

THE TERRIFYING POSSIBILITY OF SELF-DECEPTION

Allow a pastoral digression from Job. Pastors are caretakers of the soul. I am concerned how you might take (or not take) Job 18.

Any congregation probably has hypocrites and real Christians. The former tend to dismiss warnings; the latter, to be demoralized. I want to address the first problem this AM; the second, this PM.

B's insinuation was a potential stumbling-block to J, alleging he was a hypocrite (Job 8.6; 18.5). Job knew better (10.7) and resisted him, Satan's instrument (Rev 12.10; cf. Matt 16.23). Such warnings may needlessly depress/torment believers, who tremble at God's Word. Far be it from me to become like B to any of my beloved brethren!

OTOH, B's caution is valid and may awaken lost pretenders while there is time. I would give anything to save some who are like I was! One of my nightmares is that any of you might perish.

Beware self-deception (Jer 37.9; 1 Cor 3.18), terrifying because:

- *It soothes the damned* (Jer 23.17; 1 John 1.8; Rev 3.17). He knows no reason for alarm. He is asleep in a burning house. "All see how others deceive themselves; yet none, of whatever class, imagine themselves to be in any great danger of self-delusion" (Charles Simeon, IV.CCCCLVII).
- *It is so prevalent*. Multitudes of professing Christians will be stunned on Judgment Day to be excluded from the righteous (Job 8.13; 27.8-10; Matt 7.22-23).
- *It is so easy*. "Nothing is easier than self-deceit. For what each man wishes, that he also believes to be true" (Demosthenes). Little is harder in this life than to entertain the real possibility that you are headed for eternal torments, and yet, if you never admit this to yourself, it is harder still to see how you could be saved.
- *It is natural*. Before God gives us faith, we are self-confident. We trust our deceitful hearts (Prov 14.12; Jer 17.9) which tell us we are something when we are nothing (Gal 6.3).
- *It is a form of bondage*. If a good man were duped by a bad, there might be hope of realizing his error and recovering, but when a bad man dupes himself, he needs a miracle (Isa 44.20). "The idolater is 'hooked' on idolatry. A whole area of freedom has died and he is not able to save himself. . . . The idolater picks up the figurine in his hand, holding it, but in reality it holds him. He is in bondage to a lie" (Alec Motyer, in loc.).
- *It ends very, very badly*. Unless pride's spell is broken, the self-deceived will burn in an oven of God's wrath (Obad 3; Mal 4.1; Matt 24.51).

James 1.19-27 warns (AM) and protects (PM) against self-deception.

Reality of Self-Deception

James warns "my beloved brethren" (v. 19; i.e., those he regards as Christians, cf. 2.1). Even they need it. He has two explicit references.

1) Vs. 22, "deceiving your own selves," Gk. verb only here and Col 2.4: to "deceive ["to cause to accept as true or valid what is false or invalid"], delude ["to mislead the mind or judgment of," both MWCD]" (BDAG).

2) Vs. 26, "deceiveth his own heart [i.e., himself]," sense nearly the same.

As a pastor [James] . . . knows that many people merely go through the motions of serving God, but their speech gives them away. Their religion has a hollow ring. And although they may not realize it, by their words and by their actions—or lack of them—they deceive themselves. Their heart is not right with God and their fellow man, and their attempt to hide this lack of love only heightens their self-deception. Their religion is worthless (Kistemaker, in loc.).

What does the hypocrite falsely believe? Here, mainly two things:

1) That he "shall be blessed in his deed" (v. 25). James is a NT writer using OT idiom. The hypocrite believes he is in God's favor and shall be saved.

2) That he is truly "religious" (v. 26). "If anyone thinks he is religious" (ESV), positive connotation, i.e., God-fearing, pious (TDNTA). Hypocrites typically very high religious self-esteem, considering themselves very devout, etc.

He sincerely believes these things but he is severely mistaken. He has PRESUMPTION, that plausible, worthless counterfeit of ASSURANCE. But just as with counterfeit money, if you really want to know, you can find out. God's Word gives us absolutely reliable tests to distinguish these.

Suppose someone gave you a bag filled with a hundred bundles of twenties. You might consider keeping and spending them even if you suspected counterfeits. You *might not want to know*, but this could ruin your life. The presumptuous will be caught red-handed by Christ on Judgment Day!

Marks of Self-Deception. Let me show you four telltale signs. These relate to the PM sermon matter so we only mention them briefly here.

1. Annoyance with preaching/counsel that pricks the conscience. Jas 2.19-20 may especially relate to Scripture. The hypocrite is slow to hear (i.e., really listen and take to heart), quick to speak (talk back), and quick to wrath/annoyance, at least in his spirit. This habitual reaction works against his becoming righteous, growing in righteousness, etc.
2. Unwillingness to "put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness" (v. 21 ESV). Saints war against remaining sin. Hypocrites make peace with it.
3. Consistent failure to practice the Word despite good intentions (vv. 22-24). You might like good sermons and still be lost (Ezek 33.31-32).
4. Unbridled [uncontrolled] tongue (v. 26). He just says what he thinks. A hypocrite never reigns in his speech with a Scripture halter. For example, he claims to be a Christian without a biblical warrant, when he should wait until God makes him a new man to make the claim (2 Cor 5.17).

