

“Do Not Be Deceived”

Luke 21:5-28

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. The Word of the Lord which will serve as the basis for the sermon this morning is our Gospel lesson, read a moment ago from Luke chapter 21.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

We are nearing the end of the church year, and in the tradition of the ancient church, we use this time to discuss “the time of the end,” as Daniel’s prophecy refers to it. In our Gospel lesson the Lord Jesus Christ is teaching about what to expect at the coming of the Son of Man, and describing what will lead up to it. In verse 8, He says regarding false messiahs, “See that you are not led astray. For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is at hand!’ Do not go after them.” A better translation of that would be, “See that you are not deceived.” Deception is a clever trick of the devil to lead astray, to bring people into his realm instead of in the care of the one true God. This certainly is nothing new. Throughout Scripture there are instances of the evil one working through people to deceive and try to make God a fool.

Take Gehazi, the servant of Elisha. In 2 Kings 5:20-27, when Elisha heals Naaman the Syrian of his leprosy, he refuses to accept payment from Naaman in response to God’s gracious gift. After Naaman leaves, Gehazi sees an opportunity for personal gain, and he uses great deceit in his actions. He follows Naaman out onto the road and says, “My master has sent me to say, ‘There have just now come to me from the hill country of Ephraim two young men of the sons of the prophets. Please give them a talent of silver and two changes of clothing.’” Of course, his master has said no such thing, and these supposed young men of Ephraim do not exist. For his treachery, Gehazi is cursed with leprosy, as will be his descendants after him. The point of this being that Gehazi, in defying God’s holy prophet, and deceitfully gaining that which was not owed to him, has allowed the devil to lead him astray by his deceit. In the context of our text, he was the deceitful man that Jesus warns about, claiming to speak for the prophet of God, and thus speaking for God Himself. The same evil lurks around every corner for the people of God in today’s world as well. But do not be deceived. It is the devil and his minions behind every bit of it.

Societal deception is all around us. It’s where you work, where you shop, when you drive, and on it goes. The world is extremely good at making you “look over here” while doing the underhanded things behind your back. It’s the old magic trick sleight of

hand that makes you look away from the thing that's really causing the problem. "Don't look over here at all the babies that we are killing. Look over there at the mean tweets that they keep saying!" There's nothing quite like mass murder done in the name of "social justice." Satan is always working through underhanded tactics to work against the people of God and His salvific plan, and his deceptive attempts are very convincing to all too many people. It works in many instances, and it is not something that ought to be cast aside as an innocuous flash in the pan that'll just blow over. The evil one seeks to rip God's people away from Him, and by turning them inward to their own feelings and society's whims, he is priming them for destruction.

And it isn't just in societal terms either, though the evil we encounter on a daily basis is mind-bogglingly horrific. The devil has found his way into the church. False prophets abound thanks to the same evil intent of the world that has corrupted our society. "Many will come in My name," Jesus says. Not just a few. Not just one or two here and there, but many. As the end draws nigh the devil's agents are working harder and harder to achieve his condemning end to Christians around the world. Through the heresies these false prophets expound he is able to convince Christians that they are smarter than God, and that the ability for them to figure it out on their own is good and proper. They are teaching the very doctrine that the Lord warns us of in our text. They are themselves false messiahs and teaching others to be their own false messiahs in turn. By teaching a doctrine of my works and not Christ's one work, or my powerful words and not God's powerful Word, they are screaming from the rooftops, "I am he!"

And all of it is done in the name of God, speaking as if it is His doctrine they espouse and not the doctrine of demons. Paul says this will happen in 1 Timothy 4:1-2, where the Apostle writes to the young pastor, "Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared." That is the very thing we see happening in the church today. During these "later times," which is a reference to the same end times that Jesus speaks of in our Gospel lesson, people will not just scratch their itching ears with false doctrines, but they will be lost to them. This is the greatest attack of the devil—to lead those who seek God to believe they follow Him and are in reality only at the mercy of his demonic forces. It's a "Wizard of Oz" type of moment. "Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!" Continuing to believe that God is the author of these doctrines will lead to the ultimate penalty of eternal death. We must expose the man behind the curtain for who he is, and he is none other than the liar and great deceiver, Satan. Just as Jesus says, "Do not go after them," but mark and avoid them.

We must , however, call these people to repentance and teach them the proper doctrines of God as they have been given to us by God Himself. The first and foremost of those being the doctrine of justification. We are saved not by our own works, and our words have no power that exists in this world. The power to save belongs to Jesus Christ alone, and is a result only of His substitutionary death which paid the penalty for our sins. To believe anything else is to make God a liar, and there is no deceit in the one true God. The Apostle John says in 1 John 5:10-11:

Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. Whoever does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne concerning His Son. And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal, and this life is in His Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

Any doctrine that teaches anything other than salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone makes God a deceiver, and that is contrary to His very nature as it has been revealed to us in Holy Scripture.

There is nothing but truth in Him, and any seeming deceit is there only by our imperfect reason injecting it. We are not called upon to question God, but to question the world according to His Godly revelation in His Word. We are not to look for the end in order to find a way around it, but we are to look to the end of all things in the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds of glory with joy and anticipation. Our Lord and Savior says in verse 9 of our text, “And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified, for these things must first take place, but the end will not be at once.” There are going to be things happening around us in the world that make us wonder just how bad it must get before the Lord finally comes back to bring us home. Many of them will shake us into fear and trembling, but we do as the Lord has bid us, and the Psalmist adjures us in Psalm 118:6, “The Lord is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me?” So, we look on without fear, knowing that He has our salvation well in hand.

The Lord could return at any moment, but it will be at a time we do not know, and it will happen in His time, not ours. As we wait for that moment, we stand firm in our faith, looking to the blood of Christ for our salvation, and placing our trust in the one in whom there is no deceit. Despite the world around us and even those claiming to be of Christ’s church doing everything they can to deceive us into believing anything but the truth of Jesus and His vicarious atonement, we persevere. We stand upright, heads raised, waiting anxiously for our redemption which draws near and comes in the return of our Lord as He comes on the clouds of glory. We live by faith in our Lord and Savior, and trust that

when it is His time He will come again to gather us all unto Himself. The Glory of the Lord will descend upon the world and we will receive His grace as the unbelieving world is destroyed in its deceitful ways. Do not be deceived by their false accusations that are fueled by the great liar, Satan. His goal is to pull you down to the same depths of destruction, and if we allow his lies any power, that is where we will end up. He will tell us over and over again how much we don't deserve to be redeemed, and that we could never be good enough to be among the sheep in the judgment.

If not for Jesus and His redeeming work on the cross of Calvary, that would indeed be the truth. But thanks be to God that by His holy blood we have been washed clean of the stain of sin that would otherwise condemn us alongside the unbelieving world. By the water of our baptisms, we live a new life in Christ, baptized into His death, and ultimately into His resurrection. Each and every person will be raised up on the last day, and will be separated into the sheep and the goats—the sheep into eternal life with our Shepherd, Jesus Christ, and the goats into eternal damnation with their powerless master, the devil. Only Christ has the power to save, and He has chosen us as His beloved children. He has gone to prepare a place for us to live in His Father's house, and awaits our arrival into the heavenly realm, to await there the ultimate consummation of His salvific victory in the resurrection of the dead on the last day. Then, in that day, we will walk in the presence of our Lord, glorified in our bodies for eternity, gathering in that “sweet and blessed country” where no deceit can be found in the joy of His glory forevermore. Amen.