

Some Words About...

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Apate (cunning)

The Greek Word *apate* meant “cunning” in the sense of being cleverly underhanded. The perfect example of this is in the Book of Judith. In 9:10,13 she begs the Lord, “With my cunning lips strike down the slave with the ruler... make my cunning words the wound and blow of those who have planned cruel things.”

New Testament

In Matthew 13:22 Jesus says “the cares of this age and the cunning of wealth choke the word.” The poor or oppressed have such a hard time making a go of it that they have no time for the word of truth, and the rich, who think of little but having wealth and getting more, have no time for the word. Wealth subtly makes itself the most important thing in their lives. The very profusion of possibilities inherent in having wealth can dazzle and enthrall people. The very profusion of possibilities promised by wealth obscures the paucity of contributions it can make to the ennobling of one’s character. The cunning of wealth is dangerous precisely because it has little or no salvatory power but can usurp those aspects of life that are the channels of grace.

In the parallel passage of Mark 4:19 Jesus says, “the cunning of wealth and the desire for other things come in and choke the word.”

The readers of Ephesians are told to quit living like the Gentiles (a vivid description of that lifestyle follows in 4:17–19) and to cast off their former way of living according to the trickery of cunning (4:22). Ephesus was a center for the worship of Artemis, “whom all Asia and the world worship” (Acts 19:27). Further insight into local customs appears in 5:3–14. The public prostitution that was part of the worship of Artemis was but the most blatant aspect of immorality in Ephesus. The equally immoral but cunningly disguised transvaluation of ethical standards, social practices, and personal conduct was the other side of the coin — then as now.

The situation addressed in Colossians 2:8-9 is less immoral than that in Ephesians but equally distracting of our relation to Jesus Christ. Ancient philosophies assumed some sort of ultimate reality and described existence in terms of that assumption. It might be a meaningless flow of atoms or a transcendental ideal or anything in between. Clever words and cunning rhetoric were used to explain everything material, social, and religious in terms of the assumed reality. Once you accept a given view of the nature of all that is, you are caught and have to admit the consequences of the basic proposition as it applies to everything you think and do.

The relation of Jesus Christ to individuals and to the world as a whole is a personal relationship, not a propositional or a mystical relationship.

Paul begins Second Thessalonians by thanking God for them and their faith (1:3), and he returns to this theme in 2:13. But he knows how easily the most devout faith can be diverted from truth by events that distract our attention. He sees this as the work of Satan, who uses “all power, signs, lying wonders, and every evil cunning in the perishing” (2:10). Faith comes first and generates love for one another (1:3), but all is not easy (2:2–10), and the cunning of the evil one strikes first at relations among people as a way to undermine faith in Jesus Christ.

In a fairly confused section of Hebrews (3:1–5:14) the writer alternates between the assurances of faith in Jesus and the “cunning of sin”(3:13). There is not much subtlety or cunning about sin today as reported in print or on television, but within each of us there is that resistance to the imperative will of God which

cunningly shapes our desires and expressions and makes the satisfactions of self more important than our dedication to the will of God.

The author of Second Peter uses a long diatribe (2:1–22) against false teachers to point out that they are “gloating in their cunning while they feast on you” (2:13). Obviously those false teachers found it quite profitable to sell their deceitful doctrines to willing dupes. Things haven’t changed all that much. The pure preaching of the gospel can be both salvatory and invigorating, but false teachings can undermine and distort our very relationship with God. False teachers in our day have founded cults that prey cunningly on the religious aspirations and credulities of thousands. And, far less seriously, even the accepting of the “laying on of hands” as a true and necessary element in the structure of our relationship with God falsifies the nature of that relationship and of our relationship with each other.

Today

Cunning isn’t what it used to be. Daniel Drew would drive a few thousand head of cattle to market, feed them lots of salt, let them drink all they could hold, and then sell them by weight. The buyers paid for a ton or so of water along with the beef. Today we have financial analysts who give false recommendations that lose millions for small investors and gain millions for brokers. It seems less ingenious, less cunning. And the things you read in horoscopes these days couldn’t fool a ten-year-old. Laugh at the cunning of Satan if you want — but not until you’ve prayed.

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