

Weekly Encouragement

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The Beam in My Eye

By Peter Eng

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"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" ([Luke 6:41](#))

As a child, I was endlessly fascinated by the ray of light that cuts into some place indoors and lights up minute particles of dust. These particles, otherwise not visible, become visible under strong and direct light. One of these particles of dust is a speck.

Can we see a speck? Not ordinarily. But if we shine a bright enough light, and if we have good enough eyesight, we can see it. The speck may or may not bother my brother's eye, but it bothers me. I need to get it out. In contrast, I have a beam in my own eye, which should incapacitate me. But I am not bothered by the beam

in my eye, and I just want to remove the speck from my brother's eye.

Of course, Jesus says this to us as ironic and exaggerated speech. We cannot really see a speck in another person's eye and we cannot really have a beam sticking out of our own eye.

When we think of this rather famous saying, we rarely think of applying this to ourselves. We see the other person with the beam stick out of his eye looking for the speck in ours. But isn't that exactly what Jesus is saying when he gives us this picture? We see our brother's speck and not see our own beam?

An intriguing book I read has the rather damning title: *I told me so – self-deception and the Christian life* (Greg Elshof, 2009). I would like to use several points from this book for us to explore the problem of the beam in our eye.

If we will be more like Jesus, we need to identify our self-deception. We need to recognize that we are all deceived at this point in time. The only question is what we are deceived about.

One point the author makes is that if we look back in our lives, we will recognize that we were deceived or mistaken about things we thought were true. There is therefore every likelihood that even though we do not know how we are

deceived now, eventually we will learn about what we believe wrongly now. Looking back to our past, it is reasonable to assume that we are deceived in some things now as we were deceived then. In other words, we all have beams in our eyes we cannot see. And if we will grow in Christ, we need to identify these beams in our eye.

Jesus' anecdote focuses on the beam in our eye and not the speck in our brother's eye. Let's use a test that is unrelated to faith so we are less sensitive about ourselves. Let's say we run a survey among men on how well they drive compared to other men; and we ask mothers how hard they try to be good mothers. We give them five options: (1) poor, (2) below average, (3) average, (4) above average, (5) excellent. Logically, we should have the most people indicating "(3) average" since that is what the word means. In reality, we will almost certainly have most people saying "(4) above average." That is a logical impossibility. If a certain level is the majority level, then that is the average.

But our self-deception is necessary to keep us happy about ourselves. Conversely, it is reality that will keep us humble and enable us to be more gracious towards other people who are less than perfect.

One beam we need to realize is that most of us are average in most things; and we may be above average in a few things; and excel in perhaps one or two things. But we love to engage in self-deception because we have an emotional stake in our self-deception. We feel better about ourselves when we deceive ourselves into thinking we are better than we really are.

As a general rule, the more stake we have on a certain matter, the more prone we

are to self-deception. Since I am a pastor, I will use my own [foibles](#) as an example. Let's say I come to a certain conviction and go public with it. I argue strongly for it without a provision for my being wrong. What I have done is to create an emotional stake on the issue. I now become less able to look at counter arguments objectively and less capable of presenting arguments for my own case that may convince others, and I have severely reduced my ability to examine counter arguments.

However, if I have not made a public commitment to my conviction and find myself in the company of my peers (pastors or students of the Bible), and we examine the same subject, my reduced emotional commitment to the issue tends to give me greater room to change my mind. First, I have not made a public commitment, so I do not need to make a public defense. Second, I am among my peers and it is emotionally easier for me to concede to my peers than it is to my parishioners.

One approach I take to prevent self-deception is to refrain from taking positions on non-essential matters. I know that when I take a stand it becomes much harder for me to examine issues objectively. A Christian value that has helped me handle my self-deception is the practice of humility. If there are things I have not noticed before, I learn to be gracious and to say that is a good point, and that I have not noticed it before. It reduces my emotional stake on a position, and allows me to rethink my position without having to change it on the spot.

Self-deception is extremely hard to handle because the deceived person cannot see it. I make it a priority to reduce my self-deception by reducing the conditions that

lead to a greater likelihood for self-deception.

