

DISTORTION AND DISGUISE

By Steve Zeisler

Professor James Moriarty was the archenemy of Sherlock Holmes in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's stories. Moriarty was the only man in England who was the intellectual equal of Holmes. He was evil to the core, a mastermind of wickedness and crime who would organize his minions to go abroad in the land and wreak havoc. When Holmes recognized the complexities of various cases, he knew this evil genius was behind them.

Given the nature of the current political turmoil, the international community we live in is worried about the problem of terrorism in a similar vein. What makes terrorism particularly awful is that here, too, there are evil masterminds at work behind this devilish enterprise, running networks that make ordinary foot soldiers much more dangerous.

The Scriptures recognize that much of the turmoil we face-the effect of evil in the world-comes from a single source as well. There is a mastermind of destruction behind the seduction of the church as wickedness tries to interpose itself into the lives of Christian people. This mastermind of destruction is behind the world darkness that is descending. We encounter this mastermind, Satan, in the passage before us this morning.

An evil mastermind

Paul is in the midst of a section in which he is distinguishing between godly leadership and ungodly. In verses 1-15 of chapter 11, we are reminded that behind the lie is a liar, and behind liars is the father of lies. That was the name Jesus gave for Satan: a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44). It is his lying influence behind those who are undermining the church in Corinth. We'll meet this mastermind behind the wicked influence against which Paul is writing in verses 1-6:

I hope you will put up with a little of my foolishness; but you are already doing that. I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ [a better translation is "from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ."]. For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough. But I do not think I am in the least inferior to those "super-apostles." I may not be a trained speaker, but I do have knowledge. We have made this perfectly clear to you in every way.

Paul hearkens back to the Old Testament story of the fall of Adam and Eve. The serpent beguiled Eve in the garden, and without realizing what she was listening to, she took in lies that led to the fall and ultimately to all human tragedy. In the very same way there is a cunning master deceiver behind the "super-apostles" who are not telling the truth. Paul is worried that the Corinthians will lose their way as Eve and her husband Adam did; they will make deadly choices and not see the import of them.

Let's finish reading this section and then discuss it. Verses 7-15:

Was it a sin for me to lower myself in order to elevate you by preaching the gospel of God to you free of charge? I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you. And when I was with you and needed something, I was not a burden to

anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied what I needed. I have kept myself from being a burden to you in any way, and will continue to do so. As surely as the truth of Christ is in me, nobody in the regions of Achaia will stop this boasting of mine. Why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do! And I will keep on doing what I am doing in order to cut the ground from under those who want an opportunity to be considered equal with us in the things they boast about.

For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.

We have to accept from the beginning that there is only one avenue down which we can find life

Paul is very pointed, finally, with his antagonists in Corinth, the "super-apostles." That may be the term they use for themselves, or it may be an ironic term he uses for them. They claimed to be better-credentialed and more powerful, authoritative, and important than Paul.

We read that, first of all, they are presenting a different Jesus. "For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel . . ." The idea here is a contrary gospel. These super-apostles are telling tales that lead away from the message that the Corinthians heard from Paul. He goes on in verse 13 to say that they are deceivers. Finally, he notes that behind them is the supreme liar, the father of lies himself, who masquerades as an angel of light—a genius in his cunning who knows exactly how to influence and beguile us.

Paul's foolishness

Against all this, we have a man who begins the chapter with this reference to himself: "I hope you will put up with a little of my foolishness." Paul deliberately avoids fighting fire with fire. He does not attempt to use their sort of sophistication to argue against them. Instead, he lays a simple truth alongside the high-sounding, sophisticated thinking of the super-apostles. He is not a great rhetorician in the Greek style; he is not that sort of person. He is telling them something true and potent in simple language to remind them that the cunning sophistication they are listening to rings hollow in comparison.

The simple point Paul makes is this: As an evangelist and apostle, he came to Corinth and became their spiritual father, and the church that was born in Corinth was readied as a bride for her husband. That was Paul's role in their life: to make them ready in all purity for their husband. Now, since the Lord has not yet returned, they should be waiting patiently, growing in love with their beloved, looking forward to the day when the bridegroom will come for the bride and all will be filled with rejoicing. But instead, they are being seduced by good-looking, fast-talking gigolos who are turning the head of the bride. They are listening to voices that offer other opportunities, seducing them away from the one for whom they were intended.

The Bible frequently, throughout the Old Testament and the New Testament, draws an analogy between the covenant of marriage, with its faithfulness and life-giving quality, and the covenant between God and his people. Adultery and idolatry are analogous; adultery is a betrayal of your beloved in marriage, and the same sort of awful betrayal takes place when the people of God stop loving the one Lord God, who has created them and given himself in love for them, and listen to other voices, other gods.

