

✠ Strong and Vital

- *There's an interesting contrast we see throughout the NT. On one hand, we see a loving recognition that life can be a struggle, that God understands this, and is patient and loving in the midst of our struggles.*
- *At the same time, we also see an assumption that individual believers- AND THE CHURCH AS A WHOLE- will not succumb to the difficulty of life, but rather PREVAIL, and increasingly grow in maturity, love, joy, and peace- that we will be STRONG AND VITAL in the midst of life as it really is.*
- *Consider how we've seen Paul describe the church in Colossae- in terms of what they are learning, how they are growing, and the strength of their faith in Christ...*
 - *They have great love for God's people*
 - *They have truly understood God's Grace*
 - *Paul prays they would have knowledge, wisdom and understanding, strengthened with all power, endurance, patience, and joyful gratitude.*
 - *They have been taught the word of God in its fullness... IN CHRIST they have the full riches of complete understanding, treasures of wisdom and knowledge.*
 - *FINALLY, Paul says "I delight to see you disciplined you are and how firm is your faith in Christ."*
- *In the midst of very challenging circumstances, we see here a church that is healthy, maturing, full of love, goodness, and vitality!*
- *AS A RESULT, it's STRIKING that almost in the same breath, Paul says...*

✠ Don't be deceived!

Colossians 2:4 *I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments.*

- *We would expect Paul to say something like this to the church in Corinth- if you read 1&2 Corinthians you'll see a church that was NOT healthy. But for Paul to say this to Colossian church tells us that NO MATTER how healthy or mature we THINK we might be, part of spiritual maturity is recognizing that apart from God's Grace and a humble, trusting dependence upon Christ, we are vulnerable to deception.*
- *NOW- I'm sure you know that within the full spectrum of Christianity there is LOTS of disagreement- about biblical issues, and also plenty of issues that have very little to do with scripture at all.*
- *Something that happens ALL THE TIME is one group will look at the understanding of another group and say... 'THEY ARE DECEIVED! THEY ARE WRONG.'*
- *So often this leads to mistrust, animosity, and further splintering within the church. In past centuries it has at times even led to violence and death.*
- *My point is that when we hear Paul's warning to 'not be deceived', we need to consider that the core issue at hand- at least here in the Colossian church- is much simpler than many debates dividing the church today.*
- *If you get to the root of it, this 'root of deception' that Paul calls a 'fine sounding argument' is a devaluing of the work of Jesus Christ. It's the idea of "Christ Plus"... Yes we believe in*

Jesus, who he is, that we are forgiven and the hope of eternity- but this isn't enough. There is more YOU MUST DO to be in right standing with God and to be complete- certain things YOU must believe and understand- to have FULLNESS in your life.

- *This is the root of deception that leads to legalism, judgmentalism, and division.*
- *It is also the deception that has robbed so many Christians of the freedom, fullness, and life-giving joy of their new life in Christ. AND SO, PAUL SAYS... DON'T BE DECIEVED!*
- *THEN, in verse 8, Paul amplifies his warning. Not only are we warned against deception, but the ultimate consequence of deception- Paul says...*

† Don't be taken captive

Colossians 2:8 *See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.*

- *It's subtle, but there's an important progression here in these two concepts- from deception to captivity.*
- *It's tempting at times to have a cavalier attitude toward deception- and deceiving.*
- *We may say... It's okay for me to lie a little here- to be just a bit dishonest, use a little deception, because it will help me and won't hurt anyone else. WE ALL do it, and we ALL are wrong. Lies rarely stay little, and even the smallest deception is corrosive to our hearts as by definition we are turning from trust in God to trust in ourselves. Likewise, when we tell ourselves its okay to lie- we are devaluing the person we deceive. This never ends well, and it can lead to bondage.*
- *On the other hand, we allow ourselves to be deceived, again thinking it's no big deal. Maybe there's a situation – or a way of thinking- we know is unhealthy for us, but just a little bit is okay. But unhealthy thinking leads to an unhealthy mindset which can lead to unhealthy actions, which easily leads to bondage.*
- *In my FirstTracks I told story of when I was teenager in Paris- I was deceived by man who wanted to give me a private tour of Paris- at night- without my parents knowledge... and I was all ready to hit the town... but praise God my parents prevented me from being taken captive.*
- *The phrase "TAKE CAPTIVE" is interesting- the Greek word Paul uses is rarely seen, and to explain why this matters I need to take a step back. (Going deep!)*
- *As we've discussed, Paul knows there are false teachers trying to undermine these believers faith in Christ. Scholars call this the 'Colossian heresy', but we don't know precisely what it was. There are clues, and they all point to this idea of "Christ Plus"- that Jesus isn't enough.*
- *ONE widely held theory is that this false teaching was some blend of pagan and Jewish mysticism- a pull back into the legalistic and performance based thinking of the Jewish laws, traditions, maybe circumcision- combined with the allure of 'special knowledge' and elitist mysticism common in the ancient pagan religions, or maybe even a very early form of Gnosticism.*
- *One leading scholar makes the case that the Colossian heresy was Judiasm itself- that these teachers were saying to be follower of Christ you also had to fully conform to the mosaic law- the dynamic we saw back in Acts 15 at the Jerusalem Council.*

