. It is one form of denying the truth—justifying false beliefs to ourselves.

2. The World—Others—unintentionally and intentionally (false prophets and teachers).

3. The Devil or his cohorts—Deceiving demonic spirits (1 Tim. 4:1).

## **What are some of the specific ways in which God's Word says we deceive ourselves?**

1. We deceive ourselves when we hear the word and don't do it—when we fail to practice what we preach: James 1:22—"*Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.*"

2. We deceive ourselves when, because of our pride, we say we have no sin. We are not sinless saints. We are saints who sin and the church is a hospital for sinners. First John 1:8-10 says, "*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.*" James 4:6—"*But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.'*"

3. We deceive ourselves when we think we're something that we are not: Romans 12:3 says, "*For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.*" Galatians 6:3—"*If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.*"

Paul says we are what we are by the grace of God: 1 Corinthians 15:10—"*But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.*" All we are and have are expressions of God's grace.

4. We deceive ourselves when we mistake the world's wisdom for God's wisdom: 1 Corinthians 3:18-19—"*Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a 'fool' so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: 'He catches the wise in their craftiness.'*"

The height of arrogance is to think that we know better than the "all-wise God." Paul said in Romans 1:22—"*Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools.*" We cannot match wits with the god of this world, let alone the God of this universe. Whenever we think we can outsmart Satan we are candidates for being led astray by his crafty deceitfulness. It's important that we not rely on our own understanding but rather acknowledge God in all our ways (Prov. 3:5, 6).

5. We deceive ourselves when we think we are religious but do not bridle our

tongue. James 1:26—*“If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.”*

6. We deceive ourselves when we think we will not reap what we sow. Galatians 6:7—*“Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.”*

7. We deceive ourselves when we think that the unrighteous will inherit the kingdom of God: 1 Corinthians 6:9-10—*“Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.”*

8. We deceive ourselves when we think that we can continually associate with bad company and not be corrupted: 1 Corinthians 15:33—*“Do not be misled: ‘Bad company corrupts good character.’”*

### **How do other people deceive us inside and outside the church? (Jer. 23:16, 21-31)**

The Scripture in general and Jesus in particular warn us against false prophets and false teachers. Satan can counterfeit spiritual gifts and deceive us into believing they're from God. That's why the Scriptures instruct us to put everything to the test. In 1 Thessalonians 5:21, Paul says, *“Test everything. Hold on to the good.”* False prophets and teachers exist because Christians uncritically accept them. A prophetic message should motivate people to righteousness, not placate them in their sin. Manipulating people by claiming a word from the Lord is spiritual abuse. Beware of people who tell you that, *“the Lord told me to tell you something.”*

False prophets can even be among us: 2 Peter 2:1-2—*“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—bringing swift destruction on themselves. Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute.”*

The biblical standards are truth and righteousness and false teachers malign both.

### **How are we to beware of deceiving spirits?**

In addition to deceiving ourselves and being deceived by others, can we be deceived in other ways? For many, demonic spirits are normally viewed as “influences” and their effectiveness in the lives of people is undetected because they are not seen as real personalities that are totally and unreservedly evil. These ambassadors of Satan are busy doing what they do best—deceiving men and women, both regenerate and unregenerate.

Ephesians 6:12, *“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and*

*against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*” First Timothy 4:1—“*The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.*” First John 2:18; 4:16 cautions us to test the spirits in order to unmask the antichrists. Satan’s forces are at work attempting to pollute our minds with lies to keep us from walking in the truth.

### **What is more deceitful than anything else?**

Jeremiah 17:9 says, “*The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?*” In Ephesians 4:22 Paul tells us to “*put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires.*” Jesus said in Matthew 15:19, “*For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.*” Sin in general, and our human heart in particular, are extremely and inherently sinful. Hebrews 11:25 talks about “*the pleasures of sin for a short time.*” Sin appears to be good for a while but that is because it is deceptive. Sin is never in our long-term best interest.

