

CHAPTER 6

RECOGNISE HOW CAPABLE THE WICKED ARE OF INFLUENCING YOU AND TRY HARD TO AVOID THEM

*⁴ And Jesus answered them, "See that no one leads you astray
Matthew 24:4 (ESV)*

*Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals."
1 Corinthians 15:33 (RSV)*

*The wicked watches the righteous,
and seeks to slay him.
Psalm 37:32 (RSV)*

*Consider how many are my foes,
and with what violent hatred they hate me.
Psalm 25:19 (RSV)*

*"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.
Matthew 7:15 (RSV)*

*⁵¹ Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. ⁵² For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three.
Luke 12:51-52 (ESV)*

Consider the ways in which the wicked tried to oppose and undermine Zerubbabel. If they would try to do that to him, they will do it to you.

Zerubbabel was seeking to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem but his enemies were determined to stop him. Consider the techniques they used, all of which are standard. Every real Christian will come up against these schemes repeatedly and must learn to recognise them. They include infiltration, discouragement, intimidation, obstruction, lies and false accusations. The wicked began by trying to *infiltrate* Zerubbabel's team to undermine him, and his work, from within. However, he saw through their trick and refused to let them join in:

¹ Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the Lord, the God of Israel, ² they approached Zerub'babel and the heads of fathers' houses and said to them, "Let us build with you; for we worship your God as you do, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of E'sar-had'don king of Assyria who brought us here." ³ But Zerub'babel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of fathers' houses in Israel said to them, "You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us."

Ezra 4:1-3 (RSV)

When infiltration failed, they tried *discouragement*. They also tried to *intimidate* the workers, so they would stop work or do less. They also hired people to *obstruct* the work and delay it, so as to frustrate Zerubbabel's purposes:

⁴ Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and made them afraid to build, ⁵ and hired counsellors against them to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.

Ezra 4:4 (RSV)

They then moved on to making *false allegations* about the people of Judah and Jerusalem so that the King would be wary of them and withdraw his support:

And in the reign of Ahasu-e'rus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.

Ezra 4:5 (RSV)

They even wrote a deceitful letter to King Artaxerxes, saying that the people of Judah and Jerusalem were rebellious and were rebuilding the Temple for seditious purposes:

¹¹ this is a copy of the letter that they sent—"To Ar-ta-xerx'es the king: Your servants, the men of the province Beyond the River, send greeting. And now ¹² be it known to the king that the Jews who came up from you to us have gone to Jerusalem. They are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city; they are finishing the walls and repairing the foundations. ¹³ Now be it known to the king that, if this city is rebuilt and the walls finished, they will not pay tribute, custom, or toll, and the royal revenue will be impaired.

Ezra 4:11-13 (RSV)

For a time the King believed their lies and sent a letter of his own giving orders for the work to cease:

²³ Then, when the copy of King Ar-ta-xerx'es' letter was read before Rehum and Shim'shai the scribe and their associates, they went in haste to the Jews at Jerusalem and by force and power made them cease. ²⁴ Then the work on the house of God which is in Jerusalem stopped; and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

Ezra 4:23-24 (RSV)

The effect of their lies was that the work was stopped for a number of years, until a new King came to the throne, called Darius. Then the work was resumed, due to the intervention of Haggai, Zechariah and Ezra. As a result of what they did, the truth eventually came out. It began when Ezra called a fast and also got others to join with him in prayer, seeking for God's help and protection:

²¹ Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Aha'va, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a straight way for ourselves, our children, and all our goods.

Ezra 8:21 (RSV)

God answered their prayers and protected Ezra, and those with him, from the wicked and delivered them from the dangers they faced:

Then we departed from the river Aha'va on the twelfth day of the first month, to go to Jerusalem; the hand of our God was upon us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambushes by the way.

Ezra 8:31 (RSV)

Note how seriously Ezra took the threat posed by the wicked. He was under no illusions as to how much harm they could do. It would therefore be naïve for you to imagine they can't influence or harm you. They certainly can, and all the more so if you underestimate them, or don't even realise who they are. I can speak from first-hand experience. I was once in a business partnership with a very dishonest man who was also a skilled manipulator. In the end, I decided that I had to get out of that firm. If I had not left when I did, his influence would have rubbed off on me.

Sooner or later, associating with him would have caused me to compromise my integrity. In fact, he was already starting to have an unhealthy influence on me. That is what inevitably happens when you become closely involved with bad people. For example, when you are with the wicked, conversations frequently become vulgar. Unless you remove yourself, or remove them, you will be affected by the

way they speak and act. Moreover, you will only ever move in *their* direction and become worse. They won't move in *your* direction and get better.

It's true that a godly person can act as 'salt' in a workplace or other group and prevent bad things from happening, or at least reduce the effect of those things. However, your being salt will not cause the wicked people around you to become good. The godly person acts as a preservative, slowing down the rate of advance of evil, just as salt slows down the process of decay. But it can't *reverse* it. In the same way, a refrigerator can slow down the rate of decay in food, but it cannot make rotten food get better, or become fresh again.

