

Don't Be a Sucker

by John Piper

The sermon warns against the dangers of being a sucker, which can lead to negative consequences, and encourages listeners to seek wisdom, discernment, and guidance from the Bible and the Holy Spirit.

Duration: 30:16

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 6:9

Topics: "Discerning The Truth", "Avoiding Deception"

Description

This sermon emphasizes the dangers of being deceived and falling into self-delusion, drawing parallels between the historical stock market crash of 1929 and the warnings in the New Testament against being 'suckers' who are easily misled. It highlights the importance of being discerning, wise, and undeceivable in a world filled with false promises and flattery, urging listeners to anchor themselves in the truth of the gospel to avoid being led astray.

Transcript

Fathers, we look together at your Word. I pray for what we talk about to actually happen in the students and in the faculty and in the administration, in the parents, the family that are here. Don't leave me to my own resources right now, but come.

We are living in a day when what needs to happen in the world and in the church and in us is supernatural, not natural. We want everything we do here at this school, natural as it is, to be permeated by the work and power of the Holy Spirit so that supernatural effects that cannot be done without you would come to pass, and I pray that about this moment right now. In Jesus' name, amen.

Noelle and I were watching on Tuesday night a PBS documentary on the great stock market crash of October 29, 1929, and you probably know the story. For about eight years preceding, the stock market had relentlessly climbed. By 1929, one of the commenters said, it seemed that it had no upper limits in the world.

For the first time in history, the little man could participate. The stock market had been around for a while for the big players, and now the shopkeeper and the carpenter and the teacher could jump in because they learned this wonderful secret called margin. You can borrow money to invest in the stock market.

You can come up with \$1,000. They'll loan you \$9,000. You can have \$10,000 worth of stock.

If it goes up, you sell high. You pay your debt down. Now you're a rich man.

So the little man was jumping in like wildfire. Michael Nesbitt said it was an arena of unbounded opportunity where somebody like my grandfather could come into it and make a fortune. So many people made so much money in the market in the late 20s.

It seemed that you just couldn't go wrong buying stocks in American companies. There were warning signs early in the year. There was a wobbliness in March, and one banker alone came up with \$25 million in credit so that people could borrow their way out of selling so that the market didn't take its plunge earlier in the year.

The Federal Reserve Board was very, very nervous. They distrusted the boom. They saw that speculation was reckless and dangerous and being driven almost entirely by borrowed money.

The board had the power to curb that, and they took no action. They issued no public statements. Their silence, it says, was terrifying.

Everything was fragile all through the year of 1929. With everyone trying to borrow money, one commentator said, to cover the falling value of the stocks, the credit crunch became huge. Interest rates soared at 20 percent.

Few people could afford to borrow more money. The boom was about to collapse like a house of cards. John Kenneth Galbraith, the economist from Harvard, was the most indicting when he said this.

It was the nature of a mass illusion. Prices were going up. People bought.

That forced prices up further. That brought in the people, and eventually the process becomes self-perpetuating. Every increase brings in more people convinced of their God-given right to be rich.

There emerged a situation where there was no correlation between the market worth of a company and the real strength of the company. The only correlation was between the market surge and the measure of optimism and the amount of credit. It was like trying to stop Niagara Falls when it started to break.

Everyone wanted to sell. AT&T, this is October 29 now, 1929. AT&T downed 50 percent in a few hours.

RCA, once 110 shares, could not find a buyer at \$26. On the floor, they had never seen anything like it. Tom McCorbick was there, and he said, just chickens with their heads cut off.

They didn't know which way to run. They were panicking, screaming. Everybody was bumping into everybody else.

Then come these words from John Kenneth Galbraith, which triggered this message that I'm now delivering. There's nothing unique about this. It is something that happens every 20 or 30 years because that's about the length of financial memory.

It's about the length of time that it requires for a new set of suckers, if you will, a new set of people capable of wonderful self delusion to come in and imagine that they have a new and wonderful fix on the future. So every 30 years, a new set of suckers arises in American culture, according to John Kenneth Galbraith. A new generation of people capable of wonderful self delusion.

One way to state the aim of Bethlehem College and Seminary is that we aim to graduate people who will not be suckers anywhere, ever, at any level. We aim for our students to be as undeceivable as possible. We aim to free students from wonderful self delusion.

We aim to impart habits of mind and heart that keep them from being dupes, easily deceived, wonderfully deluded. Now, you can see that I'm not putting the emphasis, and we do not put the emphasis on vocational training, but on intellectual and emotional freedom from deception and delusion. We put the focus on building a way of seeing and thinking and feeling and acting and creating, not on a set of vocational skills.

Of course, eventually, every one of you must have vocational skills. But mark this, millions of people who were highly skilled in their jobs brought America to ruin because they were suckers. Highly skilled and trained suckers.

We're not into that. Being a sucker is not good for you. It's not good for the soul.

It's not good for the family. It's not good for the church. It's not good for the nation.

So we believe very strongly that what we're doing here is crucial for the soul and crucial for the family and crucial for the church and the economy and the nation and its moral fabric. It is necessary in any democracy that there be a critical mass of citizens who are not suckers. We would like to help.