- **Back to the text- the verb Paul uses for ‘take captive’- in the Greek- is very similar to the Greek word for ‘Synagogue’. It’s possible Paul is using a very targeted PUN- “See that place of worship, with all of its laws, traditions, restrictions, and religious philosophy?” THAT WILL TAKE YOU CAPTIVE. IT WILL ROB you of the fullness and freedom you have received IN CHRIST.**
- **From this perspective several of Paul’s other statements come to mind...**

Romans 7:5-6 *For when we were in the realm of the flesh, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in us, so that we bore fruit for death. ⁶ But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.*

- **It’s very possible these false teachers we deceiving the Colossians- once they had become believers- to turn back to the OLD WAY of the written code- the law and religious rules.**

Galatians 3:1-3 *You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. ² I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard? ³ Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?*

- **And so Paul warns Colossians that this false teaching was ‘hollow and deceptive philosophy’- human reasoning dressed up in the garments of religion**
- **The warning goes a step further, as we’re told this ‘deceptive philosophy’ depends on ‘human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world’ rather than on Christ.**
- **Of course, there’s nothing inherently wrong with traditions, as long as they don’t become more important- or distort- the underlying truth they claim to express. We could talk about THAT a lot.**
- **But what did Paul mean by “the elemental spiritual forces of this world?” Other translations render this “the elementary or ‘basic’ principles of the world”**
- **The Greek here is difficult to translate, but if you zoom out just a bit, we hear Paul warning us against the basic- almost to our DNA- tendency (tradition) of the human condition for us to create powers and authorities to which we then give our allegiance, and to which we look for our identity and source of life.**
- **‘Basic principles’ could be things like government. Politics. Social trends. Status. Religions. Idols.**
- **The NIV sees a spiritual element here, even if it is man-created spirituality. Thinking again back into ACTS- if you lived in Ephesus in the first century, your city was dominated by the worship of Artemis. Now, Artemis was a human created deity with zero divine power- but the worship of Artemis held great power over the people of Ephesus, as Paul discovered as he shared the Gospel there.**
- **In essence, Paul is saying “There are so many things in this world to which we give our allegiance- in which we invest our identity- and from which we seek meaning and purpose. EVEN IF THEY ARE MORALLY neutral, IF YOU look to them for LIFE, if they become your FIRST PLACE PASSION, they WILL take you captive! YOU HAVE BEEN BROUGHT INTO FULLNESS IN CHRIST, so don’t be taken captive to lesser gods! (Lower case g)**
- **If we take the time to consider what this may look like in our own lives, it gets practical really quick.**

– **AND FRIENDS... CHURCH... of all the traditions, basic principles, and elemental forces that make us vulnerable to deception, the greatest of these is...**

† **The ever present danger: PRIDE**

- **How did Paul describe the deceiving arguments of the false teachers... FINE SOUNDING. They sounded GOOD. These are deceptions that stroke our sense of self-importance, that say what we want to hear, and hold the powerful temptation of elevating ourselves above others. If my FULLNESS IN LIFE, RIGHTNESS WITH GOD depends on my ability and my knowledge, then it's a very short step to concluding my spirituality and knowledge is better than yours- and by elevating myself, I am devaluing you.**
- **Tragic flipside of this is when we believe same lie, but conclude we are failures, will never measure up, devalue ourselves, and MISS liberating Gospel Truth that while we WILL NEVER MEASURE UP ON OUR OWN WE DON'T HAVE TO- we rather can humbly accept amazing and redemptive Grace of God and begin journey of transformation that flows from acceptance and love, not performance and condemnation.**
- **I'm going to draw for just a minute from a book written by our own Dr. Steve Willing.... It's excellent, info at bottom of your notes sheet.**
- **Steve points out that of all the vices, sins, and self-destruct mechanisms endemic to the human condition, the greatest- and that which scripture warns against perhaps more than any other- IS PRIDE.**
- **CS Lewis put it this way: "The essential vice, the utmost evil is pride. Unchastity, greed, drunkenness, and all that are mere fleabites in comparison. It was through pride that the devil became the devil. Pride leads to every other vice. It is the complete anti-God state of mind, the essential vice, the utmost evil."**
- **The theologian John Stott said this "At every stage of our Christian development and in every sphere of our Christian discipleship, pride is the greatest enemy and humility is our greatest friend."**
- **SO HOW DOES PRIDE lead to deception? Because pride is root of SELF-DECEPTION. There are so many ways to explore this, but most simply put, OUR PRIDE tells us we are smarter than everyone else and we DON'T NEED TO LISTEN. We DON'T NEED TO LEARN.**
- **We aren't deceived because we get things wrong- we get things wrong ALL THE TIME- the problem is when we are wrong but are absolutely convinced we are right.**
- **You've probably heard the old quote often attributed to Mark Twain... "it ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that JUST AIN'T SO."**