The problems caused by 'Chloe', a deceitful, manipulative supervisor

If they are allowed to remain in place the wicked will also influence your colleagues and staff, not only yourself. Just one wicked person in a church or workplace will have a disproportionately large influence. 'Chloe', a supervisor I employed in the past, had a poisonous influence on my staff by conducting a malicious whispering campaign behind my back. She also bullied junior staff so that they began to see her as having power over their careers. That was not an illusion. She really did have power, so they feared her and did as she told them.

In my naivety I had also allowed Chloe to conduct first interviews on my behalf, to save me time. But anybody with talent and integrity, whom she saw as a threat to herself, was rejected by her at the outset and never got to a second interview with me. She also told lies about me to get junior staff to fear me and avoid coming to me. They believed her and would then go to her for 'protection' from me. The irony is they ought to have come to me for protection from her, but none of them ever did.

Chloe also had a huge influence over the revenue of the firm as I had, very unwisely, put her in charge of the costs department. They did the bills and negotiated our charges with insurance companies after we had won cases. Because she was lazy and dishonest, she made life easier for herself by deliberately 'under-settling' hundreds of bills, over two years. After I sacked her and replaced her with 'Carla', her deputy, the revenue of the firm rose dramatically, because we began to settle our claims for costs at the correct level, rather than under-settling them.

However, Carla learned to act just like her former boss and ended up doing all the same things after Chloe was sacked.

The influence of the wicked does not end, even after you get rid of them. Carla took over the Costs Department from Chloe but went on to do all the same things. It was partly because Carla was already wicked to begin with, but also because she learned a lot of devious techniques from Chloe. For both these reasons, she went on to repeat the very same tactics. She became lazy and dishonest and under-settled bills, exactly as before, and the firm's revenue declined again. So I fell for the same trick twice and paid heavily for my error until I took steps to investigate Carla too.

As is often the case, she already knew what I was going to find so she resigned voluntarily, before my investigation really got started. The wicked can be surprisingly weak and cowardly when they are eventually caught. Instead of fighting you openly, they will often just flee without a fight. They know they can only defeat you while you are *unaware* of their real nature. Once your eyes are open the chances are they won't be willing to meet you in a head-on collision because manipulators often lack the courage to take part in a fair fight, where war is openly declared.

We are responsible for our decisions as to which people we allow to influence us.

Being influenced by other people is not just a possibility. It is inevitable. Spending time with wicked people and fools is bound to affect you, just as being with wise people will. Therefore be very selective about the people you allow to be a part of your life, because we can be ruined by the influence of the people with whom we spend our time:

***Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals."
1 Corinthians 15:33 (RSV)***

Like the Psalmist, seek for wise, godly friends, or at least for people who *want* to be wise and godly. Work hard at building relationships with them:

***I am a companion of all who fear thee,
of those who keep thy precepts.
Psalm 119:63 (RSV)***

Some might say that deciding who to spend time with seems calculating, like a social climber who only wants to be with people who are useful. That is how worldly people think. They seek out those who can help them to get on in life. But by 'getting on,' they mean something very different from what a Christian should be seeking. The relationship decisions we need to make are not about social climbing but to help us to pursue the aims that God has set for us. Given the eternal consequences that will result from success or failure, we need to take this seriously and choose very carefully the people with whom we spend our time.

When I was a police officer I was perplexed by some of the appalling criminals whom women found attractive. Despite being dishonest and violent, even towards them, their girlfriends would stay with them, and even chase after them. There is something about the wicked that is attractive to other wicked people and also to fools, as with the deceitful Mr Wyckham from *Pride and Prejudice*. However, no matter how charming, amusing or popular the wicked may be, we must not desire to be with them:

***¹Be not envious of evil men,
nor desire to be with them;
Proverbs 24:1 (RSV)***

Avoid people who are sexually promiscuous or provocative.

Sexual sin is extremely damaging. Therefore avoid any provocative person who could ensnare you. It is one of the fastest ways to ruin, because it is a sin against our own body. That is made in the image of God and is far more significant than many people realise. Greek philosophy has had a big impact on Western culture. It focused on the spirit and soul and taught that sins committed in the body were of little significance. Therefore many Christians, even today, underestimate the importance of their body and assume it does not matter much to God. But Paul points out its sacredness as a '*temple of the Holy Spirit*':

¹⁸ Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. ¹⁹Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, ²⁰for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

1 Corinthians 6:18-20 (ESV)

Paul expands further on this point in his letter to the Ephesians:

³*But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. ⁴ Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. ⁵ For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.*

Ephesians 5:3-5(ESV)

Any person who commits adultery or fornication is a fool. He is actually destroying himself:

³² *He who commits adultery has no sense; he who does it destroys himself.*

Proverbs 6:32 (RSV)

Solomon describes a loose woman as a temptation to sin, but it works equally in reverse. Many women are pressured into sexual sin by men, with the same deadly results:

²⁶ *And I find something more bitter than death: the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are fetters. He who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her.*

Ecclesiastes 7:26 (ESV)

The whole of chapter 7 of Proverbs is devoted to this one issue. It speaks of a young man who is tempted into sexual sin by a seductive young woman and we are told it will cost him his life. Sexual sin probably has more power to end our walk as disciples than any other sin:

²¹ *With her many persuasions she entices him;*

With her flattering lips she seduces him.

