

How to Stop Being Self-Deceived

Rich Nathan

July 2 & 3, 2022

James Series

James 1: 19-27

Let me begin with a couple of questions today. How many of you regularly battle with self-deception? Raise your hands. Here's the second question. How many of you know somebody who is very self-deceived? Raise your hands. The chances are that all of us know someone who's very self-deceived, right? Someone who thinks they are smarter than they really are? Someone who thinks they're funnier than they really are? Someone who thinks they're more attractive than they really are? But did you notice the disparity in hands raised between those of us who think we are regularly self-deceived and those of us who know someone who is self-deceived? We have a statistical disparity here!

Study after study indicates our almost infinite capacity for self-deception. For example, a study of college professors reveals that 94% of college professors think they're doing a better than average job. 94%! It's not just college professors! A survey of 1 million high school seniors found that 70% thought they were above average in leadership ability and only 2% thought they were below average!

In terms of ability to get along with others, 100% of students thought they were above average. 60% thought they were in the top 10 percent and 25% of high school seniors thought they were

in the top 1% in terms of ability to get along with others. You may not be a statistician, but you ought to see that a lot of us have a problem with being truthful about ourselves.

If you want to see self-deception at work just talk to an addict! What will you hear? You'll hear statements like:

- This won't hurt anybody!
- I haven't had any for a week!
- I'm cutting back!
- I can handle it!
- I can quit whenever I want to!
- I'm just going to try this once and never again!

Psychiatrists and psychologists have studied the psychological mechanisms of self-deception for over a hundred years. They've labeled various ways that we deceive ourselves – we repress, in other words, we actively, even if unconsciously, forget unacceptable drives or emotions or memories. We engage in distortion. We reshape reality and our memories to suit our present needs. We engage in projection. We attribute unacceptable thoughts and feelings to someone else. Projection is seen in the classic cheating spouse who accuses his or her spouse of cheating or the envious person who believes that everyone else is envious of them! Psychologists have discovered dozens of ways that we engage in self-deception!

What you may not know is thousand of years before modern psychology took up self-deception as a major area of focus, the Bible addressed this topic in depth. For example, we can deceive ourselves if we say we have no sin. 1 John 1:8 says this...

[SLIDE #1] 1 John 1:8 NIV

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

The Bible says we can deceive ourselves when we think more highly of ourselves than we ought to.

Galatians 6:3 says...

[SLIDE #2] Galatians 6:3 NIV

If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves.

We deceive ourselves when we think that we won't reap what we've sown. In other words that our actions have no consequences. Here's what Galatians 6:7 says.

[SLIDE #3] Galatians 6:7 NIV

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.

We read about self-deception all through the Scripture. Self-deception is a major theme in God's Word. We've been doing a series for the past month from the New Testament book of James. In the text that we're going to be looking at today, James has much to say about this subject of self-deception – how we can be deceived and how we can be liberated from self-deception. I've called today's talk, How to Stop Being Self-Deceived. Let's pray.

[SLIDE #4] James 1: 19-27 NIV

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the Word planted in you, which can save you. Do not merely listen to the Word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the Word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it – not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it – they will be blessed in what they do. Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

We see in the verse immediately preceding this text and two times more in the text, James warning us about self-deception. We read this in verses 16 and 17.

[SLIDE #5] James 1: 16-17 NIV

Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

Likewise, we read in verse 22.

[SLIDE #6] James 1:22 NIV

Do not merely listen to the Word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

Finally in verse 26.

[SLIDE #7] James 1:26 NIV

Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless.

So, here's the questions I'd like to tackle today: When are we likely to be self-deceived and how can we stop being self-deceived? James says the first circumstance we regularly find ourselves self-deceived is when we are in a conflict.

[SLIDE #8] We Can Deceive Ourselves When We Are In a Conflict

Let's read verses 19-21 again.

[SLIDE #9] James 1:19-21 NIV

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the Word planted in you, which can save you.

Think of a conflict that you had recently:

- If you're married, think of a tense conversation you recently had with your spouse
- Think of a conflict you've had with another family member. Maybe with one of your parents or a child or a brother or a sister
- Think of a conflict you've had at work with a co-worker or an employee or a supervisor.
- Maybe the conflict was with someone here at church.

Can you think of someone you've had a conflict with?

Now, be honest. During this conflict did you think you were right and they were wrong? Of course you did! And do you think that they thought they were right and you were wrong? Of course they did! Now both of the parties to a conflict can't both be entirely right.

