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Presentation Transcript
Self-Deception
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Bill here for LifeResource Ministries again.

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There's a curious scripture in the Bible. It's in Jeremiah 17:9. Let's take a look at it.

Jeremiah 17:9 – *The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick. Who can understand it?*

That's how it's translated in the ESV. That word for *deceitful* means just what it says, but that word there for *sick* is translated *wicked* in the King James Bible. But, in fact, it's only translated *wicked* once. More often, it's translated *incurable*. If you compare the two, it yields the idea that our deceitfulness is incurable and deeply imbedded. How is it that our hearts are that way?

Well, in the beginning, God said everything He created was *good*. How does human deceitfulness work? How did it get there? What effects does it have on us? Well, that's what we're going to be examining today in this third in our series on *Human Emotions*.

Let's ask the question, "How are we deceitful?" Let's look at another scripture to talk more about that. It's in Psalms 39:6.

Psalms 39:6 – *Surely a man goes about as a shadow. Surely for nothing they are in turmoil. Man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather it.* That’s the ESV. The idea here is that we’re temporary. And that certainly is true, but I think there’s more to it.

If we look at it in the King James, we see another side. And that would be Psalm 39:6.

Psalms 39:6 – *Surely every man walks in a vain show. Surely they are disquieted in vain. He heaps up riches and know not who shall gather them.* So the Hebrew term there – translated *vain show* – comes from an unused root word meaning *to shade*. That’s why the ESV translated it *shadow*.

Another meaning for that word is *a phantom*. But that also means a phantom, as in an illusion. It’s figurative – a resemblance – hence a representative figure, translated *image* and *vain show* in the Scripture. When we look at these magazines that have pictures of movie stars, for example, our young girls look at them and they feel “less than.” What they don’t know is that these glamor photos have been airbrushed and, if you’ll let me use the word, *shaded*, so that these women appear to look much more alluring than they really are. It’s an illusion – a shading of the truth, a deception. That’s what the word means.

So when we look at it from that perspective, God is saying that, when we walk around pretending that we’ll live forever, that money makes us something, that we’re good, honest, others-centered, attractive people, it’s a deception – of others, for sure, but before that, it’s a deception of the self. The deceitful human heart starts with self-deception.

A man walked into my office some time ago, and he said he was depressed and had been for as long as he could remember. He’d been fighting it for years, he said, but he could not shake the idea that he was worthless. He recalled that, when he was in high school, he’d gone out for football, though he didn’t like it – when he was a kid – in an effort to convince himself and others that he was okay. He’d gotten a doctor’s degree to demonstrate to himself and the world that he was capable. He’d gone into non-profit work to prove that he was a selfless servant of other people. He’d become a university professor to better the human race. But he never believed any of it – not really. He always had the suspicion that he would be found out for what he was – a terrible, defective human being. He told me that, between the ages of 13 and 30, he worked very hard at staying drunk as much as he could, because he felt relief from his defectiveness. And people seemed to accept him more when he was drunk – or so it seemed in his drunken state. But he gave it up, because it wasn’t really working for him. To maintain consistency of mind, we also have to deceive others. Notice that, in his efforts to deceive himself about his state, he was also attempting to deceive other people about his condition. “Deceitful above all things,” the scripture tells us.

To complicate it even more, he told me once that he could remember when he was four or five, his mother was mentally ill and she would go on rants, where she would criticize him

viciously for long periods of time. And, almost in the same breath, he would wonder out loud where his feelings of defectiveness came from. Well, how could he not know? Well, he was deceiving himself about it. We want to love our mothers and our mothers to love us.

Do you know what a computer bios is? It's a little hard-wired thing – a little tiny chip – and it's just smart enough that when power is applied to it, it issues instructions to bring up the rest of the computer with the operating system. We come with a bios, too – just enough hard-wiring to get us going. And the hard-wiring we have around relationships is a desire to love and be loved by our mothers and fathers.

So, he had that – and we all do – so he couldn't blame her for his terribleness. He had to deceive himself about that. So, having no good explanation for his defectiveness, all he was left with was self-deception and a pretending before others that he was okay.