²² *Suddenly he follows her*

As an ox goes to the slaughter,

Or as one in fetters to the discipline of a fool,

²³ *Until an arrow pierces through his liver;*

As a bird hastens to the snare,

So he does not know that it will cost him his life.

²⁴ *Now therefore, my sons, listen to me,*

And pay attention to the words of my mouth.

²⁵ *Do not let your heart turn aside to her ways,*

Do not stray into her paths.

²⁶ *For many are the victims she has cast down,*

And numerous are all her slain.

²⁷ *Her house is the way to Sheol,*

Descending to the chambers of death.

Proverbs 7:21-27 (NASB)

Avoid worldly people.

We are commanded to live in the world but not to share its values or to behave as it does. There are many worldly people that we cannot avoid being with. We have to work alongside them and live on the same street. With them all we can do is be on our guard. But it is a bad idea to spend time *voluntarily* with worldly people. They aren't seeking to do God's will and they won't help you to do so. They are preoccupied with earthly things, so avoid them and do not love the things they love:

¹⁵ *Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. ¹⁶ For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world.*

1 John 2:15-16 (NIV)

You won't influence worldly people if you meet them on their territory, for example by going out to night clubs with them, like someone I once knew. Neither will you ever help anyone to believe the Gospel by using swear words, dirty jokes or crude speech to prove how 'relevant' you are. You will never persuade worldly people to become Christians by being like them. However, they will inevitably influence you and to drag you down to their level. It may be counter-intuitive, but our only hope of influencing such people is by being *different from them*.

Merely by being with worldly people and going to the places they go to you are more likely to get into the problems and hazards that arise in such places. I remember speaking to a young man who told me he had been in a bar which is frequented by young people. It was also late at night and was the sort of place where people go to get drunk, rather than to have a drink. While he was there a fight broke out because some drunken young men threw beer over him and his friends. He began to point out that he was not at fault and had not started or wanted any of this.

I said that if he had been wiser he would not have gone to that bar in the first place because of the kind of people who go there and how they are likely to behave. By avoiding the Town Centre, and by going out earlier rather than later, a lot of the hazards can be so easily avoided. So it is not a question of whether you wanted to get into fights and other such hazards. The issue is whether you are putting yourself into close proximity with the kind of people who are likely to cause them.

Avoid proud, haughty people.

Pride is closely correlated with opposition to God, so the proud will oppose you if you are trying to do God's will. Pride is also an indicator of overall wickedness. Therefore a proud person will inevitably go on to sin in other ways as well. So the fact that someone is proud is, by itself, a useful early warning sign. It suggests that they are likely to be wicked in other ways too and is another of the 'litmus' tests that you can use to spot the wicked.

Avoid negative, resentful or embittered people and those who complain a lot.

Also avoid negative, resentful, bitter people. They will transmit their sourness to you far more effectively than you can ever hope to influence them. That doesn't mean we should avoid those who are hurting or who have been wronged. They need our support and we should, of course, spend time with them. It is the *habitual* moaners, grumblers and resentful people we must avoid. They are not seeking help. They just want an outlet for the festering reservoir of bitterness inside them. Don't allow yourself to become such an outlet for them. Firstly it won't help them anyway but, more importantly, it will damage you.

Avoid stingy people - meanness is a strong sign of general badness in a person.

Meanness with money and property is another of the litmus tests which reveals what a person's heart is really like. I have never met a stingy person who wasn't also hard-hearted. There is a consistent correlation, such that stinginess is only present in people whose hearts are already hard. Thus it is more of a *symptom* of hard-heartedness than a cause of it. A stingy person will never be a good friend to you, as they care very little for anybody else. Therefore you are not losing much anyway if you do avoid them, as their heart is not with you:

***⁶Do not eat the bread of a man who is stingy;
do not desire his delicacies;
⁷for he is like one who is inwardly reckoning.
"Eat and drink!" he says to you;
but his heart is not with you. Proverbs 23:6-7 (RSV)***

Watch out for evidence of stinginess in other people and treat it as a test of their general, overall character. It will improve the accuracy of your discernment. It is harder to discern more complex features, such as falseness, cruelty or dishonesty, as those are more easily hidden. However, because wicked people are usually also stingy, it follows that stingy people are usually also wicked. If you see stinginess, you are probably dealing with a wicked person, or at least they are heading towards being wicked. Therefore they are likely to have *other* wicked features which you have not yet discerned.

