

# Self-Deception: It's Causes, Symptoms & Cure

MATTHEW 7:21-23

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Today and next Sunday I will conclude a series of sermons I have been preaching from the Gospel of Matthew, chapters 5-7. Next Sunday I want to take a look at the last of three tests that Jesus provides at the end of His Sermon on the Mount to help us determine whether or not our Christianity is real.

The first test Jesus gives us helps us to understand whether or not we are different from the crowd. A true Christian will be different from the crowd.

The second test Jesus gives us calls us to examine the lives and words of people around us as well as our own lives and words. And then we are called upon to evaluate what we see and hear to determine whether or not a certain kind of fruit is being produced; namely, the kind of fruit that will cause people to become convicted of their sinful condition and turn to God for salvation. The behavior and speech of a true Christian will produce fruit that causes people to come face to face with their sin. And a true Christian will be able to discern the difference between a testimony that produces such fruit and the testimony of a false prophet that fails to produce such fruit.

The third test, that is the one we will study next week, is the test of unfavorable circumstances or trials that come into our lives. The trials reveal whether we are patiently and persistently growing in our faith or whether we are impatiently and hurriedly trying to get as many benefits from the Christian life that we can with the least amount of effort.

All three of these tests are important, because of one terrible reality. It is the reality of self-deception. If it were not possible for us to deceive ourselves, then there would be no need for these tests. There would be no need to test the genuineness of our Christianity, because we would already know. But you are aware as well as I that it is very easy for people to deceive themselves. It's done all the time. No church is immune from this problem. It is such a huge problem that it really deserves a whole sermon to help us appreciate its seriousness.

So today we will focus on the problem of self-deception before we go on to the final test. Using Matthew 7:21-23 to guide our thoughts, let's try to understand the causes and symptoms of self-deception. And then, finally, let's try to understand what the cure is for people who are deceiving themselves.

First of all, let's consider the causes of self-deception. I must conclude from the text that there is one main cause with one related secondary cause. The main cause or reason why people become self-deceived is false doctrine, and I am specifically talking about false doctrine of assurance.

I personally teach the doctrine of assurance. I believe it to be a very important doctrine. However, it is all too often presented in the wrong way. Here, in an evangelical church, we are highly critical of people who base the assurance of their salvation upon the good works they do. We often quote Ephesians 2:8-9 to refute people who feel assured they are going to heaven because of all the good things they have done. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."

And our scripture lesson essentially says the same thing in the form of testimony from people who felt convinced they were saved. Their confidence came, at least in part, from a false doctrine of assurance that led them to conclude they were guaranteed to go to heaven because they had done a lot of good things. They were so surprised to find out they were not saved. They said, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?"

Now even though most of us refute people who hold to this false doctrine, let us try to sympathize with their position. I assume that most of us don't believe salvation is based on works. But I would also venture to guess that many of us would have a hard time imagining that someone who is not saved could actually prophesy or cast out demons or perform miracles. We would reason with ourselves, 'How is it possible for a person who is not saved to do such things? The very fact he does them must be proof that he is saved. Sure, I know a person is saved by faith. But only a person who is saved by faith can do things such as prophesy and drive out demons and perform miracles.' People in evangelical churches tend to think this way. But this kind of thinking is wrong.

It is false doctrine to conclude that a person must be saved by faith because he is able to prophesy or cast out demons or perform great miracles. It is possible for a non-Christian to prophesy. In other words, it is possible for a person outside of the Kingdom of God to give a message of truth and even to do it under the power of the Holy Spirit. Famous Old Testament examples of this would include Balaam who delivered the right message while, at the same time, remaining outside of God's kingdom. He was a man willing to sell himself and the children of Israel for money. He allowed himself to be hired by the

enemy to prophesy. He said the right things, and even said them with the help of the Holy Spirit, but his intentions and motives were evil.

And then there is the example of Saul who, from time to time, came under the influence of the Holy Spirit and prophesied truth. But God rejected King Saul, because he was not a man after His own heart.

In the New Testament we have the words of Paul recorded in Philippians 1:15 that reveal the possibility of a person being able to preach truth, while, at the same time, not having the characteristics of a person belonging to God's kingdom. That verse says "It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry..." The message is true, but the heart of the messenger is wrong. Paul said that he rejoiced for the sake of the message.

