

"Guilt by Association and Hidden in Plain Sight"

Text: 2 Corinthians 11:12-15

God the Holy Spirit clear from your thoughts all that detracts from his Word; and from your lives all that draws your hearts from that one thing needful. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians, those that study human beings and their shared weaknesses and limitations recognize that our eyes (or mind) often fail to recognize what is right in front of us, especially if we expect what we are looking for to be elsewhere. It's the old "hidden in plain sight" phenomenon. Fans of Edgar Allan Poe will remember how well he used that human idiosyncrasy as the basis of his short story, *The Purloined Letter*.

We see the same sort of thing all around us every day without recognizing it. At the height of his career, for example, someone once asked the famous Denver quarterback John Elway how he deals with the inevitable lack of privacy that comes with fame. How, for example, does he avoid being mobbed every time he goes to the mall or eats at a restaurant? His answer was that he routinely wore one of his own jerseys. People would look at him, notice that he looks remarkably like John Elway, but then dismiss the notion, assuming John Elway would never wear one of his own jerseys. Hidden, in plain sight.

This morning then we are going to examine the concept of "hidden in plain sight," together with the concept of "guilt by association," to learn to identify two of Satan's most common and effective weapons used in his struggle to destroy God's children. The text that will guide us this morning is found in Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, the 11th Chapter:

^{ESV} 2 Corinthians 11:12-15 *And what I do I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do. ¹³ For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. ¹⁴ And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. ¹⁵ So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.*

This is God's Word. What a blessing to have and study the precious words of Almighty God on a regular basis. Honor these words as such and learn from them accordingly. To this end we pray, **"Sanctify us by the truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth!"** Amen.

Before we get to Satan's plan to hide the truth in plain sight, we need to understand the first part of his plan: "guilt by association." Do you understand the concept? It's one of those things in life that can be more imaginary than real. Courts in our land, including multiple judgments by the United States Supreme Court, have repeatedly ruled that guilt by association has no place in any legal proceeding. In other words, the fact that your family member or best friend is a thief doesn't in itself make *you* a thief. The fact that you were with someone who was doing drugs doesn't prove that *you* took drugs. That's how the courts see it. Unfortunately, human beings tend to feel no such constraints.

If, for example, you see a young man loitering on a street corner in the company of gang members, most rational people would assume that he too had been drawn into that perverse mentality and way of life. If you were to see a young woman in garish clothing, late at night, calling out to passing cars on a street corner with known prostitutes, most would again assume that she too was caught up in that sinful lifestyle.

So what would you, personally, think of a man who routinely shunned the higher, more honorable classes of society and hung out instead with known criminal elements – like prostitutes and thieves? It would certainly tell you something about that person, wouldn't it? Except, of course, that in this case it is a description of Jesus Christ – which is why "guilt by association" must be used only with great care by Christians.

Why "great care"? God's Word tells of its misuse. The Jews used it to condemn Jesus: (Luke 15:2) ***And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."*** Again in Matthew 11:19 we read Jesus' words: ***"The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds."***

To Christians, this sort of thing ought to be self-evident. The Eighth Commandment reminds us of God's will that we *"put the best construction on everything."* "Association" probably calls us to gently question; it does not give us the right to assume guilt.

Yet there is a far more diabolical and clever means by which Satan is employing "guilt by association" against God's children. In fact if you combine "guilt by association" with the concept of hiding something in

plain sight, you begin to grasp the evil genius with which Satan today attacks both the Christian Church and the truth of God's Word.

Think back to the last few times some sort of religious service was depicted in a movie you watched or a book you read. Was the depiction obviously positive or obviously negative? Were the participants portrayed as fine, normal, upstanding people or delusional nut jobs? I can't recall a single instance of a normal Christian worship service. It's always creepy fake faith healers, demonic cave rituals, and cultic brainwashing.