Thus stinginess is another warning sign which can help you to identify wicked people earlier. However, do not confuse stinginess with the sensible frugality shown by those who are careful about what they spend. That is *thrift* and has nothing to do with meanness. Thrift is a quality, not a fault, whereas meanness is a sinful heart-attitude. It causes a person not to give or share when they ought to. It is easy for a person to hide their general wickedness from you, but meanness is hard to disguise. They could only hide it by showing generosity, which they would find difficult.

Even if they tried, the chances are they wouldn't be able to be generous in any consistent or convincing way. A wicked person can therefore be identified and exposed much earlier if you test their attitude to money and possessions. It could be in a small everyday situation such as sharing a bill, buying drinks or making a contribution to petrol costs. If you see evidence of stinginess, *as opposed to sensible thrift*, then take note. From then on, be on the lookout for other forms of wickedness in that person as well, because you are very likely to find more.

Create little tests of meanness or generosity, without telling anybody what you are doing. Don't give your methods away. See how people react where a bill needs to be shared. Take careful note of whatever you see or hear. You may be surprised at the relaxed, spontaneous generosity of some, and the hard-hearted tight-fistedness of others. However, don't then waste that information by failing to act upon it. Begin to watch the mean person much more closely from then on, in all his other dealings, not just with money.

Having been alerted to their meanness, you will then begin to see other negative aspects of their character emerge, which you probably would not have discovered if you had not been consciously looking out for such things. When I was a police officer, there was a young man who joined the station as a probationer. If we went out for a drink after work he would let other people buy rounds, but then head off home before it was his turn to buy a round. This was not just on a one off occasion. It was his consistent policy, each time we went out.

Moreover, if we went out for dinner as a shift he would ask at the outset whether we would each be paying for ourselves or splitting the bill equally. If we decided to split it equally, he would then order fillet steak, a starter and expensive drinks. But if we said we would each pay for ourselves he would have the cheapest item on the menu and drink very little. In the end, if he was with us, we would pay for ourselves because we knew what he would do. We would only split the bill if he wasn't there.

We also began to buy rounds at the police bar without including him, or we would each get our own drink, so as to stop his tactics. However, none of that embarrassed him. He felt no shame, as any right-thinking person would. He just accepted that he had been thwarted and then got his own drink. If others had ever excluded me from a round because they thought I was a sponger I would have been mortified. But he wasn't bothered, because his overall character was also bad. He was proud, arrogant and selfish and the sort of officer who does not enhance the reputation of the police.

The 'stinginess test' is reliable, because it is one which most wicked people will fail. Their stinginess is so ingrained that they would actually find it hard to hide it, even if they wanted to. They don't actually notice when they are being mean. It seems so normal to them that they don't see it as wrong or expect you to attach any significance to it. So beware of anybody who is mean. Of all the people I have ever met, I cannot think of even one stingy person who was not *also* selfish, uncaring and hard-hearted in other ways as well. Can you?

Avoid crude or foul-mouthed people.

Persistent foul language is a clear sign that a person's heart is corrupt. The Bible says "*Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks*". That means whatever is already in your heart, or whatever your heart is *full of*, will automatically flow out in your speech, without you even realising it. Again, it's really a *symptom* of the existing corruption within that person, not a *cause* of it. In addition, the persistent use of foul language also suggests that the person is being influenced by demons. (See Books 7 and 9).

When a person becomes a real Christian, one of the first things that tends to disappear is foul language, and especially blasphemy. However, that is not so with apostates, or with phoney or nominal Christians who are mere 'churchgoers'. I have come across many such people who used bad language, and even took God's name in vain, without feeling any qualms about it. Therefore, watch out for swearing and blaspheming. It is another warning sign that something is wrong, especially if the person is claiming to be a Christian.

Real Christians who have the Holy Spirit within them, would feel uncomfortable even hearing blasphemy, let alone speaking it. Thus, if a person is swearing regularly, and especially if they are blaspheming, it is a clear indicator that they are corrupt, unless they are a brand new convert, for whom some temporary allowances may need to be made. However, with the possible exception of brand new believers, blaspheming is a strong indicator that the person is not a genuine Christian.

Avoid scoffers and mockers.

We hear a lot in the book of Proverbs about *scoffers* and *mockers*. They are flippant and disrespectful about the things that God values. They are unlikely to listen to you and will mock what you value, so avoid them. Also avoid comedians who mock people, values or institutions which God wants us to honour. At the very least, He does not want us to revile them. Therefore, Christians should avoid comedy shows where politicians are being mocked.