### **What is the relationship between Deception and Evangelism?**

The Bible describes the non-Christian as blinded and imprisoned by Satan in “the dominion of darkness” (Col. 1:13; 2 Cor. 4:4). Second Thessalonians 2:9-10 says that the evil one deceives those who are perishing. The unbeliever cannot escape this prison by himself, nor can the Christian rescue him through the Christian’s own abilities. Your skill or lack of it in explaining or arguing for the gospel is not what it takes to liberate a person from Satan’s deception. Evangelism is humanly impossible, but God rescues a person through three means: His Word, His Spirit and His People.

### **What was Paul’s approach to evangelism?**

1 Corinthians 2:4 “*My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power.*” 2 Corinthians 10:4-5 “*The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.*”

### **What is our first line of defense against deception?**

Spiritual discernment is God’s antidote or first line of defense against deception. The Word and Spirit of God discern the thoughts and intentions of our hearts and give us the ability to discern—the ability to make proper distinctions. Spiritual discernment presupposes proper motives. The motive for true discernment is never self-promotion or personal gain. Discernment has one primary function: to distinguish between right and wrong so that we may pursue the right and avoid the wrong. It is more a function of the Holy Spirit bearing witness to our spirit than it is of the human mind. Our union with God makes spiritual discernment possible through the process of illumination.

Apart from God we are spiritually deaf, dumb and blind. Discernment comes through the Holy Spirit illuminating us as to what is consistent with the Word of God. Paul says in Romans 8 that the Holy "*Spirit bears witness with our spirit...*" Hebrews 5:14 identifies those who have discernment: "...*the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.*" Jesus said in John 8:31-32 to the Jews who had believed him, "*If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*" The light of God's truth is the only valid weapon against the darkness of deception.

### **How can one be "inoculated" against deceptions?**

1. Believe God wants you to know—He wants His people free! (Jn. 8:32; 16:13)
2. Be willing to do His will in advance of knowing it. (Jas. 1:22; Jn. 7:17)
3. Believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God and our final authority. (1 Thess. 2:13)
4. Be diligent in studying God's Word with a humble, teachable attitude. (2 Tim. 2:15)

### **What is the greatest deception for the unregenerate person and the regenerate person?**

The unregenerate person is deceived into thinking that one need not be saved or that salvation is by works and that salvation can be put off to some later day. All the world religions except Christianity believe this and they are all deceived. Salvation is by grace alone (Eph. 2:8-9).

The regenerate person is most frequently deceived by thinking of themselves in terms of their old nature (Rom. 8:5-14) rather than their new nature and failing to realize who they are in Christ. This is such an important issue that it demands a separate article for a fuller, clearer explanation.

### **How can we sum up what we have learned on this important topic?**

It is impossible to have a biblical worldview without believing in the reality of Satan and the serious threat of his dangerous devices—especially deception. Ignorance is not bliss. The better we know what we are up against the more likely we are to recognize how and when the enemy attacks and the more likely we will be able to resist the fiery darts of the evil one in the strength of the Lord. We are vulnerable to Satan's lies if we fail to exercise mental discipline. We're most equipped when we are able to immediately relate specific Scripture to specific temptations—like Jesus in Matthew 4.

We need to take advantage of the resources that God has provided in order to successfully resist the attacks from the evil one—spiritual discernment through the Word and Spirit of God. We overcome the evil one by the blood of the Lamb—when we discover who we are in Christ and learn to take every thought

captive to the obedience of Christ, we will be free from the bondage of Satan's lies (2 Cor. 10:5). The good news is that we have available to us the first line of defense—the Sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God (Eph. 6:17).

We need to keep this problem in view when sharing the good news of God's love with others and humbly acknowledge our limitations. Unless the Holy Spirit is working in a sinner's life to convict of sin, righteousness and judgment, nothing of any eternal consequence is happening (Jn. 16:8-11).

The Apostle John gives us this encouraging reminder in 1 John 4:4-6, *"You... are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood."*