Professing Christians, examine yourselves. These marks, when habitual, and while you remain impenitent and unchanged, are marks of the damned. Your hope of heaven is wishful thinking. Your house is built on sand. Repent!

THE PROMISE OF DELIVERANCE FROM SELF-DECEPTION

I am confident many of you are real Christians. So I am deeply concerned that you might lose assurance by misapplying warnings meant for hypocrites. By God's grace, Job faced and overcame this temptation, and you can, too.

Prov 28.26, "He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool: but whoso walketh wisely, he shall be delivered." Whether you "feel saved or not" is no indicator of your true spiritual state. The Word of God applied is the only reliable test—and it is reliable. Believers can have strong assurance of salvation, and should crave it (1 John 5.13). What God offers you may have.

Counterfeit money may be convincing at first but it is not undetectable if you know the what real money looks like (lifelike portrait, clear Federal Reserve and Treasury seals, fine lines in border, paper with tiny red and blue fibers, etc., from the US Secret Service website).

If you honestly compare your own heart and life with the biblical description of a real Christian, you will be able to judge yourself. It is like taking a course on how to spot counterfeit money and then being willing to test your stash.

God promises deliverance from self-deception, but it is a *conditional* promise.

For example, consider 2 Pet 1.5-11. First, you must "give diligence to make your calling and election sure" (v. 10), and this assurance is not a carrot on a stick. Spurgeon explained,

Not [making your calling and election sure] towards God, for they are sure to Him: make them sure to yourself. Be quite certain of them be fully satisfied about them. In many of our dissenting places of worship very great encouragement is held out to doubting. A person comes before the pastor, and says, "Oh! sir, I am so afraid I am not converted; I tremble lest I should not be a child of God. Oh! I fear I am not one of the Lord's elect." The pastor will put out his hands to him, and say, "Dear brother, you are all right so long as you can doubt." Now, I hold, that is altogether wrong. Scripture never says, "He that doubteth shall be saved," but "He that believeth." It may be true that the man is in a good state; it may be true that he wants a little comfort; but his doubts are not good things, nor ought we to encourage him in his doubts. Our business is to encourage him out of his doubts, and by the grace of God to urge him to "give *all* diligence to make his calling and election *sure*," not to doubt it, but to be sure of it. . . . Idle men have no right to assurance. The Scripture says, "Give diligence to make your calling and election sure."

Second, Peter says, "if ye do these things, ye shall never fall" (v. 10). There's the promise, but it starts with an "if." What are "these things," which, as you do them, guarantee your abundant entrance into Christ's kingdom? (v. 11). Probably it refers to the diligent pursuit of the virtues in vv. 5-7. Another "if" appears in v. 8 attached to them, with the promise of spiritual fruitfulness.

And it is impossible that one who proves spiritually fruitful should be damned, because he is one in whom God's saving grace is powerfully operating.

Conversely, a hypocrite does not diligently pursue these virtues, is not spiritually fruitful, and is not diligent to make his calling sure, etc.! That is why any confidence he might feel is mere untested presumption on his part.

James 1.19-27 promises deliverance from self-deception *with the basic condition of relating properly to God's Word*. You don't need a special revelation or a warm feeling, but real faith in Scripture with the fruits of it.

A Real Christian Hears the Word Patiently (vv. 19-20)

This may praise a good, patient listener in general, but I think it has special reference to God's Word. The context favors this. Note references to Scripture in vv. 18, 21, 22, 25. John MacArthur comments on this passage,

Believers are to respond positively to Scripture, and eagerly pursue every opportunity to know God's Word and will better. But at the same time, they should be cautious about becoming a preacher or teacher too quickly. ["Wrath" in 1.20] describes a deep, internal resentment and rejection, in this context, of God's Word.

A Real Christian Receives the Word Meekly (v. 21)

"Receive" means "to indicate approval or conviction by accepting, be receptive of, be open to, approve, accept" (BDAG) the Word (Acts 17.11). The original verb can mean "receive, welcome, believe, take hold of" (LN). In this context "meekness" connotes "humility" (BDAG), an attitude of submission to teaching and counsel of the Word. True of all real Christians.

A Real Christian Obeys the Word Practically (vv. 22-24)

Hearing it comes first (cf. v. 19) but doing it must follow. Biblical indicatives lead to imperatives with the force of divine command. Faith with respect to the Gospel inspires obedience with respect to the moral law (cf. Jas 2.17).

I am reading a book on manliness and have already put into practice its advice on shaving. What have you changed because of biblical counsel?

A Real Christian Continues in the Word Perseveringly (v. 25)

He "continueth in the perfect law of liberty, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work." God gives, preserves a living faith in real Christians, so that it remains with them to the end of their lives. Is your faith enduring?

A Real Christian Lives the Word Comprehensively (vv. 26-27)

Genuine faith changes his habits of speech, compassion, and moral purity. These exemplify radical, general, all-encompassing moral improvement.

Do you relate to the Word this way? Don't say you can't tell. God reveals this for real self-examination with a sound conclusion. If you can honestly say, "Yes, by grace, I do," you are certainly in a state of grace! Amen.