It may not be blasphemous or crude, but cruel sarcasm aimed at politicians is still wrong, because it is based on contempt. God wants us to honour, and pray for, the political leaders He has put in place. Even if they are unbelievers, they were all put there by Him. We are to pray for such leaders, not to ridicule them. There is nothing constructive or edifying in mockery. It is a base form of humour and if we engage in it, or listen to it, it will harden our hearts.

That said, there is a place for the intelligent and constructive use of irony, and even satire, if the motive is to reveal the truth about a politician or government. Some cartoons or other comments on social media are entirely proper in my view, such as where Mr Obama is revealed for what he really is. It depends on how it is done and on the heart-attitude and motives of those doing it. Intelligent satire is therefore alright, but gratuitous insults, mockery and contempt are not.

Do not marry, or even go out with a non-Christian.

For some, this will mean making painful decisions, but there is no getting away from the fact that God does not want a Christian to marry a non-Christian. We should not even go out with them, or 'date' them, but should wait for the unbeliever to be genuinely converted. Until then, there should not be any romantic relationship. Moreover, if we don't see marriage as at least a potential outcome, we should not be going out with members of the opposite sex at all. If the possibility of eventual marriage is excluded, there isn't any biblical basis for what our society calls dating.

It creates all kinds of temptations, not only to sexual sin, but also to compromise by marrying an unbeliever. The safest way to ensure you don't marry an unsaved person is to refuse even to go out

with one. If a Christian disobeys God and marries a non-Christian, it will almost certainly end in disaster and the unbelieving party is unlikely ever to be converted. Instead, they are much more likely to drag the Christian down to their level and wreck their spiritual condition. That is exactly what happened to Solomon as a result of his marrying pagan women who worshipped idols:

¹ Now King Solomon loved many foreign women, along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, ² from the nations concerning which the LORD had said to the people of Israel, "You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods." Solomon clung to these in love.
1 Kings 11:1-2 (ESV)

Solomon was the wisest man ever. He had also personally met with the LORD, at least twice, i.e. a pre-appearance of the Son of God. But even Solomon's faith could not survive the corrosive influence of being married to unbelieving wives. They ruined him for many years, until he eventually recovered his faith in his old age.

Don't form any kind of significant partnerships or alliances with non-Christians.

Consider what apostle Paul says about entering into any kind of intimate or significant relationships with unbelievers:

¹⁴Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? ¹⁵Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? ¹⁶Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, "I will dwell in them and walk among them; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. ¹⁷"Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate," says the Lord. "And do not touch what is unclean; And I will welcome you.
2 Corinthians 6:14-17 (NASB)

Paul is frank about the reality of being closely tied up together with unbelievers. Marriage, business partnership, or anything which requires us to be tied together in a very close relationship with mutual trust and obligations will never work between a believer and an unbeliever. Consider this example involving the godly King Jehoshaphat of Judah. Contrary to God's wishes, he formed a military alliance with the ungodly King Ahaziah of the Northern Kingdom. God strongly disapproved of King Jehoshaphat forming that alliance with an ungodly man and brought judgment on him because of it:

³⁵After this Jehoshaphat king of Judah allied himself with Ahaziah king of Israel. He acted wickedly in so doing. ³⁶So he allied himself with him to make ships to go to Tarshish, and they made the ships in Ezion-geber. ³⁷Then Eliezer the son of Dodavahu of Mareshah prophesied against Jehoshaphat saying, "Because you have allied yourself with Ahaziah, the LORD has destroyed your works." So the ships were broken and could not go to Tarshish.
2 Chronicles 20:35-37(NASB)

I went into a business partnership with two unbelievers, one of whom was wicked. In the end, the other became wicked too, because of the influence of the first one. But I should never have gone into partnership in the first place, with either of them. It would be alright to work for them, as an employee, or to do business with them as a customer or supplier, but not to join their business *as a full equity partner*. When I did that I went too far and became "bound together with unbelievers", which Paul warned against. It was asking for trouble and ended in disaster, which I wrote about in Book 2.

Be realistic about the extent of human wickedness, and suitably alert, yet without over-reacting or becoming paranoid.

We need to be balanced about the likelihood of encountering wickedness in other people. If we assume that *nobody* is wicked, then we're naïve and will be damaged by people. But if, on the other hand, we assume *everybody* is wicked, we'll become cynical and even paranoid. Therefore aim to be realistic about the number of wicked people as a proportion of the population and also the likely extent of their wickedness. Neither over-estimate nor under-estimate those things. Instead, keep an open mind about other people, whether you have only just met them, or have known them for years.

Having an 'open mind' means we form no judgement at all until we have sufficient information to give us a reliable basis for forming one. It doesn't mean we assume all people are wicked until they're proved not to be. Neither does it mean assuming everybody is sincere until they're proved to be false. Both assumptions are wrong, because the population is made up of a wide range of types of person. Having an open mind means not assuming anything at all and forming no judgement, in either direction, until sufficient facts become known to enable you to make one properly.