Here's how it begins. All our relationships are based on our relationships with our caregivers in childhood. As I said, they come hard-wired. Mom and dad – we want to love and trust them. And we want them to love us, take care of us. If they act in such a way that we can love and trust them, then all goes well. But, if we can't, then everything starts to go south in a hurry. When our parents don't love us enough, it's a blow to our sense of self. It means to us, when we're small, that something is wrong with *us* – it couldn't be them. As children, we think that way. I've talked to so many children that explain to me that they are the reason their parents divorced. They ascribe to themselves too much power.

So, when we get in that situation, where we think our parents don't love us, we have to pretend that they do. I watched a video once, during which a sixty-year-old woman told the interviewer in all sincerity that it was her fault that her father sexually abused her when she was five. It was easier to believe that she caused it than to think that her father would do her harm, because that would mean that she was defective in some terrible way. So that's what she did – she covered it over – wouldn't let herself see it. She took on the responsibility rather than seeing it in her father and the implications about what it meant for her as a human being.

So, it's a self-deception first, but what was this woman running away from? And what was the man running away from? Well, they're protecting themselves from feeling negative emotions toward their parents. That's how this all ties in with our topic – our emotions. She would rather feel defective than angry with her father. And he would rather feel defective than angry with his mother. His lifelong effort was two-fold – to avoid feeling angry with his mother while trying to mute the sadness of his perceived defectiveness by covering it over with a prodigious amount of accomplishment – very smart man.

There are many ways we accomplish the task of deceiving self. Notice that any time our sense of self is threatened that it creates anxiety. Anxiety triggers ways of defending

ourselves from the feelings that make us anxious. We're always trying to get away from anxiety. It's kind of like trying to get away from electricity – you know, we just withdraw from it.

So here are two classes of defenses. We can call one class *internal* and we can call the other *interpersonal*. Let's look at *internal* first. Here's an example:

Have you ever met someone who acts sickeningly kind and gentle when there's also a history of thoughtlessness and cruelty? The exaggerated kind behavior is the way the person wants to see themselves and to be seen by others, but underneath is a lot of unresolved anger, and under that, a lot of hurt. And usually, these people are not aware of that anger and that hurt.

Another example: Have you ever seen someone suffer a big loss and then explain that it doesn't bother them in a very logical or reasonable manner. "I didn't make the team, but it's okay. I have too much to do anyway."

Yet another example: I was talking to a thirteen-year-old girl once, who had been telling me about how other girls at school had been calling her mean. She said it came from one girl in particular. And during the course of our conversation – and this is a direct quote – she said, "I hate that mean girl. She called me a mean girl." So what's the fear there? Well, it's a fear that she is a mean girl. So, she shifted it to this other girl – she's projecting it.

We talk about people that can't get along because they're so much alike. Well, that's what they're doing. What they don't like about each other is what they fear they are like themselves.

Here's a different kind of example: This young woman told me some time back, "I keep having these attacks where I can't digest my food. My doctor have run all these tests, and they say, 'It must be my mind causing it,' but I'm not upset about anything." So there is anxiety expressed as illness, rather than felt. That's a defense mechanism. She doesn't even know she's anxious.

Okay, so let's look now at the interpersonal. Now these are examples employed to defend against interpersonal closeness: sarcasm, vague language. I was talking to a client some time ago and asking him to explain what the problem was, and suddenly, it sounded like he was talking another language. He would say things like, "Things are going pretty good," but he never defined what he was talking about. It was sort of like listening to that video on YouTube about the retro-encabulator. Have you ever heard that? You ought to look that up – a retro-encabulator. It's just hilarious. You'll probably recognize some people that sound like the guy talking about the retro-encabulator.

Argumentiveness is another one. I had another client – some time back – a twenty-five-year-old woman, who had been seriously neglected as a child. And every time we got close to issues with her boyfriend, she would argue with me, though I was not trying to offer any advice or course of action. But she just would get angry because she didn't want to have to go where the pain was.