So where do "hidden in plain sight" and "guilt by association" come in? First the guilt by association. That is *exactly* how the devil wants our society see you and me and our religion. To the unconverted, there is probably little difference between a man who believes that the golden plates of the Book of Mormon ascended into heaven after their translation by Joseph Smith and the ascension into heaven of a crucified Jewish man named Jesus of Nazareth. To the non-Christian there is probably no appreciable difference between the reception of Jesus' body and blood in Holy Communion and drinking blood from a human skull in a Satanic ritual.

Satan's goal is arguably even worse than leading souls into the damning error of work-righteous churches. His goal is to discredit the one true religion by raising up countless false and perverse cults. Guilt by association.

Now change the channel and watch the aftermath of yet another "act of religious conviction" in the Middle East where a devout young follower of the Prophet Mohammed strapped 50 pounds of high explosives, ball bearing, and nails to his chest and blew up women and children in a local marketplace – all in the name of Allah. See hundreds or even thousands as they bow in unison to the god and his prophet who supposedly condone such actions.

Just another religion – and they are all pretty much alike. Guilt by association.

Change the channel again and you find yourself in Tibet, watching a Buddhist monk light himself on fire, or listening to one who believes that he, through mediation, is very close to being "assumed into the deity."

Just another religion – and they are all pretty much alike. Guilt by association.

This is how Satan is employing his "guilt by association" against the Christian Church today. No one wants to be seen by society as a demented nut-ball. No one wants to be regarded as lesser or in any way delusional. Nor are Satan's attacks an on-again, off-again proposition. The attacks are both relentless and cumulative. It's like he straps a pack on your back and continually adds one rock after another. Christians who imagine that they are immune do so at their own peril.

Our text for this morning describes this sort of guilt by association when it speaks of Satan "***disguising himself as an angel of light.***" There is little doubt that those souls who have been caught up in these pagan religions are absolutely convinced of their "rightness." They speak of supernatural, religious experiences that often transcend human description and understanding. They speak of blissful assurance and of the unimaginable joys that await them. Tragically, what they are experiencing are demonic forces aping the truth – Satan, masquerading as an angel of light.

And that's only half the plan. The other half of the devil's plan is to hide Christianity in plain sight.

The devil is under no illusion that he will be able to destroy the Christian Church. Jesus himself said that it's not going to happen, and while man often doubts the Savior's words, Satan is not so foolish. Therefore, if Satan was to have any success he had to either discredit the Means of Grace or find a way to withhold God's Word from mankind. For a time – until God raised up the 16th Century Reformers – Satan succeeding in withholding God's Word from the masses. Those that knowingly or unknowingly did the devil's bidding had literally chained the Bible, locking it away. Yet when God returned the Word to the people through translation and printing press, Satan had a fallback plan: hide it in plain sight. Once rare and precious, the market has now been flooded. Bibles are everywhere, and yet who now reads it?

Satan knows the truth. He knows the one true God and he knows that the one path to heaven is through faith alone in Jesus Christ. What better way to discredit God's salvation plan than by erecting crude caricatures of the original? What better way to hide the shining gem that is Christianity than to cover the field with cheap imitations of his own manufacture? He knows he can't destroy God's Church, and he can no longer hide or chain the Word, so his last hope is to hide it in plain sight.

While the effect of the devil's mimicry on unbelievers is bad enough, the effect on Christians is no less dangerous. The message of doubt that he wants to drill down into our sub-conscience is not so much *"I want to become a cultist, Muslim, or Buddhist"* as it is *"Is my religion as nutty as all those others?"* and *"Am I as foolish as those poor misguided goofballs on television?"*

Paul recognized the same forces at work already in his day. Again his words from our text: ***"For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. ¹⁴ And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. ¹⁵ So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds."***

Note well the ominous declaration pronounced here by the Holy Spirit through Paul over against all of the false religions that the devil has manufactured: ***"...their end will correspond to their works."*** Their end is destruction, which serves as our reminder that the stakes here could not be more serious or more consequential. All other paths lead always and only to eternal destruction in hell. No matter how peaceful or how convinced its proponents might appear, they and those that follow share a common, terrible destination.