Don't take any significant action, form any alliance, or join any group or project without seeking God's guidance first.

To a gung-ho, enthusiastic person like me, caution and restraint do not come naturally. My instinct is to press ahead, make quick decisions and get things moving. Therefore, I have often got involved too hastily in groups, committees and other projects. Or I have joined a church or some other group without ever asking God whether He actually *wanted* me to do so. I have been headstrong and wilful at times, like a dog that pulls on its lead. I have therefore made many painful errors, and wasted a lot of time.

I would have been much better off asking God first, preferably at the very outset, what He wants me to do. I could have done so by praying along these lines: "*Lord, I am considering joining church X, or committee Y, or starting project Z. Please tell me what your will is and whether this is something you want me to do, or just my own headstrong idea. Please help me not to 'pull on the lead'. Instead, help me only to do what you want, nothing else and nothing more*".

If we don't pray in that way, and just press on without asking God first, we will end up doing things which displease Him. That is not necessarily because they are *inherently bad* things, but because they were the wrong things for us to be doing. They could even be the right things, but done at the wrong time, in the wrong way, with the wrong people, or to the wrong extent. So if we don't ask God first we are highly likely to make mistakes, waste time and get into unhealthy relationships:

¹ "*Woe to the rebellious children," says the LORD, "who carry out a plan, but not mine; and who make a league, but not of my spirit, that they may add sin to sin; ² who set out to go down to Egypt, without asking for my counsel, to take refuge in the protection of Pharaoh, and to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt! ³ Therefore shall the protection of Pharaoh turn to your shame, and the shelter in the shadow of Egypt to your humiliation.*

Isaiah 30:1-3 (RSV)

Isaiah told the people of Judah that forming an alliance with Egypt, which seemed a good military idea to them, was not from God and would only end in disaster. On that occasion God did not want them to form any alliance, but to rely solely on Him. However, it is equally wrong to go in the other direction and *oppose* someone or something without asking God first. In the next example the godly King Josiah, probably the best King that Judah ever had, made a decision to confront Pharaoh Neco of Egypt. His armies were passing through, on their way to do battle with the King of Assyria.

King Josiah of Judah decided that he would not allow this. So he went with his army to do battle with the Egyptian army, even though Pharaoh Neco had told Josiah that he had no quarrel with him. The

Egyptians just wanted to pass through and had no desire to fight against Judah. Neco was an Egyptian, not an Israelite, but he claimed he had been commanded by God to go to war with Assyria. Evidently, King Josiah did not think it was possible that God could really want to use Neco:

²⁰After all this, when Josiah had prepared the temple, Neco king of Egypt went up to fight at Carchemish on the Euphrates, and Josiah went out to meet him. ²¹But he sent envoys to him, saying, "What have we to do with each other, king of Judah? I am not coming against you this day, but against the house with which I am at war. And God has commanded me to hurry. Cease opposing God, who is with me, lest he destroy you.

2 Chronicles 35:20-21 (ESV)

King Josiah either did not listen to Pharaoh Neco or he did not believe him. He just made up his own mind and decided to stop him. We are not told explicitly that he did not pray for guidance, before opposing Pharaoh Neco. However, there is nothing in the text of 2 Chronicles (or 2 Kings) to suggest that King Josiah did ever pray about it or seek the advice of Jeremiah. It is possible that he just made his own decision, there and then, and set off. Then when King Josiah misguidedly joined the battle he was killed by an Egyptian archer:

²²Nevertheless, Josiah did not turn away from him, but disguised himself in order to fight with him. He did not listen to the words of Neco from the mouth of God, but came to fight in the plain of Megiddo. ²³And the archers shot King Josiah. And the king said to his servants, "Take me away, for I am badly wounded." ²⁴So his servants took him out of the chariot and carried him in his second chariot and brought him to Jerusalem. And he died and was buried in the tombs of his fathers. All Judah and Jerusalem mourned for Josiah.

2 Chronicles 35:22-24 (ESV)

Presumably, King Josiah just assumed that Pharaoh, who was an Egyptian, cannot possibly have heard from the God of Israel and cannot, therefore, have been doing God's will. Yet we see, from verse 22 above, that what Pharaoh said was actually *true*. He had been commanded to attack Assyria. The Bible says Josiah "did not listen to the words of Neco *from the mouth of God*....." What Pharaoh had said to Josiah really was from God. He had given Josiah a genuine warning and it had been ignored through haste, presumption or thoughtlessness.

Perhaps it was just prejudice on Josiah's part or a feeling of superiority? At any rate, Josiah made the mistake of getting involved in opposing something without asking God first. I can't point my finger at King Josiah though, because I have made the same error myself many times and have paid the price for doing so. To ignore God's guidance and warnings is a grave error, even if they come from a person like Pharaoh, for whom we don't have much regard. In this case Josiah paid for it with his life. The people of Judah also paid, because evil Kings then took over from him.