There are similar paradigms in scripture for both godly marriage and godly religion. In marriage, God created human sexuality so that one man and one woman experience the energy of attraction to one another and make a commitment to one another that lasts a lifetime. By the grace of God life comes into the home that is established. Husband and wife grow in their understanding of one another, spend a lifetime together, and see God at work. Analogously, we were made with a spiritual nature to correspond to the one God. We were made to know him. Pascal's great comment about a God-shaped vacuum inside us says exactly what we are made for—to be filled with him.

Loss of standards

We live in a world that is aggressively denying both of these truths. It's saying that human sexuality in reality is a wide open field of possibilities. Choices can be made at every turn, and nothing is better or more true than anything else. Whether it's the domestic partners legislation in San Francisco, what's being taught in our schools, the example of celebrities, or the statements of those who are in positions of prominence, the rhetoric over and over again is that there are no guidelines in these matters. The same thing is held to be true for religion. Voices proclaim an endless variety of gods, ways to know God and express spirituality. Further, the seduction of Eve was based on the idea that she on her own could be like God. Instead of serving God, she could be God, holding the reins, being the creator, establishing her own experience. So if you experiment with the adventure of either sexual possibility or spiritual possibility, you become the builder of what takes place and the one who is glorified.

The simple announcement made by Paul is that these things are not true. Humanity was made to be gathered together as a bride for one husband. Only one marriage is legitimate. Only one spiritual option has any possibility of giving life. That's why Paul's announcement comes in these terms: "I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him." All the offers of other possibilities are to be rejected if we understand the Scriptures and our calling.

I want to make a couple of points before we move on from this. First, while what Paul is speaking of is simple, it is not simplistic. Consider again the analogy of marriage. For one man and one woman to spend a lifetime together is to create the most profoundly beautiful of human possibilities. To live with someone, know them, grow together, suffer together, rejoice together, raise a family-to go through it all because the commitment remains firm-is to experience humanity at a much deeper level than the person who samples a thousand opportunities on the smorgasbord will ever understand. To have served another in this way, rather than yourself, is to become profoundly human.

That's the point Paul makes in verse 6: "I may not be a trained speaker, but I do have knowledge." He advocates simplicity, meaning purity, not simple-mindedness that lacks profundity. There is a great depth to be experienced by choosing devotion; the universe opens up into glorious possibilities! But what we have to accept at the beginning is that there is only one avenue down which we can find life. We were made for one thing, while the seducer is saying we were made for everything. The seducer says we'll lose out if we don't take the reins in our hands, promote ourselves, and experience everything. If we restrict and deny ourselves by staying with only one God or one partner, we're the losers. That's the lie.

The second point I want to highlight is that the sophistication of the words of the super-apostles (in contrast to Paul's more ordinary speech) was what made them so seductive. I received a brochure in the mail the other day. It's advertising a high-priced conference taking place in an expensive hotel in San Francisco. The conference is being given by a Ph.D., author, and psychologist who is the head of a family therapy institute and a faculty member of a major university. Here's what the brochure promises:

Many people discover that facing sexual/spiritual integration is facing a wilderness-a wilderness within. On our journeys inward we will redefine those misunderstood terms of sexuality, spirituality, and sensuality, and co-create a new model of intimacy. [You get to create, to be God.] The disconnections and cutoffs resulting from cultural myths, family and church messages, and our own socialization have intensified our spiritual dis-ease... This workshop is intended to lead us into a journey inward, into our own wilderness, into our own unknown interior. Through our journeys we will focus on the integrating process that teaches us new ways of feeding our relational selves from our deepest source of knowing rather than popular cultural belief.

I'll bet no one in this room has a clue of what that means! But it's sophisticated and engaging. It invites you to be the master of your experience. Intimacy, sexuality, sensuality, spirituality-all these can be yours to own, maneuver, and produce. You are the center of everything. The teacher offering the conference has impressive credentials. She'll charge you a lot of money, and offer beautiful surroundings. You're sort of taken advantage of and catered to at the same time in equal doses! But it's all a high-sounding lie wrapped in an impressive mantle.

Paul, in his "foolishness," requests that the Corinthians listen to someone who says simple things, who announces that the categories are clear. He doesn't display the cunning manipulation of his opponents. He rocks back on a truth that he expressed in 1 Corinthians: "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." As we'll see in the second half of this passage, he insists on being different from his opponents. He will not join them, and the Corinthians are going to have to choose one or the other—the fool or the sophisticate.

Mis-use of money

The first issue he has raised is that of spiritual adultery, and the second he raises is sin regarding money. You get the feeling the world hasn't changed. Sex and money come out being the problems in just about every generation. We are susceptible to being led astray by either means.

Look at verse 7 now. "Was it a sin for me to lower myself in order to elevate you by preaching the gospel of God to you free of charge?" What Paul did is significant. He deliberately refused to take money from the Corinthians when he ministered there, although they attempted to give it to him. He worked late at night with his hands in the ignoble profession of tent-making. And yet when the Macedonian Christians offered him money he took it from them. But he refused to take it from the Corinthians. Now what is the point of that? It certainly irritated the Corinthians. They wondered why the money of the believers from the north was good enough, but theirs wasn't.

