

## The Danger of Deception

Having recently celebrated Christmas and the truth that Jesus Christ came to bring salvation to sinners (Matthew 1:21), I'm reminded that throughout the history of the church people have been determined to distort this good news. In our own day there are those who teach that if you come to Jesus Christ, all your *earthly* troubles will be over. For example, the beautiful promise of God, given to us by the prophet Isaiah (53:5) pointing to the Servant who would come which reads, "...and with his stripes we are healed....." has been distorted to mean that—if you have enough faith—you will never be physically sick.

In 2 Corinthians 8:9 the Apostle Paul writes, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for our sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich." This verse has been turned into a promise of freedom from financial worries, i.e., a promise from God that those with enough faith can—and should—be wealthy. The sad reality is that many believe these lies and fall prey to the hucksters who preach this type of false gospel. Regrettably, those who are deceived are also regularly sending money to these charlatans in response to pleas made with the promise that—if you send more money to our ministry—all your prayers will be answered. Although this attempt to deceive can come from others outside of us, many times we're deceived because of our own sinful hearts.

During the time of Jesus in the first century there were those who were looking for the coming of the promised Messiah. Unfortunately, many distorted Isaiah's prophecy of freedom from oppression (Is. 61:1; Lk. 4:18c) as a promise that One would come that would free them from their *earthly* oppression from Roman rule rather than true freedom from bondage to sin. As we begin this new series of articles from Luke 4:16-30, Jesus is no longer a baby in a manger in Bethlehem. He's now a grown man in his first year of public ministry. From his itinerant travels he now returns to his hometown of Nazareth to the synagogue to bring a message of hope.

As Jesus arrives at the synagogue in Nazareth on the Sabbath, he's handed a copy of a scroll from the Old Testament scriptures. All attention is focused on Jesus as he reads from the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor....." (Luke 4:18a; Isa. 61:1). Is Jesus making *earthly* promises to those who are materially/financially poor? We get help with our interpretation from Matthew's gospel. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus declares, "Blessed are the *poor in spirit*, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (5:3) Along with other clear passages in scripture (e.g., Is. 66:2), we can acknowledge that this is exactly what's meant in the passage from the prophet Isaiah. Those who are "poor in spirit" may be poor or even extremely rich in material wealth. That's not the issue. Jesus is referencing those who are *spiritually* poor. This describes all mankind without Jesus Christ. By grace, those who recognize their *spiritual bankruptcy* and come to Jesus with empty hands—free from the pride of thinking they can contribute their own accomplishments to the work of Jesus—those are the ones who, by grace through faith, are welcomed into the

“kingdom of heaven.” In the old hymn entitled, “Rock of Ages Cleft for Me,” hymn writer Augustus Toplady wrote, “Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling; naked come to Thee for dress; helpless, look to Thee for grace; foul, I to Thy fountain fly; wash me, Savior or I die.” Toplady understood the scriptural meaning of those who are *spiritually* poor. Although Jesus blesses his people both materially as well as spiritually, we’re setting ourselves up for deception when we hyper-focus on *earthly* wealth rather than being continually thankful for our spiritual blessing of salvation in Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:21).

Jesus continues to preach from Isaiah: “He has sent me to proclaim liberty to those who are captive, recovery of sight to the blind, and liberty for those who are oppressed.” (Lk. 4:18) We can imagine everyone in the synagogue straining to hear Jesus as he states unequivocally, “Today, this Scripture (Isaiah 61:1-2a) has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (4:21) It’s as if we can almost hear the gasps from those in the room: “Did I just hear what I thought I heard? What can he mean? What has been fulfilled?” How will these synagogue worshipers respond to Jesus’ provocative words? We’ll continue our look at this passage next time.

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