Now, I know that I could structure this message upside down. I could talk about our goal is wisdom. Our goal is to produce graduates who are wise and discerning and judicious and perceptive and astute and eagle-eyed.

Yes, we do. That would be true. But the Bible says it both ways, doesn't it? Be wise.

Don't be a fool. The Bible says it both ways. And my own sense is that there's so many suckers in the world today, it might be time to say, don't be one.

We aim to make it as hard as we can for you to be a sucker. We aim for you to be as undeceivable as you can be. Now, there was a song in the 20s.

It was written in 1926 by Irving Berlin. And one of the daughters of the great financiers of that day said in the documentary, it was the essence of the roaring 20s. And the name of the song was Blue Skies.

None of you know this song. Of course, a few of us know this song. Blue skies smiling at me.

Nothing but blue skies do I see. Blue birds singing their song. Nothing but blue birds all day long.

Blue days all of them go. Nothing but blue skies from now on. She said, when she quoted that song, that was the whole tenor of the day.

I mean, people believed that everything was going to be great, always, always. There was a feeling of optimism in the air that you cannot even describe today. And it seems that the sucker fever had mainly to do with excessive optimism.

An inability to consider that it might not be blue skies from now on, personally or nationally. So, when we turn to the New Testament, what struck me is that if you track warnings against being suckers in the New

Testament, what you find is a correlation precisely with the blue sky sucker optimism of the 1920s. It's amazing.

Now, you got a problem when you try to study suckers in the New Testament, because the word isn't there. The word sucker, to mean easily deceived, did not occur anywhere before 1836, so it's not going to be in the Bible with that use. So, if you're going to preach on what the New Testament has to say about suckers, what would you do? Well, you'd come up with the language of suckerdom that the New Testament does use, and you get out your concordance, and you'd look them all up, which is what I did yesterday.

I looked up all the places where the New Testament warns against being deceived. I just put be deceived in Logos, be deceived, and then I put deceived with a little asterisk. I get all of them.

Then I looked them all up, and I read them. Then I wrote them all down, about 20, and then I grouped them, and I was stunned. This is what I do all the time.

I just write down truths about a topic. I look for patterns, and I get blown away. And what blew me away was that the two most frequent kinds of sucker that the New Testament warns against is the sucker who blue skies about history, and the sucker who blue skies about himself.

It was amazing. In the 20s, they blue skied both ways. It's always going to be this way.

Richer and richer. Better and better. Borrow, borrow.

Margin, margin. Onward and upward. History has turned a corner.

It's going to be blue sky from here on out, and they did it personally. I deserve to be rich. I am somebody.

I'm as good as the rich guy who's making it on Wall Street. So, I want to just walk with you through these two groups of texts, so you can see what I saw. The warning against historical blue skying and personal blue skying is what the New Testament is most eager to warn against, if you just take the language of deceit.

Let's do the macro. The macro. Five texts.

One. First Corinthians 6, 9 to 10. Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived.

Don't be a sucker. Neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. Don't be deceived into thinking nobody's excluded.

So, somebody had come along and was trying to deceive the Corinthians into thinking, it doesn't matter what your behaviors are. You're in. There is no judgment coming on impenitent behaviors.

There's none. And Paul says, you're being suckered. And you might think that today that's not our issue of blue skying about history.

Well, who thinks that, you know, that things are going to go well with ISIS knocking on our door, or the economy rattling, or Ebola, or some new disease ready to just sweep across the continents Nobody blew

sky today, so why are you preaching on this? And the problem with that observation is that it is ignorant of the fact that yes, we're pessimistic about ISIS, and yes, we may be pessimistic about the economy, and yes, we may be pessimistic about whether we're going to have a cure for every disease, but we are not the least pessimistic about escaping judgment. Everybody thinks home free when it comes to God. We do blue sky about history ultimately.

I'm not going to hell. Thank you very much, and I don't want to hear you talk about it. Number two, Galatians 6, 7, and 8. Do not be deceived.

Don't be a sucker. God is not mocked. Whatever man sows, that will he also reap.

For the one who sows his own flesh will, from the flesh, reap corruption. The one who sows to the Spirit will, from the Spirit, reap eternal life. Somebody's trying to deceive the Galatians that you don't sow what you reap.

They're being suckered, and Paul says, don't be a sucker. You're going to sow what you reap. You sow to the flesh.

You're going to, from the flesh, reap corruption. Wake up. It's coming.

Number three, 2 Corinthians 11, 3. I'm afraid that as the serpent deceived, suckered Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from sincere and pure devotion to Christ. What did the deceiver say to Eve? You will not surely die, sucker, he whispered. To himself, there's no judgment for this sweet bite.

Number four, Ephesians 5, 5, and 6. You may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral, impure, or who is covetous, that is an idolater, has no inheritance in the kingdom of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words. Don't be a sucker, for because of these things, the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience.

Don't be suckered into thinking there's no judgment and no wrath. Where is anybody in secular America terrified of the wrath of God? They're suckers. They haven't listened to Paul and to the Bible.