Tragically, Josiah's godly reign was cut short when he was only 38. His place was taken by his son, Jehoahaz, who only managed to reign for three months before he was deposed by Pharaoh Neco and replaced by his brother Eliakim. Pharaoh then changed Eliakim's name to Jehoiakim and he reigned for 25 years, but in an evil way. He sowed the seeds for the subsequent invasion and destruction of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon:

⁵Jehoiakim was twenty-five years old when he began to reign, and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem. He did what was evil in the sight of the LORD his God. ⁶Against him came up Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and bound him in chains to take him to Babylon. ⁷Nebuchadnezzar also carried part of the vessels of the house of the LORD to Babylon and put them in his palace in Babylon

2 Chronicles 36:5-7 (ESV)

All of this flowed from one impulsive act. Yet, despite all his previous good conduct, God did not spare Josiah, or his sons, or the people of Judah, from the bitter consequences of his hasty decision. It shows

what problems can result when we act wilfully without waiting to pray first, or to seek God's instruction from the Bible, or from godly advisers. We have a duty to listen to God and not to act independently of Him whatever position we may hold. Nobody is so wise, senior or experienced that they are above needing God's instruction and nobody is free to ignore it when it is given.

It is your responsibility not to allow yourself to be deceived by other people. You are answerable if you fail to avoid such deception. Therefore you must be on your guard.

Many assume that if they have been deceived by somebody else then they carry no responsibility for their own subsequent actions. There is an element of truth in that. We will not be *fully* responsible if we have been lied to, without realising it. But, we are still blameworthy for allowing ourselves to be deceived in the first place, if proper caution, prayer, study of God's Word, or time spent pursuing wisdom, would have prevented it.

God holds us accountable to know His Word and to learn it, memorise it and apply it. If we do all of that, we will be better able to see deception coming and to avoid falling for it. We are to take note of all the Bible's warnings, such as where Jesus tells us not to follow false Christs who are claiming to be Him:

⁵And Jesus began to say to them, "Take heed that no one leads you astray. ⁶Many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray.

Mark 13:5-6 (RSV)

He also expects us to be vigilant in every other area where we might be deceived, for example through bogus miracles or counterfeit spiritual gifts:

²¹"And then if anyone says to you, 'Behold, here is the Christ'; or, 'Behold, He is there'; do not believe him; ²²for false Christs and false prophets will arise, and will show signs and wonders, in order to lead astray, if possible, the elect.²³"But take heed; behold, I have told you everything in advance.

Mark 13:21-23 (NASB)

Sadly, you must also be on your guard when dealing with other Christians, or those who *claim* to be, even when the person really is a *Christian*, not only where they are bogus. People who claim to be Christians cause you to lower your guard. You are more likely to believe that they have heard from God, and are saying something genuine that can be relied upon. Such complacent assumptions will bring you into all sorts of danger. No matter who the other person is, you must always check everything they say, to make sure it does not go against God's Word.

You must do that yourself, as you can never rely on anybody else to be the interpreter of God's Word on your behalf. You can't ever delegate that duty. The task is always yours, no matter who you are dealing with, or listening to. Secondly, don't accept anything if it jars with your own conscience. Never do a thing merely because another man says it is right, if *you* feel it isn't, no matter who he is. Your conscience always comes ahead of other men's teaching or advice. If you feel a thing is wrong, but they say it's right, always go with your own conscience, not theirs.

A classic example of this is the unnamed prophet who appears in 1 Kings chapter 13. He was a genuine prophet who went to see King Jeroboam and made a powerful prophecy about the altar at Bethel (in the Northern Kingdom). He said that one day a king called Josiah would arise who would burn on that altar the bones of the men who had offered false offerings upon it. King Jeroboam, was angered by what the prophet was saying, and tried to seize him. When he did that, the King's hand withered because of the power of God which accompanied the man of God's prophetic ministry.

So, this unnamed prophet whom we'll call 'the first prophet', was no minor figure. He obviously had God's anointing on him. However, even he went wrong by believing a lie told to him by another prophet, whom we'll call 'the second prophet'. When the King's hand was healed he wanted to reward the first prophet. But he refused to accept anything because he already knew that God wanted him to leave immediately and also that he had to go by a particular route. He had been very clearly told that he must not go back by the same route that he had used to get there:

⁷And the king said to the man of God, "Come home with me, and refresh yourself, and I will give you a reward." ⁸And the man of God said to the king, "If you give me half your house, I will not go in with you. And I will not eat bread or drink water in this place; ⁹for so was it commanded me by the word of the Lord, saying, 'You shall neither eat bread, nor drink water, nor return by the way that you came.'" ¹⁰So he went another way, and did not return by the way that he came to Bethel.