And the words of 1 Corinthians 13 also emphasize the possibility of people who are able to speak in the tongues of angels and prophesy while, at the same time, have a heart that is devoid of love.

So the Bible does teach that it is possible for a person who is outside of God's kingdom to preach truth. And the Bible also teaches that it is possible for a non-Christian to cast out demons, and even do so in the Name of Christ. In Mark 6:7 we read that Jesus sent out His twelve disciples to preach and cast out demons. Many of us are familiar with the story. But think about the fact that one of those 12 was Judas, a man who was clearly condemned to hell. I can only say that because the Bible tells us what happened to Judas. I, myself, do not have the authority to say who goes to heaven and who goes to hell. But the fact that Judas, who did go to hell, was able to cast out demons is a shocking reality.

Prophesying and casting out demons and performing all kinds of miracles—all these things can be done by people outside of God's kingdom. The magicians in Egypt performed wonders when Moses demanded that Pharaoh let the children of Israel go. And the New Testament predicts that this kind of thing will increasingly happen as we approach the Second Coming of Christ. Matthew 24:24 says, "For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect."

Sometimes it will be God Himself who gives power to people to do things that we tend to think only people belonging to God's kingdom can do. In Ezra 1:1 we read how God stirred the heart of a pagan king named Cyrus to a great thing. Non-Christians can receive power from God.

And non-Christians can also receive power from Satan. But when Satan gives the power, the end result is always destructive. I once met a man who made his living by relying on the power of demons to heal people. But the physical healing that occurred always left the people being healed in a more miserable spiritual state than they were before they were healed. Such is the nature of Satan's power.

But regardless of where the source of power comes from, it is possible for people outside of God's kingdom to do virtually every kind of good work we normally think that only people inside of God's kingdom can perform. For this reason, a doctrine that gives a person confidence about his salvation that is based upon all the good things he does is false doctrine.

That is relatively easy for me to say in an evangelical church. The thing that is more difficult to say is the thing that I must now say. Please listen carefully. It is not only wrong to base our assurance of salvation on the works we have done, it is also wrong to base the assurance of our salvation on our correct belief in certain truths. What I am talking about here is our intellectual assent and proclamation of certain truths.

Now I know that I am contradicting things that you and I have been taught in evangelical churches. Soon after I confessed Jesus to be the only One who could save me from my sins and soon after I prayed a prayer asking Him to come into my heart—soon after I did these things—I was told that I could be assured of my salvation based upon my correct belief and the things I had said in my prayer. But now I believe it is wrong to base the assurance of my salvation on the fact that I have acknowledged and even proclaimed certain things to be true.

Now don't get me wrong. Correct belief in certain truths is extremely important to the Christian life. I do not think it is possible for a person to be a Christian without some correct belief in some amount of truth. But I now realize it is possible for a person to have correct belief even in a large amount of truth; and at the same time, not be a Christian. I even believe it is possible for a person who is not a Christian to acknowledge Jesus Christ to be the Son of God and to confess that there is no other means of salvation except through the blood of Christ. I even believe it is possible for a person to proclaim these truths in the form of a prayer and then declare that Jesus is his Lord; and at the same time, be outside of God's kingdom. It is even possible for a person to believe these things and say these things under the influence of the Holy Spirit and still not be a Christian. In fact, according to 1 Corinthians 12:3, "no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit."

But Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus is not criticizing people for saying, "Lord, Lord". That is what Christians should say. Jesus is not criticizing people for having correct doctrine and making correct proclamations. Jesus is simply stating the reality that it is possible for people to believe all the right things and say all the right things about Him and still be outside of His kingdom. James 2:19 puts it like this: "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder." It is good to believe in the correct truth. That is always a good thing. But it is possible for even a demon to believe in the correct truth and still remain a demon.

Obviously there is a difference between the kind of belief that truly saves a person and the kind of belief that we are talking about here. There is a difference between faith and saving faith. I will try my best to point out that difference in a minute. But, for now, I want you to understand and accept the shocking reality that people can believe and say all the right things about Jesus and still be outside of His kingdom.