Number five, 2 Thessalonians 2, 1-3. Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus and our being gathered together with him, we ask you brothers not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed. The day of the Lord, as if the day of the Lord has come, let no one deceive you.

Don't be a sucker in any way, for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed in the son of destruction. Somebody among the Thessalonians was trying to pull a fast one and saying, the day of the Lord has already passed, you don't have to worry about that. It wasn't past, it was future and it was coming.

So five times Paul uses the language of don't be deceived, don't be a sucker, and in all five of those cases he is talking about delusional optimism of blue skying about the future. No judgment. Everyone.

That's the world we live in. People might be afraid of ISIS, they might be afraid of the economy, they might be afraid of cancer, they might be afraid of whatever short of eternal judgment, and Paul says we live in a world of suckers. The voice of the New Testament is a voice crying in the wilderness, I baptized once with the spirit and I will baptize with fire.

I will gather out the wheat and I will take the chaff and I will burn it with fire. Wake up, don't be a sucker. And the last group of texts addresses the whole issue of blue skying about me.

And I'm special and I'm somebody and I deserve to be as rich as the next guy. So let's take another pass at the New Testament and talk about what Paul addresses and John here. This one is rooted in flattery.

Deceit, suckering, rooted in flattery. We love to be made much of. This is one of the greatest dangers you'll face right now as new students.

Comparing yourself with each other, wanting desperately for somebody to say something good about you, approve you, a teacher to comment on you, a colleague to say you look nice or you are smart or whatever. We just crave, we crave to be made much of. It is making you a sitting duck to be a sucker.

And that's what Paul addresses. So here we go, there's six of these. Romans 16, 18, they don't serve our Lord Christ, but their appetites and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive.

They blue sky you. They tell you you are amazing, that if you look in the mirror you see blue sky personality. And so here we are with our craving, ego hungry, need for approval and we are sitting ducks for this kind of flattery and we get suckered into the latest scheme and the latest false doctrine.

Number two, 1 Corinthians 15, 32. What do I gain if humanly speaking I fought with beasts at Ephesus? If the dead are not raised, let us eat, drink, for tomorrow we die. Don't be deceived.

Don't be a sucker. Bad company corrupts good morals. Wake up from your drunken stupor as is right and do not go on sinning.

Don't be a sucker. Bad company corrupts good morals. You think you are so self-sufficient that you can keep your hand happily in the fire of the sins of your friends and not have it burned.

You're a sucker. Have you lost the old wisdom? He who walks with the wise will be wise. He who lives with fools will come to harm.

Number three, Galatians 6, 2 and 3. Bear one another's burdens, so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks that he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. He's a sucker.

Number four, 1 Corinthians 3, 18. Let no one deceive you. Let no one deceive himself.

If anyone among you thinks that he's wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. Better to let the world think that you are a Christian sucker than let you be one. Really.

Number five, 1 John 1, 8. If we say we have no sin, we're a sucker. We deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. Only suckers think they're sinless.

Lastly, Romans 7, 11. This is perhaps the most penetrating sin. Seizing an opportunity through the commandment deceived me, made me a sucker.

Sin through the law, through the commandment, made me a sucker and through it killed me. Sin rises, takes a hold of the good, holy, pure, wonderful law of God, holds it up in front of you and says, you can do this. You are a blue sky boy.

You can do this all the way to heaven. This is it. This is the key.

Law keeping. Law keeping. Don't get you to heaven because you got strength.

You got resources. You got resilience. You got moral superiority.

You can do this, sucker. No. So, it's astonishing to me.

It is absolutely astonishing to me that when I come away from a PBS documentary on the blue skying of the roaring 20s, historically and personally, and then go to the New Testament and say, what is the New Testament concerned about here when it comes to deceit in the human soul? The answer is blue skying about history and blue skying about individualism and personal sense of worth. That's remarkable. Our aim at Bethlehem is that our students be as undeceivable as possible.

We aim to graduate people who are not suckers at any level. There is a true way to deal with this. Coming judgment and it isn't the blue skying of denial.

There's a true way to deal with the judgment. It isn't denial. There's a true way to deal with my sin, John Piper's sin, John Piper's sense of inadequacy, John Piper's fears and imperfections and weaknesses, and it's the gospel way, the way of Jesus Christ crucified and risen, and it is so solid.

It is so sure that no one who believes it becomes a sucker. God has not destined you for wrath, but to obtain salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ who died for us so that whether we wake or sleep, we might live with him, and if he is that for us, who can be against us? Therefore, no flattery, no wishful thinking, no wonderful self-delusion, no hysteria of blue skying will ever make you a sucker. Father, I pray again now that you would make this come true here.

That every class, every conversation, every book read would serve to make us undeceivable. And freedom from being a sucker. Grant, I pray, that truth would hold sway and that we would be made free.

Let every faculty here be protected by the Holy Spirit and the Word of God from ever deceiving in any way. Guard us from moral deceit, financial deceit, intellectual deceit, demonic deceit, and especially the deceit of riches, which just about ruined us once and ruins lives every day. Oh, that we might trust Christ.

In his name I pray. Amen.

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