

Wednesday Night BIBLE STUDY

Wednesday, February 24, 2021 – First Baptist Church Buda
Midweek Prayer Meeting & Bible Study



RECOGNIZING FALSE TEACHERS AND FALSE PROFESSORS Matthew 7:15-20

¹⁵ “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Therefore by their fruits you will know them. –Matthew 7:15-20 (NKJV)

“Before you can impact the life of another for Christ, you must have been impacted by Christ in a personal and life-changing way” You can’t be a world changer if your world hasn’t been changed by Him to start with. Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount” actually teaches us how we may impact our world and the lives of those around us for Christ. We have been adding these important keys to impacting your world from Jesus’s sermon. Let’s review where we’ve been and add another one in our study as we proceed through Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount.” We are now up to 16 important keys to impacting your world...

16 Important Keys to Impacting Your World: (From the Sermon on the Mount)

1. To impact your world for Christ you must **KNOW CHRIST PERSONALLY** = Matthew 5:1-12, “The Beatitudes”
2. To impact your world for Christ you must **REFLECT CHRIST** to the **WORLD** (others) = Matthew 5:13-16, “Salt and Light”
3. To impact your world for Christ you must **LEARN** to **LIVE** by the **WORD** of God daily = Matthew 5:17-21, “Fulfilling and Living by the Word”
4. To impact your world for Christ you must **RIGHTLY RELATE** to **OTHERS** = Matthew 5:22ff
5. To impact your world for Christ you must **GUARD YOUR HEART** = Matthew 5:27-30
6. To impact your world for Christ you must **BUILD STRONG CHRIST- CENTERED MARRIAGES** and **HOMES** = Matthew 5:31-32

7. To impact your world for Christ you must **LIVE A LIFE OF INTEGRITY** = *Matthew 5:33-48*
8. To impact your world for Christ you must **PRACTICE RADICAL GENEROSITY** = *Matthew 6:1-4*
9. To impact your world for Christ you must **BECOME A MAN OR WOMAN OF DEEP AND FERVENT PRAYER** = *Matthew 6:5:15*
10. To impact your world for Christ you must **GIVE YOURSELF AT TIMES TO THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE OF FASTING** = *Matthew 6:16-18*
11. To impact your world for Christ you must **NOT LET THE THINGS OF THIS WORLD HAVE TOO GREAT AN IMPACT ON US** = *Matthew 6:19-24*
12. To impact your world for Christ you must **GIVE TESTIMONY OF A FAITH BASED, WORRY FREE LIFE** = *Matthew 6:25-34*
13. To impact your world for Christ you must **AVOID A JUDGMENTAL SPIRIT TOWARD OTHERS** = *Matthew 7:1-6*
14. To impact your world for Christ you must **ASK, SEEK AND KNOCK FOR THE POWER AND ABILITY THROUGH CHRIST TO IMPACT YOUR WORLD** = *Matthew 7:7-12*
15. To impact your world for Christ you must **CHOOSE THE RIGHT PATH FOR YOUR LIFE** = *Matthew 7:13-14*
- ➡ 16. To impact your world for Christ you must **BE ABLE TO RECOGNIZE AND BEWARE OF FALSE TEACHERS AND ERROR** = *Matthew 7:15-20*

Isn't that essentially what we have been saying all along in this study... ***"Before you can impact the life of another for Christ, you must have been impacted by Christ in a personal and life-changing way"*** How can we effectively impact the lives of others around us in this fallen world? Well, you can't if you, yourself haven't chosen the right path. This study is about that path and Jesus invitation to that path.

We have acknowledged throughout this study that trying to impact our fallen world is overwhelming. The short of it is we can't... at least not on our own, not in the flesh, not without the Lord. As we have seen in previous weeks, what Jesus is calling us to is beyond us, outside of us and our ability. But through Him we can.

One of the most overwhelming things about trying to impact our world with the truth of Christ today is that there is so much "error" and "false teaching" in our world today that obscures and distorts that truth and God's Word. Even those sometimes claiming to be "Christian" and claiming to be from God or to speak for Christ. Error and false teaching takes many forms and guises in our day... as well they did in Jesus' time.

How can we recognize false teachers?

The following are "Eleven Characteristics of the False Prophets and False Religions" (the following is compiled from research adapted from Josh McDowell's "Handbook of Today's Religions.")