Another way of expression of the self-deceptive beam in our eye concerns pride which God hates. Most people have enough humility to acknowledge they can make mistakes or be wrong about something – at least in an abstract sense. But self-deceptive pride can easily take over our life if we have to defend our public actions or words. When the things we say and do commits to either a humbling admission of sin, or further justification for our wrong doing, we often choose the route of self-deceptive defense. Why? Pride! [It's like the Chinese expression: *xia bu liao tai*. Not able to get off the stage without loss of pride.]

While no one is exempt from this foible, I think those who teach, like myself, stand in greater danger than other people. That appears to be the case between Jesus and the Pharisees. The Pharisees were the respected religious class. They were the gold standard for understanding the Word of God. When Jesus came and gave the authoritative interpretation to the Word of God, they were outclassed. They think their worth is diminished in the eyes of observers. And pride drove them to try and trap Jesus at his teachings.

We too can fall into the same self-deception. We can try to win by fair means or foul, just to salvage our pride. We can also resort to bullying tactics if we are in a position of power. These are just some of the ways we miss the beam in our own eye.

Substitute Criticism

When we are angry at someone and refuse to admit our anger, we end up engaging in revenge through substitute criticism. Did not Jesus tell us it is

necessary that if we have something against a brother, we should speak to him alone? Let's walk ourselves through a sequence of what can happen.

Nick said something that offended Mike. At some point, Mike begins to form a strategy for revenge. He would not actually allow himself such unworthy thoughts, but creates a self-deceptive strategy. If he were to heed the command of Christ to speak to the brother alone, the matter will close. But his real objective is not closure but revenge.

"When we're angry with others and we're not willing to think of ourselves as harboring anger toward them, we'll find some alternative characterization... Sometimes we're "concerned" for them. Other times we're "sad." We're not angry with them; we just feel sorry for them. Or maybe we're frightened that someone else may be injured by their actions. "I'm not angry with him," we say. "I'm just worried that he's going to hurt someone else - something needs to be done to stop him." (Elshof. *I Told Me So*, Kindle Locations 765-768).

Mike begins a character assassination campaign against Nick. So Mike talks to his friends about his concern over Nick's behaviour problem of harshness. His friends begin to look out for Nick's harshness. Every time they hear something respectfully true they chalk it up against Nick.

Mike's self-deception would not allow him to see his own action as wicked. At some point, he convinces himself that he is doing it for the good of the other Christians in the community. One day, the group confronts Nick with spurious examples of Nick's harshness. Nick explains himself, but there is now another problem. This group that confronted Nick

has committed themselves. Their pride is now at stake. If they are wrong, they owe Nick an apology for their gossip. Rather than admit wrong, they embark on a self-deceptive group-think. They need to find some way to justify their action against Nick. And unless there is one righteous person among them willing to break the cycle and admit they have sinned against Nick, Mike has successfully created a self-deceptive group-think against Nick. It is now a matter of time before they find another reason to criticize Nick, and a matter of time before Nick is rejected from their midst.

Group bullying in the name of Christ is just wicked in every way.

Have you ever wondered why some churches are perpetually sick? More likely than not, they have embarked on a self-deceptive group-think of some sort. It may be how they deal with individuals. It may be some sacred cow in the church. It may be a false doctrine. Underlying these is self-deception.

Most people just care more about their sinful self-interest than the church of Jesus Christ. They will not admit their own wrong that keeps the church from moving forward. They will see the speck in their brother's eye but will not see the beam in their own eye. Their self-deceptive pride just won't allow it.

No, it is not "they" and "them." It is "we" and "us." To a lesser or greater extent, Jesus speaks to all of us when he says *"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?"* ([Luke 6:41](#)) If we read this passage and immediately see the fault in another person, it confirms for us that we have a beam in our eye.

Admitting self-deception is extremely difficult. That is why it is called self-deception! After David sinned against God, and when he understood his own sin and self-deception he cried out, *"Behold, you desire truth in the innermost being, and in the hidden part you will make me know wisdom... Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me."* ([Psa 51:6,10](#))

If you have never admitted to self-deception, the chances are high that you are currently engaged in self-deception. Will you now hate me for saying this and begin a certain course of action? I think better of you.

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Rev. Peter Eng is an ordained minister from the Reformed Tradition, but he is truly global in perspective. He served the Lord in various capacities starting from his teenage years in the 70s. His undergrad studies were done in Singapore, his grad studies in the USA, and post-grad studies in the United Kingdom, with additional post-grad research in Germany.