

The Three Deceivers

Introduction. The fall of the stock market over the last year and a half and the subsequent loss in savings accounts, bonds, and 401k accounts have caused us to search for perspective. The frustration and stress we feel is not based so much on the amount of money that we have lost as it is on the fact that we are pursuing the wrong goals. We spend an enormous amount of time and mental energy seeking three goals that work against our happiness and joy.

Sadly, we not only want them, we worship them! They are the antithesis of the abundant life that Jesus came to give (John 10:10). But the "herd mentality" takes over and we tend to want what others want, or what others have, or what others tell us we should want. We fall into the pursuit of society's definition of success, not God's. This is all brought about by the greatest deceiver, Satan (John 8:44; Revelation 12:9).

Before we get started, it needs to be said that these three deceivers can be very useful concepts. The problem comes in when we covet these three so much that we let the obsession take over our physical and spiritual lives. The two most predictable results of following them are greed and pride -- both of which lead to unhappiness. The deeper, spiritual purpose of your life will be ruined, destroyed, and frustrated if you pursue them.

I. ***The Three Deceivers***

A. Control.

1. Striving to control our emotions, our appetites, and our habits is good and praiseworthy. But the good idea to set goals and have plans and control oneself gets expanded into the false idea that we should be able to control and manage everything around us.
2. The history of the quest for control is essentially the history of the world. Human beings seem hard-wired with the desire to control everything. Control is intoxicating because it appeals to our lust for power. It is fashionable today to be in control, in charge, to plan and manage. We like to say, "Act; don't react." In recent years, the instinct to control has been institutionalized by a whole industry dedicated to planning and goal setting, and by the notion that control is what can bring us happiness.
3. It is essential to understand that God has given us choice so that we can exercise it in becoming more like Him, and that all of our plans should be set within the context of His eternal plan for us.

B. Ownership.

1. The right to own property is a key underpinning of a democracy and a free enterprise system. This right had to be fought for and won in

order to free people from tyranny. In an economic sense, ownership is a prerequisite for responsibility.

2. We may work harder than any people in the history of the world because we want more wealth, more possessions, and more ownership. Life has become a giant scoreboard where we are measured by what we own.
3. Satan's goal has always been to motivate us to focus on getting and keeping and hoarding and having -- all of which enslave us. People are spending more than they earn, and spending it before they earn it; judging themselves and others on how much they have; becoming jealous and envious of each other based on relative possessions. When an ownership mentality takes over our thinking, we forget that, in eternal and spiritual terms, God owns all.

C. Independence.

1. It is hard to speak or write against independence in a land founded on it and emancipated by a document called the Declaration of Independence! Of course independence is a desirable political condition, and of course personal independence is an asset in the sense of thinking for oneself and taking care of oneself.
2. However, our society has elevated "being independent" to iconic levels, and we equate strength with not needing other people, of "going it on your own." Independence has become the goal of almost everyone, and the obsession of many.
3. Independence is the attitude of "I." Benjamin Franklin said, "I am lord of myself, accountable to none." It is about me and about what I can do on my own. Real life, though, the way God intended it to be lived, is always about we and about us.

II. ***The Three Alternatives***

A. Guidance.

1. James 4:13-15 teaches us a good lesson about guidance.
 - a) The starting time is arranged, and the city has been selected, but God is nowhere in the picture. They have been planning as if they know exactly what the future holds or even as if they can control the future. Not only is their knowledge limited, but their lives are uncertain.
 - b) To point up the transitory nature of life, James wrote that in the morning the vapor or mist covers the countryside; before noon it is gone. But some of James' readers had been planning as if they were going to be here forever, and some now covet control like they are going to be here forever!
 - c) Some of James' readers were boasting and bragging about the future, but no Christian can live apart from God. For Christians

to leave God out of their plans is an assumption of self-sufficiency, a "Declaration of Independence" from God.

2. We need to not only "kick against the goads" in the pursuit of selfish goals, but to diligently seek the Lord's will. We should not control; we should be led (Psalm 23:2-3; Isaiah 42:16; 48:17; 58:11).
3. Guidance presupposes trust, and there are marvelous examples of people in scripture who trusted God's guidance: Moses (Numbers 14:8-9); Nehemiah (Nehemiah 2:20); Paul (Acts 27:25); the Hebrews (Hebrews 10:34). God's word will lead us (Proverbs 6:23; 2 Peter 1:19-21). Donald Barnhouse said that 95% of knowing the will of God consists in being prepared to do it before you know what it is.

B. Stewardship.

1. Would a stockbroker ever have a client who said, "Okay. I have enough now." Instead, they think, "Well, now that I have that much, it looks easy to have twice as much." Our definition of "enough" keeps increasing!
2. Imagine the depth and meaning life would have if we saw everything as a stewardship: our possessions (Luke 12:21), our children (Psalm 127:3), our bodies (1 Corinthians 6:19-21), our words (Matthew 12:36-37), our deeds (Romans 2:5-7), and our talents (Hebrews 5:12).
3. By understanding the concept of stewardship, we recognize that we are merely taking care of what we have for the true Owner (Psalm 24:1; 50:10-12; Matthew 25:14-30; 1 Corinthians 4:1-2, 7).
4. Concentrating on stewardship will remove the materialism and much of the selfishness in life -- Joy is the objective and stewardship is the vehicle; joy is the goal and stewardship is the plan; joy is the what and stewardship is the how. Stewardship allows us to be comfortable living in the world without being of the world.

C. Fellowship.

1. Life is not about independence, but about interdependence with each other and dependence on God. The combined result of us working with God and with each other can be much greater than what each could do separately (Romans 1:12; 15:2). The church is not a building where we come together for a service, but it is a gathering of people who build each other up by faith and strength.
2. Instead of focusing on individualism, fellowship focuses on family, friends, congregations, and on connecting everything to God. Instead of looking for ways to do better than others, it aims at ways of doing better with others (Proverbs 27:17; 1 Corinthians 16:18; 2

Corinthians 7:13). There is no place for any loose stones in God's edifice (1 Peter 2:5)!

3. As the world encourages the false goal of standing alone and doing everything for ourselves, we should turn that goal around and look for opportunities to serve others, to let them serve us, to become good givers and good receivers (Galatians 6:10; Philippians 4:17). A person striving for independence is impressed only by his own ability. One seeking fellowship is impressed first with his own vulnerability.

Conclusion. It does us little good to scale the heights if we are climbing the wrong mountain. It is hard to break away from the three deceivers of control, ownership, and independence. They are the very definition of "the world," and most of us have spent our whole lives trying to achieve them because we are bombarded by messages of materialism.

Satan knows that if he can make our world so complex, so demanding, so overflowing with options and alternatives -- and then add an overlay of compulsive comparing and competitive envy and pride -- he can completely distract us from the will of God. If you can shift your thinking away from these temptations, you will draw closer to God.

If we focus on control, ownership, and independence, then we may do a great job in being in the world, but a very bad job in not being of the world (John 15:19; 17:11-18). On the other hand, if our model is guidance, stewardship, and fellowship, we will see the world more realistically, and will have little trouble in keeping ourselves from becoming of the world.

The following points form a fitting conclusion: 1) I make myself happy by changing my definition of success; 2) I make myself rich by wanting only the simple gift of eternal life; and, 3) I make myself joyful by appreciating what God has already given. Henry David Thoreau once said, "If a man fails to keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him move to the beat he hears, no matter how measured or far away."