11 Characteristics of False Prophets, False Teachers and False Religions:

1. **Peaching/Promoting New Truth** - Many false religions (and cults) promote the false idea that God has revealed something special to them. This is usually truth that has never before

been revealed and supersedes and contradicts all previous revelations. The Mormon Church (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints) teaches that Christianity was in apostasy for some 18 centuries until God revealed new “truth” to Joseph Smith, Jr., restoring the true gospel that had been lost. Today the Mormon church has its living prophets who receive divine revelation from God, continually bringing new “truth” to the world.

2. **Claims New Interpretations of Scripture** – Some false religions and false teacher (cults) make no claim to new truth or extra-biblical revelation, but believe they alone have the key to interpreting the mysteries in the Bible. The Scriptures are their only acknowledged source of authority, but they are interpreted unreasonably and in a way different from that of orthodox Christianity. They testify that the historic beliefs and interpretations of Scripture are based upon a misunderstanding of the Bible or were pagan in origin. An example of this is found in the writing of “The World Wide Church of God’s” Herbert W. Armstrong: *“I found that the popular church teachings and practices were not based on the Bible. They originated... in paganism. The amazing, unbelievable TRUTH was, the sources of these popular beliefs and practices of professing Christianity was quite largely, paganism and human reasoning and custom, not the Bible! (Herbert W. Armstrong, The Autobiography of Herbert W. Armstrong, Pasadena: Ambassador College Press, 1967, P. 298, 294).* The Bible is then reinterpreted, usually out of context, to justify the peculiar doctrines of the cult. Without an objective and reasonable way to understand what the Bible teaches, the cult member is at the mercy of the theological whims of the cult leader.
3. **Uses/Has A Non-biblical Source of Authority** – Some false religions (and cults) have sacred writings or a source of authority that supersedes the Bible. The Mormon Church says, “We believe the Bible to be the Word of God in so far as it is translated correctly...” (Articles of Faith of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Article 8). Although this sounds like the Mormons trust the Bible, they, in fact, believe it has been changed and corrupted. So they have their own “non-biblical” sources of authority... such as “The Book of Mormon,” “The Pearl of Great Price,” and “Doctrines and Covenants,” as greater authoritative sources. Thus, the Bible is not truly their final source of authority. In Christian Science, the Bible is characterized as being mistaken and corrupt and inferior to the writings of Mary Baker Eddy. The Unification Church believes the Bible to be incomplete, while Rev. Moon’s “Divine Principle” is the true authoritative source. Other groups such as the “Jehovah’s Witness” have their own translation of the Bible called “The New World Translation.” And other groups calling themselves “Christian” like “The Way International” and “The Worldwide Church of God” claim the Bible to be their final authority when in actuality their authority is the Bible as interpreted only by the “cult” leader. Regardless of whether the Bible is superseded by other works or reinterpreted by a cult leader, a sure mark of a cult is that the final authority on spiritual matters rests on something other than the plain teaching of Holy Scripture.
4. **Follows Another Jesus (or not Jesus at all)** – One characteristic that is found in all false religion (including all cults) is false teaching about the person of Jesus Christ in light of historical biblical Christianity. The Apostle Paul warned about following after “another Jesus” (2 Corinthians 11:4) who is not the same Jesus who is revealed in Scripture. The “Jesus” of the cults is always someone less than the Bible’s eternal God who became flesh, lived here on earth, and died for our sins. The Bible make it clear that Jesus was God in human flesh, second person of the Holy Trinity, who lived a sinless life on earth and died as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. Three days after His crucifixion, Jesus rose bodily from

the dead. Fifty days afterward he ascended into heaven, where He now sits at the right hand of the Father, interceding on behalf of believers. He will, one day, return bodily to planet earth and judge the living and the dead while setting up His eternal Kingdom. The Jesus of false religion and of false teacher is not the Jesus of the Bible. For example, according to the theology of the Jehovah's Witnesses, Jesus did not exist as God from all eternity by was rather the first creation of Jehovah God. Before coming to earth, He was Michael the Archangel, the head of all the angels. He is not God. Another false religion, The Mormon Church, does not accept the unique deity of Jesus Christ. He is, to them, one of many gods, the "first-born spirit child," spiritually conceived by a sexual union between the heavenly Father and a heavenly mother. He was also the spirit-brother of Lucifer in His preexistent state. His incarnation was accomplished by the physical union of the heavenly Father and the human Mary. No matter what the particular beliefs of any cult may be, the one common denominator they all possess is a denial of the biblical teaching on the deity of Jesus Christ.