1 Kings 13:7-10 (RSV)

The first prophet then set off, as instructed by God, but was met on the way by the second prophet, who wanted to spend time with him. The second prophet had heard the news of what had happened and wanted to hear more about it. He wanted that so much that he was *willing to lie* to the first prophet to get him to change his plans. He even claimed that God had told him that the first prophet should stop and stay with him, which was an outright lie. Nevertheless, we are clearly told, despite him telling such a lie, that he was a *real prophet*:

¹¹Now there dwelt an old prophet in Bethel. And his sons came and told him all that the man of God had done that day in Bethel; the words also which he had spoken to the king, they told to their father. ¹²And their father said to them, "Which way did he go?" And his sons showed him the way which the man of God who came from Judah had gone. ¹³And he said to his sons, "Saddle the ass for me." So they saddled the ass for him and he mounted it. ¹⁴And he went after the man of God, and found him sitting under an oak; and he said to him, "Are you the man of God who came from Judah?" And he said, "I am." ¹⁵Then he said to him, "Come home with me and eat bread." ¹⁶And he said, "I may not return with you, or go in with you; neither will I eat bread nor drink water with you in this place; ¹⁷for it was said to me by the word of the Lord, 'You shall neither eat bread nor drink water there, nor return by the way that you came.'" ¹⁸And he said to him, "I also am a prophet as you are, and an angel spoke to me by the word of the Lord, saying, 'Bring him back with you into your house that he may eat bread and drink water.'" But he lied to him. ¹⁹So he went back with him, and ate bread in his house, and drank water.

1 Kings 13:11-19 (RSV)

Strangely the second prophet, despite having lied to the first prophet, then received a genuine word from God. He told the first prophet that because he had disobeyed God's instruction to him, by delaying, then he (the first prophet) would come under God's judgment:

²⁰And as they sat at the table, the word of the Lord came to the prophet who had brought him back; ²¹and he cried to the man of God who came from Judah, "Thus says the Lord, 'Because you have disobeyed the word of the Lord, and have not kept the commandment which the Lord your God commanded you, ²²but have come back, and have eaten bread and drunk water in the place of which he said to you, "Eat no bread, and drink no water"; your body shall not come to the tomb of your fathers.'" ²³And after he had eaten bread and drunk, he saddled the ass for the prophet whom he had brought back. ²⁴And as he went away a lion met him on the road and killed him. And his body was thrown in the road, and the ass stood beside it; the lion also stood beside the body

1 Kings 13:20-24 (RSV)

The point is that the first prophet had already been instructed by God. Therefore he should never have allowed any other person, not even a fellow prophet, to persuade him to disobey what he already knew God had told him. What the second prophet did was wicked. He told a deliberate lie. Even worse, he pretended it was an instruction from God. Sadly, there is nothing exceptional about any of this. People

lie regularly, even in churches, and that includes some leaders. They also misrepresent God so as to get what they want. That is simply a fact and we must deal with it.

We need to weigh up everything we are told, *even if it is said by a church leader or Bible teacher*. Then we must decide for ourselves whether it is from God. Never assume it is from God just because of the identity, role, ministry or seniority of the person who says it. In 1 Kings, it may be that the second prophet was deliberately lying. Or he could have been deceived by a demon. Perhaps it was both. Whatever it was, the answer is the same. The first prophet should have followed his own conscience, and obeyed what he already knew God had said, irrespective of what any other man might say.

If Eve could be deceived by Satan, despite being a perfect person, with no sin nature, why would any of us assume that we aren't likely to be deceived?

The average Christian spends little or no time thinking about whether he has been deceived or is in danger of being deceived in future. This hazard is not on their agenda. They don't see it as an issue that might arise, partly because they under-estimate the problem. Many think they are immune as they are too good a judge of character ever to be deceived. Such people are sitting ducks. However, why do they imagine they can't be deceived when Eve, who had a perfect mind, no sin nature, and knew God face to face, was deceived? Indeed, Satan found it easy to trick her:

Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden'?"² And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden;³ but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'"⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die.⁵ For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."⁶ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate.⁷ Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons.

Genesis 3:1-7 (RSV)

The key point to note about how Eve was deceived is that the same thing can happen to us. God didn't put that passage in the Bible to show us how foolish Eve was, and how clever we are in comparison. It is there to warn us that we are exactly like her, indeed more so. Therefore, if she can be deceived, then so can we. If you can't see that, you really are in danger of being deceived. Indeed, you already have been, because you have believed the very lie that you're unlikely to be deceived. So, if you do believe that, you need to think again.

It is not only other human beings that deceive us. Demons also do it. They whisper into our minds every day, whether we are Christians or not, seeking to tempt, divert, distract, confuse, mislead, deceive, demoralise and alienate us. Remember, it was Satan who deceived Eve, not a human being. Therefore, don't think that it is only human beings who can deceive you. The demons will do it too and if you think they don't exist, or are no longer active, or can't affect Christians, then you've already been lied to.