It is false doctrine to teach that people who believe and say all the right things are guaranteed to go to heaven. And it is wrong for us to base the assurance of our salvation upon this false doctrine.

And finally it is false doctrine to base the assurance of our salvation on our emotions. And here I am talking about the person who is zealous and excited about the things of God and about serving God. We have a tendency to look at such a person with such a fervent nature and say, "What a strong Christian! He never seems to be depressed or down about anything. He is always excited about serving God."

The double repetition of the word "Lord" found in Matthew 7:21 and Matthew 7:22 seems to imply that this person had a fervent spirit. The person does not simply say, "Lord," but he says, "Lord, Lord." A lot of emotion is implied here.

Over the years I have come to understand better how easy it is to get excited about doing God's work. Seeing large numbers of people attending meetings or realizing that we have done a good job in whatever we are doing excites us and makes us want to do more. Everyone who has taken part in public ministry for any length of time should know what I am talking about. It is possible to be carried away by your own eloquence and the very thing you are doing and not be excited by the truth at all. And it is possible for people who are not Christians to think that they are Christians based upon their own emotions of excitement in doing ministry.

False doctrine of assurance is the main cause for the self-deception talked about in today's scripture lesson. The secondary reason is a failure to examine oneself in light of the true doctrine of assurance. But I must say that it is nearly impossible for a person to examine himself properly if that person does not know the true doctrine of assurance. And unfortunately, far too many people who profess to be Christians are ignorant of the true doctrine of assurance. The best thing they can do is to look at the symptoms of self-deception that will sooner or later come to the surface and reveal themselves.

Self-deception is like a cancer on the inside of our bodies. It is very difficult to recognize on the surface, but there are eventually symptoms that become (or should become) obvious. Allow me to briefly mention some of these symptoms.

One symptom of self-deception is the tendency to find total fulfillment in the attending of meetings. Attending meetings is something that Christians have to do. We cannot live the Christian life alone. But when the attending of meetings becomes the primary thing that drives us, then there is an indication that something is wrong. There was once a person who was assigned to work for a summer in a remote area of the country. It was hundreds of miles away from the nearest church. For the first time in his life, he was forced to be alone for a long period of time. During that time he discovered there was a deep emptiness in his soul and in his Christian experience. While busily attending meetings, he never had the chance to realize that there was something very important missing from his life.

Another symptom is an excessive interest in signs and wonders as they relate to the Christian life. Signs and wonders are never meant to be the focus of our attention. They are meant to point us to truth. But there are times and places when signs and wonders become the main interest and truth takes second place. There are times and places where people become more excited about the miraculous things God is doing in their lives than they are about their relationship with God. We must take heed and recognize this as one of the symptoms of self-deception.

Another sign of self-deception is on the other end of the scale from what I just mentioned. It is to become excessively academic in our approach to Christianity. A person can be so absorbed in the intellectual understanding of biblical truth that he forgets he is alive and forgets other people around him. He becomes 'puffed up' rather than 'edified'. Do I find myself constantly arguing and debating over certain theological positions? Do I find that I never practically talk to people about their souls and about Jesus and about their relationships with God? Our original interest in Bible study is good, but it can become a pride trip and take us away from what should be the central focus of our faith.

Related to this symptom is an excessive interest in understanding how prophecy will play itself out in the final days. Believe me, there are people and there are websites that are totally absorbed in this activity. They follow all the current events and try to match them up with prophecies from the Bible or recent predictions made by self-proclaimed prophets. It's not that this is wrong, but when it becomes excessive to the point where a person becomes more excited in discovering how things are going to play themselves out in the future than they are about their relationship with God, then something is dreadfully wrong.

Can you see that there is something common with all of these symptoms? Each one of these symptoms reveals that something has become more important than developing a personal relationship with God. Actually, I could go on with many more examples. For instance some people become so taken with their daily disciplines of prayer and Bible reading that the discipline itself (and not a relationship with God) becomes the most important thing. Disciplines of reading the Bible and prayer are meant to help a person build his relationship with God. They are not meant to replace it.