How do we keep from being self-deceived? James says in verse 19...

[SLIDE #10] James 1:19 NIV

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry...

Now James doesn't tell us to just listen, never speak, or never be angry. He says when we find ourselves in a conflict, be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. We typically do the opposite of what James tells us to do. During a conflict we're quick to speak, quick to get angry, and we're slow to listen. Even when we listen, think about this with me, we listen badly.

[SLIDE #11] We Listen Badly

Think about a conflict you've been in. Do you listen well? Most of the time we listen badly! We listen to defend ourselves, or we stop listening altogether because we're thinking about the next thing we want to say to make our point. We can't take in what someone else is saying when our heads are full of what we want to say. We listen badly when we listen to fix the other person. "Here's what you need to do!" James says, when you're in a conflict, don't just listen a lot! That would be good. But listen first!

[SLIDE #12] Listen First!

James' counsel for ending conflict is listen first before we speak. How many conflicts would end if we just listened first rather than spoke first? And how many conflicts would end if we not only listened first, but listened last, instead of having to get in the last word. How do we listen well? Another way is we listen to learn.

[SLIDE #13] Listen to Learn

Everyone of us knows what it's like to listen to learn. When we want to learn something we ask questions, we open our minds, we're curious, we take a posture of humility! When we listen to learn, we don't think we already know everything already. We say to ourselves, "I don't have all the information I need! I haven't closed my mind to new information!" Unfortunately, when we're in a conflict our brains get hijacked by anger and hurt, and so we deceive ourselves that we are entirely in the right and this other person is entirely in the wrong. So how do we stop being self-deceived so that we would even want to listen well and listen to learn?

Brothers and sisters, we have tremendous resource in the gospel. The gospel tells us that Jesus died for our sins. So we can say:

[SLIDE #14] Because Jesus died for my sins, when I'm in a conflict, I don't need to _____

You fill in the blank!

- Because Jesus died for my sins, when I'm in a conflict, I don't always need to be right because Jesus is my righteousness.
- Because Jesus died for my sins, I don't always have to be perfect because Jesus is perfect.
- Because Jesus died for my sins, I don't always have to defend myself because Jesus is my defender.
- Because Jesus died for my sins, I will be okay even if this other person walks away thinking they're entirely in the right and feeling like they won the argument.

The gospel helps us to stop being self-deceived when we're in a conflict. James goes on and says we can deceive ourselves when we compartmentalize our lives.

[SLIDE #15] We Compartmentalize Our Lives

We can deceive ourselves when we compartmentalize our lives.

If we examine the structure of James 1:19-27, you can see that James is giving us a little anatomy lesson. He speaks first of all of having a controlled tongue in verse 19.

[SLIDE #16] James 1:19 NIV

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry...

In verse 26, he echoes this when he says,

[SLIDE #17] James 1:26 NIV

Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless.

So, James is speaking about our mouths.

James also speaks about our ears. In verse 21 he talks about being quick to listen.

And then James speaks about our eyes.

[SLIDE #18] James 1:23-24 NIV

Anyone who listens to the Word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.

And then after speaking about our mouths, our ears, our eyes, James goes on and talks to us about our hands. In verse 27.

[SLIDE #19] James 1:27 NIV

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

In other words, James traces down our entire bodies. And he's telling us that we can be deceived when our followership of Jesus doesn't involve our whole persons! Let me put it a different way. We can be deceived when we compartmentalize our lives. Following Jesus involves our whole bodies: our mouths, our ears, our eyes, our hands, our sexual organs.

But you know, there's lots of ways for us to deceive ourselves regarding being followers of Jesus. One way I've put it over the years is that self-deceived Christians practice "grapefruit Christianity." "I have my Christian section. And then there's the rest of my life – my social life, my business life, my romantic life, my politics, my hobbies."

We live deceived, compartmentalized lives when we say "Christianity for me takes place at 9AM or 11AM on Sunday mornings. I'm a really good Christian when I'm in church. You should see me. Oh, I stand when I'm supposed to stand, and I sing along with the songs and I say God bless you and praise the Lord when I see someone, but watch out when I leave the church parking lot or when I'm on the job. When I'm back in the real world, the dog-eat-dog world, my Christianity doesn't really apply to me then."