Paul's solution? Again from our text: ***"And what I do I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do."***

Paul recognized that the solution was not to radically alter his message and his methods. The solution was to redouble his efforts and to keep doing *exactly* what he was doing – preach the pure, sweet, life-saving Word of God.

Nothing but light can dispel darkness. When Jesus was condemned by the self-righteous skeptics of his day for associating with sinners, his solution wasn't to abandon those sinners but to continue sharing with them his message of truth and life and light. That means that this is not just the right course of action in reaching out to others, it is the right course of actions for our own personal preservation. Again, the fact that only light dispels darkness is true not only in the hearts of others, it is true also in our own hearts. God's Word, when it is read and studied, has the incredible power to cleanse the human heart of the doubts and uncertainties that Satan relentlessly and cleverly tries to sow there. God's Word is more than just information. It is power – pure, raw, divine power, for in and through his Word God has promised to dispel the gloom and uncertainty of all that is false and impure. It is through exposure to that Word that God the Holy

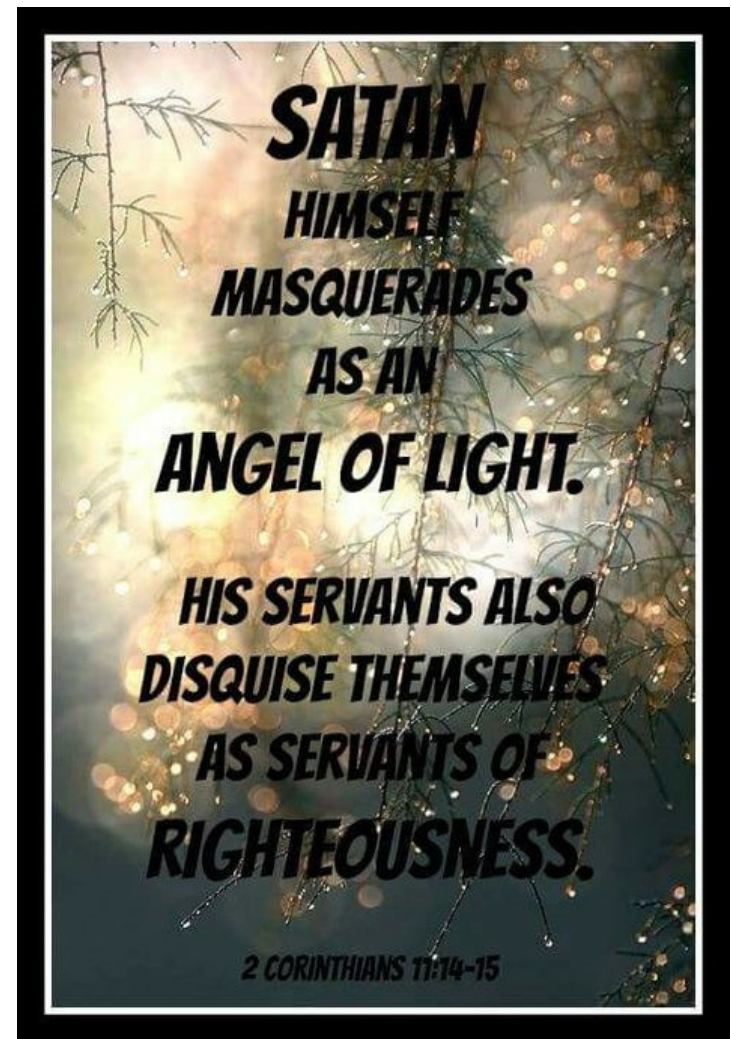
Spirit enables us to rightly judge between true and false, wise and foolish, saving truth and damning lie.

All, again, comes back to the simple, central truth of Jesus Christ and him crucified. This is the truth that saves – that by his life and death, Jesus has supplied the goodness that makes up for our sin. No man – no matter how deeply he meditates or in what rituals he participates or how much he denies himself – no man can satisfy God's demand for perfection. Jesus alone could do that. Jesus alone *has done that*. That perfection is not paid to us as our due; it is given to us as a gift. The only way any human being can forfeit that full, complete payment is to reject or deny that Jesus did what he said he did. Believing, that payment is yours. You are forgiven, and since you are forgiven, nothing and no one can prevent you from inheriting heaven and existing for all eternity in the presence of your holy God. You have the truth. Let no one and nothing convince you otherwise. Amen.