5. **Rejects Orthodox Christianity (as found in the Scripture/the Bible)** – Characteristics of many false religions and religious groups is a frontal attack on orthodox Christianity. They argue that the church has departed from the true faith. They may reject such orthodox Biblical teaching of the church like the deity of Christ, or the humanity of Christ, salvation by grace through faith alone (not works), the triune God, the total depravity of man, the eternal security of the believer or perseverance of the saints, the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture/the Bible), etc.
6. **The Practice of Double-Talk** – A feature of some false religious groups and cults is that they say one thing publicly but internally believe something totally different. Many organizations call themselves Christians when in fact they deny the fundamentals of the faith. The Mormon church is an example of this kind of double-talk. The first article of faith in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints reads, "We believe... in His Son, Jesus Christ." This gives the impression Mormons are Christians since they believe in Jesus Christ. However, when we understand the semantics of what they mean by Jesus Christ, we discover they are far removed from orthodox Christianity. Nevertheless, the impression the Mormon church gives from their advertising is that they are another denomination or sect of Christianity. One, therefore, must be on the alert for organizations that advertise themselves as "Christians" but whose internal teaching disagree with Scripture.
7. **Non-Biblical Teaching on the Nature of God (Trinity)** – Another characteristic of false teaching and false religions and all non-Christian cults is either an inadequate view or outright denial of the Holy Trinity. The Biblical doctrine of the Trinity, one God in three Persons, is usually attacked as being pagan or satanic in origin. The Jehovah's Witnesses are an example of this. They say, "There is no authority in the Word of God for the doctrine of the trinity of the Godhead" (Charles Taze Russell, *Studies in the Scriptures*, V, Brooklyn: International Bible Students, 1912, p. 54). "The plain truth is that this is another of Satan's attempts to keep the God-fearing person from learning the truth of Jehovah and His Son Christ Jesus" (Let God Be True, Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1946, p. 31). The Way International take a similar position, "Long before the founding of Christianity, the idea of a triune god or a god-in-three-persons was a common belief in ancient religions. Although many of these religions had many minor deities, they distinctly acknowledged that there was one supreme god who consisted of three persons or essences. The Babylonians used and equilateral triangle to represent this three-in-one god, now the symbol of the modern three-in-one believers" (Jesus Christ Is Not God, Victor Paul Wierville, New

Knoxville, Ohio: American Christian Press, 1975, p. 11). Cults, therefore, are marked by their deviation on the doctrine of the Trinity and the nature of God.

8. **A Changing Theology** – The doctrinal position and stances of false teachers and false religions (and cults) are continually in a state of flux and have no sure foundation on which to anchor their hope. Adherents of a particular cult will learn a doctrine only to find that doctrine later changed or contradicted by further revelation. Many will deny this, with the possible exception of the Unification Church. Recently they admitted their theology was in a state of flux. The Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, used to believe vaccinations were sinful. Anyone who allowed himself to be vaccinated would lose his good standing in the organization. Today that is no longer taught. Christianity Today, in an article interviewing William Cetnar (former high official in the Jehovah's Witnesses), says: "The controversial ban on receiving blood transfusions will probably be lifted after Franz's death, (Frederick Franz, 87, is the president of the Jehovah's Witnesses) Cetnar thinks. A new date for the end of the world (JW's have previously predicted Christ's return seven times) is likely to be announced, possible 1988 (they missed that one too). By sheer mathematical necessity, some change will have to be made in the JW doctrine that Christ will return before an elect 144,000 Witnesses have died. 144,000 places are filled by those living in 1914 and few remain alive today. But Christ is supposed to return before the entire generation has died (Christianity Today, Nov. 20, 1981, p.70). The Mormon Church is equally guilty of changing doctrine. The most famous is its belief and practice, later prohibited, of polygamy... which is now once again re-stated by some.
9. **Strong Charismatic Leadership** - False religions and Cults are usually characterized by central leader figures who consider themselves messengers of God with unique access to the Almighty. Since the leader has such a special relationship with God, he can dictate the theology and behavior of those who follow. Consequently, he exercises enormous influence over the group. This is true, for example, in the Unification Church, The Way International and the Worldwide Church of God. The strong leadership leads the cult followers into total dependence upon the cult for belief, behavior and lifestyle. When this falls into the hands of particularly corrupt leaders, the results can be tragic, as with Jim Jones and the People's Temple or David Koresh and the Branch Davidians. The more dramatic the claims of a cult leader, the more the possibility of a tragic conclusion.
10. **Salvation by Works** – Most false religions and false teachers will in one way or another, either stated or unstated, with promote a salvation that is based on some sort of works, duty, following a particular code or way. One teaching that is totally absent from all the cults is the gospel of the grace of God. No one is taught in the cults that he can be saved from eternal damnation by simply placing his faith in Jesus Christ. It is always belief in Jesus Christ and "do this" or "follow that." Most all false religions and false teacher will attach something to the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith. It might be baptism, obedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel, or something else, but it is never taught that faith in Christ alone will save anyone.
11. **False Prophecy** - Another feature of false religion and false teachers including cults is they often promulgate false prophecy. Cult leaders, who believe they have been divinely called by God, have made bold predictions of future events, supposedly revealed by the inspiration of God. Unfortunately, for the cult leaders, these predictions of future events do not come to pass. The one who prophesied is exposed as a false prophet.