I'm self-deceived when my followership of Jesus only involves part of my body, part of my time, part of my life. I read a story years ago of Christian crusaders who left Western Europe in the

Middle Ages to march on Jerusalem and recapture it from the Arabs. I don't know if this is historically true, but I read that some crusaders before they left used to get baptized and hold their swords out of the water when they were baptized. They were saying that "I want to join myself to Jesus and His cause by undergoing the water of baptism, but I reserve for myself the power of the sword and the right to kill. That part of my life I'm not giving over to you, Jesus."

Let me ask you a personal question. What part of your life have you held outside of the baptismal waters? What do you have in your hand that hasn't been baptized into Jesus? Maybe what's held out of the water is your relationship with your boyfriend or girlfriend. Maybe what you've held out of the water is your money or wallet. Maybe it's what you watch online. Your video gaming. Or some appetite. Your shopping. Let me ask you a personal question. What is in your unbaptized hand?

Again, the gospel provides resources to deal with our self-deception. See, the fundamental Christian declaration is not "Jesus is my Savior!" The fundamental Christian declaration in the New Testament, repeated over and over again is "Jesus is Lord!" Romans 10:9-10 says this.

[SLIDE #20] Romans 10:9-10 NIV

If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.

[SLIDE #21] 1 Corinthians 12:3 NIV

Therefore I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus be cursed,” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.

Following Jesus means all of me has been baptized. I’ve turned the entire control of my life over to Jesus. Rather than living a compartmentalized life, a follower of Jesus who wants to stop being self-deceived says my Christianity involves all that I am. All that I possess. All of my thoughts. All of my heart. All of my soul. All of my strength.

At the end of this talk, I want to give each of you the opportunity to make a decision to yield your entire life to Jesus and to turn over to Jesus what you’ve been holding outside the water of baptism.

- We can deceive ourselves when we’re in a conflict.
- We can deceive ourselves when we compartmentalize our lives.

And

[SLIDE #22] We Can Deceive Ourselves When We Don’t Do God’s Word

Let me read verse 22 again.

[SLIDE #23] James 1:22 NIV

Do not merely listen to the Word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

The great temptation from the time of Genesis 3 in the garden of Eden till now is to set ourselves as independent authorities in which we stand over God and His Word and decide which parts we're going to accept and which parts we're going to reject. If God's Word agrees with our ideas about how our lives should be run, we're in! But if God's Word contradicts us or challenges us or threatens us or says "no" to us and our desires, well – sorry God, but I've got to put up some boundaries here. You need to know that you've gone a little too far! My experience of life just doesn't agree with this perspective of yours found in the Bible.

Listen, Jesus doesn't address us in His Word the way a professor addresses a room full of students in a graduate school seminar. He doesn't say "here's what I think. What do you think?" He doesn't say "let's have a conversation and a really robust exchange of ideas. I'll share what I believe about God and the world and what makes life work, and you share what you believe about God and the world and what makes life work!"

Jesus doesn't say to us, "I'll share my thoughts about what is right and what is wrong for you, and you share what you think right and wrong ought to be for your life and maybe we'll learn from each other." Jesus comes to us as a general speaking to His troops, as a mother speaking to a small child, as a coach speaking with his players and he says, "do what I'm telling you to do!"

One of my favorite stories in the Bible is found in Luke chapter 5. The disciples are out all night fishing. They haven't caught anything even though they're professional fisherman. In the morning, they're pulling in their nets, they're dog tired, they're frustrated. And Jesus says "go out again! And throw the net in on the other side." And I love Peter's response because Peter's response to Jesus is the response of every true follower of Christ. Peter says...

[SLIDE #24] Luke 5:5 NIV

Simon answered, Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.

In other words, I've got lots of experience that what you're telling me to do won't work. I know a lot about this area. After all I'm a professional fisherman and you're not! But because you say so Lord, I will do what you're telling me to do. Peter is a "doer of the Word, not just a hearer."

Friends, the only way to stop being self-deceived, is to adopt the attitude of Peter. "Because you say so Lord, I'll do it." I may think to myself, what Jesus is saying won't work. I think this is the craziest thing I've ever heard. But because you tell me to do it Lord, I'll do it. See, unless God and His Word stands above us and we allow God's Word to poke us and push us and challenge us and shape us and call us up short, despite our experiences, despite our personal opinions, despite our contrary thoughts, there's no way we can stop from being self-deceived.