I was talking to a thirteen-year-old once, who told me that she'd been told she didn't have good eye contact. That's another defense mechanism. A few sentences later, I learned that her mother was an alcoholic and her father was mentally ill. She said, "My father takes me out to eat every other Friday night, but he always goes off in public on me or the waiter. And my mom... well, I never know if she's going to be upright or prone, because she's so often drunk. She wasn't looking me in the eye when we told me this. She'd had quite enough of trying to connect to people. She was going to keep her distance – no chance to get hurt.

Some people smile and laugh a lot when stressed. Have you ever seen somebody talking about a terrible thing that's happened, or something really personally disappointing, and they're smiling and laughing about it? I see that quite a bit. Or weepiness – too sad to actually do anything about the problem.

Body language is another one – arms and legs crossed, hugging pillows. We're told that Jesus, the night before He was taken, found the disciples sleeping for sorrow. It's amazing how sleepy some people get when they come to talk about their feelings. It's a very interesting thing. I had a man once, who had to – after he had had his session – go out and take a 10-minute nap in his car before he could drive away.

Okay, here's another thing that might be helpful. We talked about this last time, but I think it bears repeating. There are three elements to an emotion. There's an awareness – "I'm angry." There's a sensation – "I feel that anger in my stomach." And there's an impulse – "I want to smash his face." Also, it's good to know that every emotion is always about another person. And, if we can't find all three of these, it's because a defense is in operation.

In talking to this man who was sad and depressed, once he realized his defectiveness came from his mother, he said he felt a strong feeling in his stomach – a tension – but he didn't know what it was. Well, that was one of the three elements of anger – his anger. As he gradually allowed himself to feel the sensation of anger, then the impulse to go ballistic on his mother, because he was so angry with her, came to the front. Then he came to accept what happened. But that couldn't occur until he let himself see and feel the depth of his true feelings. He had to get rid of the self-deception before he could be healed of the emotion. Interestingly enough, once that happened, his depression and anxiety began to lift. He started taking actions that would reconnect him with others and get him out of this depression. So the ball was rolling the right way there. Once he started feeling a little bit

better, he felt well enough to start taking action to help himself along. And we shifted from EMDR to cognitive behavioral at that point, because he was able to take a look at himself and figure out what he needed to do.

Let's talk a little bit about the long-term effects of defense mechanisms. One is hindered relationships. The girl who couldn't make eye contact...think how lonely her life might be if she isn't willing to connect with others. Have you ever seen that show on TV, *Dr. House*? Though it's a very clever, well-written, funny show, his life is a tragedy. All the sarcasm, insults, denial, avoidance that he uses...well, that just isolates him from other people. And what's so bad about that? Well, he would tell you, "Nothing," but you know, we *are* social beings and we *do* need relationships. And his defenses are preventing it.

Another thing is anxiety. Let's talk a little bit about that. It's one of the results of self-deception. It's always been ironic to me to think that we fend off our emotions because we feel anxious about them, and yet, as we do, it makes us even more anxious. Why is that? Well, because the original reason for our anxiety is never resolved. The man was anxious because his mother wounded him. His anxiety was preventing him from understanding it and dealing with it. The self-deception ploy we use to avoid anxiety makes it worse in the end. I've noticed, over time, that the older we get the worse it gets until we take action to reduce it.

The third thing to talk about here is depression. The part of the mind that turns off the bad feelings also turns off the good ones. So defense mechanisms – self-deception and deceit – exact a high price, because they reduce the quality of our life. Everything gets harder and more difficult, so we don't experience life as we should. It's hard to work. It's hard to relate. And it's hard to pray. Our life, our relationships are all hindered, including our relationship with God.

Well, okay, what can we do about that? Well, we're going to get to that, but before we do, we need to know more about the way our defense mechanisms sabotage our life. So next time, we're going to understand more about how to spot our own defense and see how they are causing us trouble. If we don't know what to look for, we certainly won't ever find it. So we call it the effects of emotional self-deception.

So, until next time then, this is Bill Jacobs for LifeResource Ministries, serving children, families and the Church of God.