ESV **Acts 8:26-38** Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a desert place. ²⁷ And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and join this chariot." ³⁰ So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹ And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³² Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. ³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." ³⁴ And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?" ³⁷ ³⁸ And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him.

ESV **John 15:1-8** "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. ² Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. ³ Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

ESV **2 Corinthians 11:12-15** And what I do I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do. ¹³ For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. ¹⁴ And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. ¹⁵ So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.



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The Fourth Sunday after Easter – April 28, 2024

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 197 (Red Hymnal)

"Where Wilt Thou Go Since Night Draws Near"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The Epistle Lesson: (Acts 8:26-38) Following Christ's death and resurrection the fledgling Christian Church grew – at times by thousands converted through one sermon and at times one by one. We read in our first lesson how the gospel came to an Ethiopian official. From there God alone knows how or to whom the Christian faith spread. So also today you and I have no idea how many can be reached through a single sharing of the Word of God. What we do know is that no one is converted by silence.

Psalm 66 (Supplement page 37) (Brown Hymnal)

The Gospel Lesson: (John 15:1-8) Christians don't produce the fruits of faith (good works) because we are thankful; we do so because that is what faithful Christians naturally do – just as in this reading the branches naturally produce fruit because they are connected to the vine. While Christians are obviously thankful for what Christ has done for us, that gratitude is itself a fruit of faith.

The Confession of Faith -

Nicene Creed – (Supplement page 5)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 342 (Red Hymnal)

"Chief of Sinners Though I Be"

The Sermon – Text: 2 Corinthians 11:12-15 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

"Guilt by Association and Hidden in Plain Sight"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Post-Sermon Hymn - 411 (Stanzas 1-4) (Red Hymnal)

"From Eternity, O God"

The Preparation for Holy Communion (Brown Hymnal page 17)

The Distribution

The Nunc Dimittis and Thanksgiving (Brown Hymnal page 20)

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 544 (Stanzas 1 & 6) (Red Hymnal)

"While Yet the Morn is Breaking"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors worshipping with us this morning and invite you to join us each Sunday at this time. We are glad you are here! **To our Visitors seeking Holy Communion** – In obedience to God's Word, we practice "Close Communion." This practice stresses both our concern for others, not wanting anyone to receive the sacrament to their harm (1 Cor. 11:27-30) and the importance of unity in confession and faith (1 Cor. 10:16-17). For this reason we ask that anyone who has not established this unity through membership in a CLC congregation please meet with the pastor to discuss this Scriptural doctrine before communing. This is a practice that we follow out of love and concern for you, and out of obedience to God's Word, not in judgment of anyone's Christian faith.

Attendance – Sunday (28) Average (42)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/Holy Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour
Wednesday	-6:00 p.m.	– Confirmation Class
	-7:00 p.m.	– Midweek Bible Study
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour

CLC News – Seminary graduate Paul Agenten has accepted the calls to St Peter's of Iron River and Calvary of Marquette. He is scheduled to be ordained and installed in early July. All other pending calls are still under consideration.

Church Council Notes – Five of six Council members were present for the meeting on April 22nd. Chip and Amber Stroschein were accepted into membership on 3/28. Offerings for March were above budgeted need by \$1,210, reducing our year-to-date deficit to -\$400. Plans to cut down the north lilac hedge (to facilitate regrowth) were placed on hold. The estimate for a tree service to do the work was \$2,300. In addition to Pastor Roehl, Mark Johnson and Mick Johnson have agreed to represent St Paul at the WC Delegate Conference in Valentine in May. Next Council meeting is scheduled for May 6th.

Women's Retreat – A reminder that space will be limited at the September Women's Retreat hosted by St Paul. Those interested in attending please see the sign-up sheet on the mailbox table.