Observation - While not every false teacher, false religion or cult type group may practice or be characterized by all of these, these are some warning signs to look for that are likely to be present. Any one of these is bad enough to cause alarm. Beware of a group that embraces some of these features. The sure mark of a false teacher or false religious group is what it does with the person of Jesus Christ. False teachers ultimately deny the fact that Jesus Christ is God the Son, second Person of the Holy Trinity, and mankind's only hope.

"A key to how well you understand other religious faiths and cults is how well you understand your own." – Fritz Ridenour, "So What's The Difference"

7 Sure-Fire Ways to Recognize False Teachers:

A false teacher isn't going to tell you he's teaching heresy. In fact, he'll usually look and sound so sincere and passionate that you wouldn't know he's actually twisting God's Word. The size of the crowds around him won't tell you much either, since many people have been and continue to be led astray by teaching that pleases their ears. The prophet Jeremiah kept telling the people of Judah over and over what God planned for Jerusalem, urging them to turn from their wicked ways. But the people preferred to listen to false prophets who told them what they wanted to hear. ***We have to make sure we're not doing the same.*** So, how exactly can you tell if someone is "wolf in sheep's clothing"? You become a "fruit inspector," just as Jesus said in our passage that we will dig into a bit more in a minute (Matthew 7:15–16). Here are 7 tell-tale signs that can take the wool from our eyes, and may help to recognize a false teacher...

1. **Different Source** - True teachers will reach for the Bible first, second, and always. They may use other sources of information to help explain what Scripture reveals, but the foundation of their message is always built upon "Thus says the Lord...." If you start hearing more from other sources than God's Word, you may need to hit the door.
2. **Different Message** - The entire message of a true teacher will always revolve around the gospel of Jesus Christ. False teachers may mention Jesus here and there, but they will ultimately deny His deity and power (2 Peter 2:1). Of course, they won't do so openly at first, and you'll need to listen carefully to see if Jesus is at the core.
3. **Different Position** - True teachers will point to our sin and our need for salvation—and their lives will back that up. False teachers will promise freedom, but they themselves will be "slaves to depravity" (2 Peter 2:19). If a teacher's lifestyle points to lust, greed, envy, or other enslaving passions, they are certainly not fit to teach.
4. **Different Character** - Those who are truly following Jesus will run after the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23). They will never be perfect, but they will be working with all the strength God gives to become more and more like Christ. False teachers, on the other hand, live a life that screams "arrogance." And that leads to destruction (Proverbs 16:18).
5. **Different Appeal** - What does the teacher point to as the reason for their teaching? Are they pointing to Scripture as the reason for their urgency in sharing the gospel? Are they wanting you to believe what God says about how we are to escape the wrath to come (Romans 5:9)? If so, good. False teachers will make their appeal based on earthly passions, leading people back into sin (2 Peter 2:18). They'll urge you to focus on the things of this world.
6. **Different Fruit** - Always check the results in the lives of those who are listening to a teacher. Those listening to true teachers will grow in their knowledge of Jesus (2 Peter 3:18). Those

sitting under a false teacher will be like a “spring without water” (2 Peter 2:17). In other words, they may talk a good talk, but they don’t produce anything of eternal value.