If a person who is self-deceived does not understand the true doctrine of assurance, then perhaps he will recognize one or more of these symptoms when he sees them rise to the surface of his life. Maybe today the words of this sermon have convinced you that you are basing your own assurance of salvation on false doctrine. Maybe you are now aware you are experiencing some of the symptoms of self-deception in your own life.

Whatever the case is, you must understand that there is a cure. One of the saddest stories of self-deception is found in 1 Samuel 15. King Saul was excited, because he had just won a victory. He thought he had done everything right. He thought he had obeyed God. In 1 Samuel 15:20 we hear him say, "I did obey the Lord. I went on the mission the Lord assigned me. I completely destroyed the Amalekites and brought back Agag their king. The soldiers took sheep and cattle from the plunder, the best of what was devoted to God, in order to sacrifice them to the Lord your God at Gilgal."

But God, speaking through the prophet Samuel, said to King Saul, "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams."

I have tried to understand this story by comparing King Saul to another king who was not self-deceived. There were many times when King David disobeyed God, but God never spoke to Him the same way He spoke to King Saul. There was something wrong with King Saul's heart, and God wanted him to see it. The issue was not so much his lack of obedience as it was his lack of a desire to obey. God does not want our offerings; he does not want our sacrifices; He wants our desire to obey; He wants our hearts; He wants us. "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father" because that is the desire of his heart. King David was a man after God's own heart because He wanted to do God's will even though he often failed to obey.

In the New Testament, we are able to look into the mind of a man with whom self-deception was a real possibility. But he fought the temptation to become self-deceived and he won the battle. His words are recorded in 1 Corinthians 9:27, and they are the words of the apostle Paul. He said, "I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize."

Paul understood well that it is possible to preach truth and even do so under the power of the Holy Spirit and, at the same time, be disqualified from receiving the prize. He knew the reality of self-deception, but he fought the temptation. I don't believe he literally beat his body. But I do believe that he struggled in his heart and in his mind to remind himself that the most important thing about his Christianity was not his preaching or any of the other good things he had done. And the most important thing about his Christianity was not even his correct belief in certain truths. The most important thing about his Christianity was his relationship with God, and he would not permit his heart and his mind to accept any other possibility regardless of how strong the temptation was to do so.

The proper doctrine of assurance is based on a love relationship with God that cannot be measured by things we say and the things we do. It cannot be measured by our emotional fervency to be very busy and active in ministry. It can only be measured by the bond love that exists between God and man. It is a love that includes feeling but goes far beyond feeling. It is deep. It is hunger and thirst for righteousness. It is everything mentioned in the Beatitudes. It is everything mentioned in what Galatians 5 calls the 'fruit of the Spirit'. And it is everything mentioned in 1 Corinthians 13.

The difference between true belief that leads to salvation and belief that falls short of salvation has to do with our devotion to the truth. It is one thing to acknowledge the truth and another thing to become devoted to it.

The cure to self-deception begins when we begin to use our devotion to God as the main standard to measure our assurance of salvation. The cure begins when we use the characteristics mentioned in the Beatitudes to determine the genuine quality of our faith.

We must examine ourselves, and we must use the right standards to examine ourselves. The three tests that Jesus gives us at the end of Matthew 7 can help us to realize our problem. The symptoms of self-deception I mentioned today may also be able to help us recognize our problem. But the cure can only come when we give God our total devotion.

Over the past thirty years I have lived in a lot of places. Why is it that I feel the problem of self-deception is particularly strong in the place where I am presently living? Is it the fact that it's so hard to financially survive in this area, and the only way to survive is to compromise our devotion to God? Maybe it's not the area. Maybe it's the day and age in which we live. Whatever the reason may be, I personally find it challenging to maintain the kind of devotion to God that I feel I have had in the past.

I think there are many of you who feel the same, and that makes me feel a bond with you. I really do believe we are on the brink of revival. I really do believe there is a significant number of people in this church who are on the brink of making a decision to devote themselves totally to God. Perhaps God will use some tragedies to help us make that decision. Perhaps we will make it on our own. This I do not know. But I will count it a privilege to be around when it happens. And I do believe it will happen.

May God bless all of you. You are so precious in His sight. He loves you so much and He wants you to love Him in return. That is what He has wanted all along.