Proverbs 26:12 *Do you see a person wise in their own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for them.*

- **Thousands of years after wisdom of proverbs, recent social science has demonstrated that as people, we simply think we are smarter than we are. One study found that 96% of the participants thought they were smarter than the average person. ONLY 4% considered that they might not be smarter than another given person. IN SHORT, MOST OF US think we are smarter than most of us.**
- **Steve describes a rare medical condition that is a powerful metaphor of prides debilitating effect. It's called 'Anton's Syndrome', and it results in blindness, but for some reason, the person DOESN'T KNOW they are blind. You can imagine the disaster.**

- *On a wider scale, this is observed condition of LACK OF AWARENESS or denial of one's own disability.*
- *Steve points out that people who lose their vision can adapt in many ways, as long as they KNOW THEY ARE BLIND. Much worse is when a person is blind but doesn't know it. EVEN WORSE is when a person is blind but thinks they see BETTER than those who actually do see.*
- *THIS IS PRIDE, and it blinds us to truth, lessons, correction... and makes us sitting ducks for deception and bondage.*
- *BY THE WAY, IF WE HEAR THIS AND THINK.. AMEN! Everyone around me is blind, and I'm the one who really sees!... ODDS ARE you are the one whose eyes need to be opened... and this is ALL OF US.*
- *Steve puts it this way- PRIDE is a false belief about ONESELF- that we always know better- this leads to OVERCONFIDENCE.... And "unshakeable confidence in one's own position is an invincible barrier against correction"... and when our prideful minds are closed to correction, we are easy prey for deception, and when deception joins forces with our pride, it leads to captivity.*
- *THAT'S THE BAD NEWS. THE GOOD NEWS is that when we admit our own fallibility , we've taken the first giant step away from the bondage of pride and into the freedom of HUMILITY.*
- *NEXT POINT- both scripture and cutting edge social science agrees... our greatest...*

✠ Defense against deception and the antidote to pride: HUMILITY

- *Humility makes it possible for us to receive correction and discipline.*
- *Humility opens our hearts and minds to hear wisdom from God, and from others.*
- *Humility opens our ears to listen, to think, consider, and for our minds to be renewed.*
- *SO MUCH THAT COULD BE SAID HERE- but just consider two scriptures- of MANY- that speak to the great gift of humility.*

Psalm 25:9 *He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.*

- *It is HUMILITY that allows us to SEE and ACCEPT that God is right, and to learn his ways.*

1 Peter 5:5-6 *All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble. ⁶ Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.*

- *Last thought on humility.. humility isn't just the absence of pride- it is a positive and active posture of our heart and mind... and as followers of Christ, we must realize that TRUE and HEALTHY HUMILITY is a GIFT OF THE SPIRIT.*
- *In Galatians 5 we see the famous 'fruit of the Spirit'... Love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, GENTLENESS, and self-control."*
- *The word for 'gentleness' can also be translated HUMILITY. Humility is a gift of God, because as we saw throughout the advent season- from Philippians 2- humility is the very NATURE of God.*
- *LAST THOUGHT. As we consider the warning against deception and captivity, we cannot forget that...*

† There is a deceiver- and his greatest weapon is... **DECEPTION**

John 8:44 *You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. 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.*

2 Corinthians 2:11 *...in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.*

- **Satan's greatest scheme is deception, and his greatest weapon is PRIDE. Paul will devote much of the rest of Colossians to what this looks like.**
- **So as we 'SEE TO IT' that no one takes us captive, we have the gift of scripture- which we must engage with great humility.**
- **We have the gift of the SPIRIT- our union with Christ- who will lead us to be humble**
- **And we have the spiritual gift of humility itself- by which our hearts and minds are opened to listen, to hear, to think, to learn, to be corrected by our God whose correction and discipline is always an expression of His love.**