7. **Different End** - Here’s the part that should make us all stand up and take notice of why this matters. It’s a really big deal. False teachers lead people to a “swift destruction” (2 Peter 2:1). Jesus will tell them that He never knew them (Matthew 7:21–23). Those who listen to true teachers of the gospel will receive abundant life now and forever (Romans 5:17).

Now, it’s your turn. What marks do you look for in a false teacher? What can the church do to better keep false prophets and pastors out of the pulpits?

Previously, in Matthew 7:13-14, Christ called his listeners to decide which path they would follow. Would they follow the broad path that leads to destruction or the narrow path that leads to life? He challenges his hearers to not simply listen to the Sermon on the Mount and marvel. They must decide whether to follow his words and enter the kingdom of heaven or not.

Here in Matthew 7:15-20, he describes why some will not enter the narrow road. They will not enter because of false prophets. False prophets will usher them off the narrow road onto the broad path of destruction. He calls all listening to beware of them... to recognize them, who they are, how they work, etc.

In the context, this must specifically apply to the Pharisees and teachers of the law. Since Matthew 5:20, Christ warned his hearers to not be like them. He said, “If your righteousness does not surpass that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven” (paraphrase). The prominent religious leaders of Israel were on the broad path leading to destruction, and they were ushering others that way as well.

This means that false teachers will not only come from recognized cults but often they will come from the prominent religious establishment. The truth, even in popular religious circles, will often be hard to find. It is easy to end up on the broad path if we don’t have a discerning heart.

READ: “Progressive Church Says Bible Isn’t the Word of God”

In this study, we will consider false teachers and their characteristics so we can recognize them and not be led astray by their teachings.

Big Question: According to Matthew 7:15-20, how can we recognize false teachers—what are their characteristics?

To Recognize False Teachers, We Must Know They Will Come

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.” -Matthew 7:15

Interpretation Question: What does Christ mean by the metaphor of wolves in sheep’s clothing?

When Christ calls for his disciples to be careful of false prophets, he describes them as wolves in sheep’s clothing. Christ probably wasn’t saying that the wolves were pretending to be sheep; the illustration probably refers to their pretending to be shepherds. In those days, shepherds typically

wore woolen clothing which came from the sheep they cared for.¹ False prophets pretend to be shepherds who care for the flock, but really are wolves that destroy the flock. They feast on unstable and immature believers—those not trained in and obedient to Scripture (Eph 4:14, 2 Tim 3:6).

In fact, sometimes false prophets mimicked the clothes of true prophets. In the Old Testament, prophets were known by their simple, uncomfortable clothing, which symbolized their forsaking the comforts of the world for the cause of God.² Like Elijah, they often wore animal clothes. Therefore, false prophets would wear similar clothes to deceive others. **Zechariah 13:4** says, *“Therefore, on that day each prophet will be ashamed of his vision when he prophesies and will no longer wear the hairy garment of a prophet to deceive the people.”* They were wolves in shepherds’ clothing seeking to deceive others. No doubt, many of them even deceived themselves about their true intentions.

In the same way, false prophets are no different today.

- **They often come in popular evangelical clothing** – In other words they look the part, they may dress in the current trends of the way that make them more acceptable and appealing
- **They often have come from the most prestigious and popular seminaries and schools -**
- **They may use orthodox lingo (like Gospel! Trinity! Kingdom living! etc.) –**
- **They may even appear godly in their lifestyle -**
- **They often know Scripture well** – Remember, even the devil quoted Scripture when tempting Christ (Matthew 4).
- **However, their outward persona does not match their inward one—they are ferocious wolves who will hurt the flock.**

READ: John 10:1-21

How does this passage of Scripture and Jesus words in Matthew 7:15-20 relate?

In John 10, Christ used a similar shepherding metaphor when describing pastoral ministry. He talked about the good shepherd, the hireling, and the wolf.

What does the good shepherd do for the sheep as opposed to “hirelings”? What might this be saying about false prophets and false teachers?

When the wolf comes, the good shepherd gives his life for the sheep—he protects them at all cost. However, the hireling runs when the wolf comes because he is only there for pay.