The apostle's point of view was this: If people gave because they were grateful, out of a sense of stewardship and out of hearts that had been captured by Christ, he was delighted to receive their gifts. He recognized that it benefitted the givers, and he thanked them, as we have seen in other passages. What concerned him, though, was that in immature churches like the Corinthians', where there was rivalry, and where people had not learned of the capacity of the flesh to fool them, money became a way for people to compete with each other. Money was used to buy influence. The Corinthians loved to give money and talk about it. It was offered for all the wrong reasons. So Paul refused it.

The super-apostles, however, eagerly siphoned off money for themselves. They probably promoted rivalry within the church; they did everything they could to take advantage of these believers. Paul refuses to mix with them; he insists on being different. It is not because he doesn't love the Corinthians; it is because he wants to undercut the arguments of the super-apostles that he and they are the same. "Such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light." They are telling vicious lies and seducing the people of God away from pure devotion to Christ. They speak of themselves in terms that would be used by good men and women, yet they are using them falsely and wickedly.

We must cling to the simple truth, 'Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so'

I recently read the book, *Second Chances*, by Judith Wallerstein, who writes about the effect of divorce on children. The point of her book is to say that a subtle lie is abroad in the land, and many thousands have believed it to later awaken in regret. The lie says that divorce that is done quickly and with a modicum of good will doesn't hurt children; the children are actually better off. Her research proves that this is foolish. She ends the book with a telling anecdote:

From what the children are telling us, they recognize how great are the burdens that have been put on their slender shoulders.

When six-year-old John came to our center shortly after his parents' divorce, he would only mumble. "I don't know." He wouldn't answer questions. He played games instead. First John hunted all over the play room for baby dolls. When he found a good number of them he stood the baby dolls firmly on their feet and placed miniature tables, chairs, beds, and eventually all the playhouse furniture on their heads. Then wordlessly he placed all the mother dolls and father dolls in precarious positions on the steep roof of the doll house. As a father doll slid off, John caught him, and looking up, he said to me, "He might die." Soon all the mother dolls and father dolls began sliding off the roof. John caught them all

gently one by one, saving each one from falling to the ground.

"Are the babies the strongest?" I asked.

"Yes!" six-year-old John shouted excitedly. "The babies are holding up the world."

A tragedy has descended on children that people didn't mean to make happen. They listened to a voice that masqueraded as an angel of light in the form of a counselor, legal advisor, or religious figure, telling them to pursue a course of action that was foolish. They wake up later and realize that the choice was tragic.

Purity regained

Having highlighted the effects of bad choices, let me hasten to make a final observation. One of the great things about this whole section is the description that we read at the beginning of this chapter, in which Paul says the Corinthians have been espoused as a pure virgin to Christ. If ever there was a group with whom purity was not the first term you'd associate, it was the Corinthians! They were fornicators, idolators, thieves and drunks (1 Cor. 6:9-11) before they came to Christ. Now, some reading this are children of divorce or are divorced with children, and it's painful to be reminded of the past. But this letter is not addressing the past that's been repented of, because Paul is saying of those who have repented of past sins that they are now presented as a bride purely arrayed for her husband. Rather, he is telling them not to lose their way now. They have received the gospel and have been cleansed of the past and empowered by God. They have the restorative presence of Christ in their lives. They must not now turn aside to something else. This passage is not focused on wishing things had been different in the past. It warns us about the present and the future. Satan, posing as an angel of light, is still abroad in the world, and he still wants to deceive Christians into losing their way.

In the Revelation of John, a letter is written to the church of Ephesus. Jesus says they are good at a lot of things, hardworking, industrious, and concerned, but they have lost their first love. They have done everything but lost sight of their love affair, which began it all, with the bridegroom who is coming, the one for whom they have been prepared.

Paul here, too, is suggesting that, having lost that first love, there is danger of the Corinthians being seduced by another. What he recommends in all his foolishness and ordinariness is a simple and pure devotion to Christ. We enjoy our Lord and are thankful to him. Any voice that offers an alternative is rejected. He looms larger in our experience with each passing day. There's nothing complex about that. It's a world view that is not in line with self-promotion, but it will make more of you than any other. It will allow more depth and joy. It is truer than any other. It is what we were made for.

A great theologian, who lived many years, wrote scores of profound theological books. At the end of his life he was asked to summarize what he had learned over his lifetime, thinking back on all of his scholarship. He said quietly, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." The summary of all he had learned was simply that. Jesus loved him and he loved Jesus, and it was a relationship he was sure of because he found it in the Scriptures.

The apostle is warning the Corinthian church, and he is warning our Palo Alto church: We are always in danger of being led astray. We can lose the simple truths; we can become greater and the Lord less; seducers can win our hearts away. We must resist them and cling to the simple truth:

"Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

October 21, 1990

Copyright (C) 1995 Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.