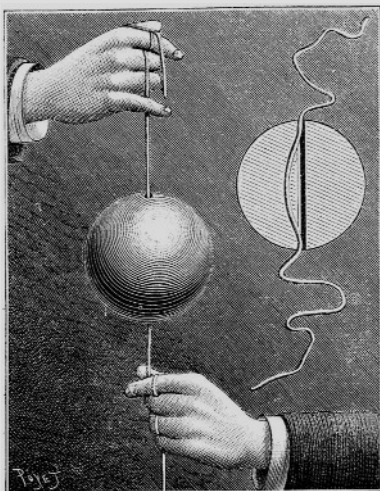




Optional Illusions

by Dave Esh



The title of this article is a play on words. A common term is optical illusion, which is defined as “a visual experience in which there is some kind of false perception of what is actually there”. It could be the sleight of hand when someone pulls rabbits out of a hat, or seeing a mirage of a lake in the middle of a desert. An illusion is simply something that deceives.

It is the tendency of fallen man to believe whatever most closely fits his agenda. Choosing to believe a lie, or refusing to accept truth is not unusual. Overrating possibilities or believing the illogical is quite common. Evolution is just one of many examples. Creation scientist Duane Gish likes to say, “It is unbelievable what an unbeliever has to believe in order to be an unbeliever.”

All too often, professing Christians are not far behind. Deceiving themselves, they choose to believe that which clearly contradicts the Word of God. The worst kinds of deception are often founded on partial truths. The following verses clearly show the pattern, or steps that are taken, when choosing to believe a lie. Exalting ourselves, questioning God, etc., has changed little since the fall in the Garden of Eden.

78.5% of Americans claim to be Christians. The vast majority have chosen to believe some or all of the lies listed in this article. Paul describes them in this verse:

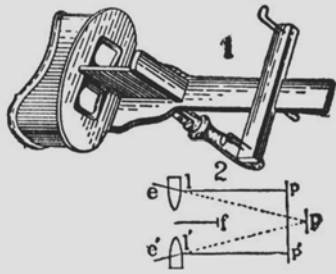
Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things. Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves: Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen. (Rom 1:22-25)

ILLUSION #1

Works Salvation

Let's first look at an illusion that is taught by many religions and even many sects of Christianity. This is the claim that we are saved by our works. The view is that God has scales that He uses to measure our performance in life. If our good works outweigh our failures, it somehow entitles us to eternity with Christ.

This is a lie that is perpetrated by the enemy of our souls, and often brings us to despair. Our human frailties and failures will hinder us from meeting our



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own expectations, let alone the requirements of a just and holy God.

The infinite holiness of God and His required perfection make it obvious that it is impossible to earn our salvation. Isa 64:6 tells us that *“we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away...”*

In several places in the New Testament, we are warned that an attitude of a *“works salvation”* is an attack on the cross of Christ.

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. (Eph 2:8-9)

Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified. (Gal 2:16)

God makes it very clear that He will not share His glory with fallen man. And why should we expect Him to do so? Do we really believe that we can add anything to the cross?

But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world. (Gal 6:14)

To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved. In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace; (Eph 1:6-7)

There are many verses that make it absolutely clear that salvation is not for sale. It is far too valuable and totally unattainable for us. Any claim to earning it, even in

part, disqualifies us from receiving it. It is very clear that salvation is an act of Grace by a merciful God. The only payment that satisfied a just and holy God was the blood of the perfect sacrifice of the Lord Jesus. *“It is finished”* meant *“Paid in full.”*

ILLUSION #2

Works Don't Matter

This lie tells us that because salvation is only by grace through faith, the way we live does not affect our standing with Christ. We are told that obedience is mechanical and only because we love God. It has no bearing on our salvation or relationship with Him. We are often told that if we are saved we will *want* to serve Him. It is automatic. The insinuation is that we have no obligation to do so. Obedience is strictly voluntary.

Although we have seen in the above verses that salvation is a gift, totally unmerited, there are many others that we must contend with to complete our picture. In doing so, we must do it with the full knowledge that God will not contradict Himself. Therefore, while acknowledging that salvation is a free gift of God the following few verses would indicate that works are still very important.

For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works. (Matt 16:27)

And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. (Rev 20:12)

And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be. (Rev 22:12)

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. (Matt 7:21)

Works are the expected response to a true act of grace in our life. To say that works are unrelated to salvation requires tremendous gymnastics with God's Word. What do we do with the following teachings of our Lord if our works are meaningless?

Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. ...Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. (Matt 25:34-46)

The above verses show us that compassion on the poor is rewarded in eternity. It is significant to note that recipients of this reward do not realize or claim to be deserving of anything.

On the other hand, Jesus also explains that sins of omission are subject to harsh and final judgment.

Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not. Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee? Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me. And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.

Scripture tells us in 1 Cor 6:9 that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God. "Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind."

We can see then, that our works flowing from a true act of grace and a living faith actually play a very important part in our relationship with God.

ILLUSION #3

"Sinner's Prayer" Salvation

This illusion says that salvation is a once and done thing. This is the belief that if we repented and trusted in Christ for our salvation, even as a child, it is impossible for us to lose our place with him in eternity. This doctrine violates many clear Bible teachings. Misused verses include the following:

For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:38-39)

We are told we must never doubt our salvation after conversion. A new convert was told that even if he went into a bank, robbed it and then shot the teller on his way out, he would remain saved! His question begs an answer: "What then am I saved from?" It seems, according to some, the worst possible sin is to question our salvation. But is it not wisdom to examine ourselves? God tells us that it is.

Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates? (2 Cor 13:5)

It is clear that we can count on God to remain faithful. Our confidence in Him should be absolute. If we are His servants and remain in Him, He will never abandon us.

All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out. (John 6:37)

However, our confidence in ourselves should be much more limited. The fact that God is faithful and will never leave us does not mean that we have no more responsibility in our relationship with Him. We are not robots. He will give us power to overcome spiritual enemies but does not force us to use that power. We still have choices and a

free will. He will not leave us, but that does not mean that we cannot leave Him. *“Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.”* (1 Cor 10:12)

The Apostle Paul said that he was pressing on his whole life so that he would not be a castaway. *“But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.”* (1 Cor 9:27) If the apostle Paul was concerned about being a castaway, how much more should we?

Other verses to consider:

“But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved.” (Matt 24:13) Does this verse mean that if we do not endure unto the end, we will not be saved? If not, why is it in the Bible? The Apostle Paul warned us *“Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils;”* (1 Tim 4:1) How can one depart from the faith unless he was first in the faith? Peter testifying before the Sanhedrin said, *“And we are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him.”* (Acts 5:32)

Peter said the Holy Ghost is only given to them that obey. To believe that God has some kind of obligation to save those who have no part in Him is deception at its worst. We are instructed to *“give diligence to make our calling and election sure”*. The promise is that if we do these things, we shall never fall. Again, doesn't this imply that if we are not diligent than our calling and election is in question?

What, Then, is Truth?

Believing God and accepting the Bible at face value is not that difficult for those who love truth. There is really no inconsistency in the above passages. In the first part, there is no question that we cannot save ourselves. But we must also realize that God is under no obligation to extend His grace [unmerited favor] upon anyone un-

less He chooses to do so. Furthermore, there is no question that His promises are conditional. Salvation is a gift, but that does not mean that it is unconditionally available to everyone who lays claim to it.

God reserves the right to give His gifts to those he chooses. It is clear that He chooses to impart the totally undeserved gift of salvation on those who have faith in Him. Recipients are required to serve Him and to trust and obey.

God does not expect or demand sinless perfection. In I John 2:1 we have this blessed verse *“My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous”*. God is faithful. He continues to pour out His love and grace on His undeserving and unprofitable servants. Oh! Isn't it awesome! The amazing grace of God.

But, the unrepentant, rebellious, and unregenerate should not presume on this grace. To think that because a man once voiced a sinner's prayer in temporary repentance, that he now has limited the options of God, is arrogant and a very dangerous presumption. James 1:21-22 says, *“Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls. But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.”* Toward the end of the Bible the book of Revelation proclaims *“Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city.”* (Rev 22:14)

We do believe in eternal security, but we also believe that God's eternal security is conditional. We know we can trust God. I John 1:9 tells us, *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”* God is faithful and He is full of mercy. If we remain in Him we can fully trust Him for our eternal well-being. The Bible is clear. The promises and warnings contained therein are not ambiguous. We do not need doctorates in theology to understand its truths. We need only to choose this day whom we will serve. Let's stand with Joshua as he pledges, *“As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”* □

