

The Consequences of Self-Deception

by Coty Pinckney 7/31/08

Consider this phrase from Isaiah 44:20: "A deluded heart has led him astray."

Note that it does not say, "He was deluded about the truth." Unquestionably that is the case. But the phrase says more: After being deluded about one matter, that very delusion leads us yet further astray from the truth.

In Isaiah 44, this is the case with idol worship. The prophet here mocks the man who takes a block of wood, cuts it up, then uses some pieces to cook food and calls the rest a god. Verse 20 concludes: "He cannot deliver himself or say, 'Is there not a lie in my right hand?'" Having turned away from the One Who is the First and the Last, the one true God (verse 6), the idol worshiper eventually becomes unable to escape the delusion he willingly chose. He acts foolishly, but can't recognize it. His chosen delusion leads him further and further from the truth. He is trapped.

This is a great danger that Scripture warns against again and again. Indeed, all fallen humanity is caught in this trap. We see this elsewhere in the Old Testament, describing ancient times. For example, Zechariah 7:11-12 says that God sent His revelation through the prophets, yet:

They refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears that they might not hear. They made their hearts diamond-hard lest they should hear the law and the words that the LORD of hosts had sent by his Spirit through the former prophets. (Zechariah 7:11-12)

We see the same behavior in New Testament times. Paul says that men also close their minds to God's general revelation in nature, as well as His special revelation in His Word:

For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools. (Romans 1:20-22)

Paul states that many aspects of God's character are apparent in creation. Yet men willingly choose to believe a delusion - that God doesn't exist, or that He is not in authority. Having chosen this delusion, their hearts become more and more darkened, and their thinking becomes more and more futile. They claim that they are thinking clearly - and they believe they are wise. But having taken that first foolish step - the step of rejecting God - they become fools, no matter how intelligent they may be. Their deluded hearts lead them astray.

Paul says something similar in 2 Timothy 4:4, which we looked at briefly last month. Speaking of those who gather teachers who will say what the listeners want to hear, Paul says they "will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths." Or as I rendered this phrase in that

sermon, "they will turn their ears away from the truth and be turned aside to myths." Once again, there is an active turning away from truth. But that is only the beginning. When we actively close our minds to one aspect of God's truth, we end up passively moving further and further away from the truth. We have no anchor. Our reason is unable to serve as an anchor. And so we drift and drift in a sea of falsehood.

Paul brings out the ultimate consequence of this closing of our minds in 2 Thessalonians 2:9-11:

The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false.

Note the chronological order of events: First these folks "refuse to love the truth." This is active on their part. They see the truth of God in the natural world. They may well hear the Gospel, and see it lived out in the lives of God's people. Yet they close their ears to that truth and, thus, are not saved. In that state, separated from truth, without an anchor, Satan comes in his role of deceiver, putting forth "the lawless one". And they gladly, willingly believe Satan's lie. They harden their hearts. And God hardens their hearts. Why? The next verse tells us: "In order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness."

Thus, the consequences of self-deception are severe: Eternal condemnation.

The exhortations to us are clear:

First, personally: Am I closing my ears to any aspect of God's truth? Are there things I simply don't want to believe? Am I setting myself up in authority over God's Word, saying, "OK, that part looks ok, but that other part - no, I won't accept that." That is self-deception; that is ultimately self-exaltation.

Second, with others: Do I see my unbelieving friends and family members as self-deceived? Do I thus pray for God to open their eyes to the truth? Do I try to help them to see the nature of their self-deception?

May God be pleased to search our hearts and to expose to us our areas of self-deception; and may He use us for His glory to open the eyes of the blind, that they may see Jesus for Who He is.