If our thoughts and our experiences and our feelings and our ideas are always the standard, and God's Word is not allowed to regularly challenge us, then what we're saying is we don't have any guidance system outside ourselves. We're our own GPS. And if our internal GPS is off or flawed or badly programmed, well, we'll never get to where we want to go. If our internal GPS is off and we won't listen to God's Word, there's no correcting mechanism. We'll end up driving into a lake. Or off a cliff. Or into a dead end. And many of us have done that with our lives! See, God knows what the road ahead is like. He can see all the way into eternity. He knows when we're going the wrong direction. Do you hear Him saying, "correcting, correcting." Turn around. Turn around? Last thing.

[SLIDE #25] We Can Deceive Ourselves When We Try to Understand Ourselves Apart From God's Word.

Let's look at verses 23 to 25 again.

[SLIDE #26] James 1: 23-25 NIV

Anyone who listens to the Word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it – not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it – they will be blessed in what they do.

James is continuing his thought about how we followers of Jesus ought to approach God's Word. And James uses the illustration of God's Word being like a mirror into which we see ourselves and understand ourselves only if we look intently and consistently into the mirror and remember what we look like.

Only Jesus whose eyes are like burning coals according to the book of Revelation can plumb the depth of the human heart and see through all of our games and all of our masks and all of our deception.

What do we discover about ourselves when we stare intently into God's Word, when we read God's Word, when we think about it, when we mull it over, when we chew on it, when we meditate upon it, when we memorize it? What do we discover about ourselves?

Last couple of thoughts. We discover the bad news first of all, that we are way worse than we fear. You and I love to imagine in our fantasies about ourselves that we're basically nice people. We are kind people, we are fair people, we are truth seeking, we are giving, we are forgiving. But then we stare intently into God's Word, and we read Jesus' words about loving our enemies, praying for those who persecute us, forgiving everyone for everything, not judging others lest we be judged, we have to say "Lord, you got me! I'm nothing like your Word tells me to be! I often hold onto grudges! I want to be forgiven but I don't forgive others! I'm easily triggered! There are lots of people that I judge and dismiss and believe don't deserve to be

loved. When we look into God's Word we discover the bad news that we are way worse than we fear!

But, if we stare into God's Word long enough, we don't only discover the bad news that we're way worse than we fear, we discover the good news that God loves us way more than we imagine!

God tells us in His Word in 1 John 3 verse 1.

[SLIDE #27] 1 John 3:1 NIV

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!

And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

But sometimes when we look at ourselves, we say, I'm not so sure the evidence stacks up that I'm a child of God. There's so many things wrong with me. I'm not so sure that the Holy Spirit is in my life and that I'm a real deal Christian. But John goes on to say a little later in the chapter in 1 John 3 verse 20...

[SLIDE #28] 1 John 3:20 NIV

If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

In other words, as I stare into God's Word and really believe it, I hear the good news pronounced to me by my Father in Heaven who says: "Rich, the reason why you are a child of God is entirely based on what I've done for you in sending my Son Jesus to die for your sins, in raising Him from the dead and in sending my Spirit to live inside of you." God the Father says to you and me "because of what I've done, you don't need to keep playing pretend or deceiving yourselves anymore about who you are. You don't have to constantly try to establish your own okay-ness, your own righteousness. I'll give you righteousness as a gift if you simply trust in my Son, Jesus. You don't have to pretend that you're smarter than you are or nicer than you are or better looking than you are or kinder than you are. You don't have to be anything other than you are! All you need to do is trust in my Son Jesus. He is enough for you! You'll find a secure foundation for your self-worth and your identity if you simply trust in my Son Jesus. When you trust in Jesus and really look to Him, you'll stop being self-deceived!

Offering Text:

Vineyard Columbus' Value Life Ministry is designed to support women in crisis pregnancies. We believe that every woman has the right and ability to carry her child regardless of financial or emotional situations that may make pregnancy more difficult. We have in our hearts a passion for life and parenting. Our ministry seeks to assist women in making choices regarding themselves and their unborn child based not on fear but on wisdom and prayer.

[SLIDE #29] James 1:27 NIV

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

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James 1: 19-27

I. We Can Deceive Ourselves When We Are In a Conflict

A. We Listen Badly!

B. Listen First!

C. Listen to Learn!

II. We Can Deceive Ourselves When We Compartmentalize Our Lives

III. We Can Deceive Ourselves When We Don't Do God's Word

IV. We Can Deceive Ourselves When We Try to Understand Ourselves Apart From God's

Word