Likewise, in churches there are good shepherds who aim to care for the sheep. They feed them the truth of God’s Word and aim to protect them by doing this. Hirelings are professional clergymen who see ministry primarily from a career stand point. They bounce from church to church seeking higher pay and better weather. They are in ministry only for the benefits. Therefore, they neglect the sheep and don’t really teach the Word of God—ultimately endangering the flock. Wolves destroy the flock by teaching error. Also, they tend to manipulate the flock for gain (cf. 1 Timothy 6:3-5).

¹ MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1985). *Matthew* (p. 465). Chicago: Moody Press.

² MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1985). *Matthew* (p. 465). Chicago: Moody Press.

Christ warned of these false prophets because they were already present in Israel and had been there throughout Israel's history. **Jeremiah 23:6** says:

The LORD who rules over all says to the people of Jerusalem: "Do not listen to what those prophets are saying to you. They are filling you with false hopes. They are reporting visions of their own imaginations, not something the LORD has given them to say."

Christ taught that in the last days false prophets would increase in number and lead many believers away from God. In **Matthew 24:11**, he said, ***"And many false prophets will appear and deceive many."*** The last days began at Christ's death and will continue until his second coming. False prophets have come and will continue to increase. There is a new Christian cult that begins essentially every day, and people are continually lured from the narrow way to the broad way by them. In fact, the majority of New Testament epistles were written to combat false teachers that were tearing the church apart. Consider what Paul said to the Ephesian elders in **Acts 20:29-31**:

I know that after I am gone fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Even from among your own group men will arise, teaching perversions of the truth to draw the disciples away after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that night and day for three years I did not stop warning each one of you with tears."

Paul warned of these false teachers, and they eventually came. Even from the original elders of that congregation, men rose up and divided the flock. In his letters to Timothy, Paul challenged Timothy to warn the false teachers and to faithfully preach the Word in spite of them (1 Tim 1:3, 4:1-16).

Therefore, we must be warned as well—false teachers will come. They will arise from among us, and if we are not careful, we may be led astray by them, or even worse, become one of them, even as the Ephesian elders did.

John R.W. Stott says, ***"In God's sovereignty, these attacks on the church have been used by God to make the church focus on and clearly define truth."***³

- **Their attacks raised a need to define what books were in the Canon, as many false books began to circulate.**
- **Their attacks provoked a need to clearly define the doctrines of Scripture such as: the Trinity, the hypostatic union of Christ (the union of his humanity and deity), the inerrancy of Scripture, etc.**
- **In the same way, being confronted by error has made many individual believers study God's Word in a deeper manner, which kept them from being swept away into lies.**

To recognize false teachers, we must recognize they are coming. They may already be among us. If we don't recognize this reality, we will be unprepared and possibly led astray.

Application Question: What experience do you have with false teachers? Why are they so deceptive?

³ Stott, J. R. W., & Stott, J. R. W. (1985). *The message of the Sermon on the mount (Matthew 5-7): Christian counter-culture* (p. 197). Leicester; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

To Recognize False Teachers, We Must Know Their Fruit

¹⁶ You will know (recognize) them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Therefore by their fruits you will know them.” -Matthew 7:16-20

Because false prophets put on the clothes of a true shepherd, they are hard to detect; however, Christ says their fruit will ultimately manifest. A tree always produces fruit in line with its character. An apple tree produces apples—not grapes. In the same way, a minister’s fruit will eventually manifest. It may not be clear initially. It may require a lengthy and intimate inspection, but eventually the fruit will manifest—establishing whether the person is a true teacher or a false one.

Their fruit will become apparent. Therefore, we must not hastily accept or reject someone. We must patiently inspect his or her fruit.

Interpretation Question: What types of fruits do you think will identify a false teacher?

3 Types of Fruit that Identify a False Teacher:

1. False teachers are identified by the fruit of their character.

In Scripture, fruit often refers to character.

- In Galatians 5:21-22, Paul describes the fruit of the Spirit as *love, joy, peace, self-control, humility, etc.* False prophets will lack these fruits. They will often be identified by pride, anger, lust for money, discord, etc.
- 2 Peter 2:3 says, *“And in their greed they will exploit you with deceptive words.”* Their teaching and ministry will primarily be about making more money and filling their pockets. In addition, they will commonly be identified by their abusive leadership.
- 2 Timothy 3:6 (NIV) says, *“They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over gullible women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires.”* They will seek to control people’s time, money, and relationships. Often, they will become abusive when others make their own decisions. They often claim, or at least act, as though they are the medium between God and their people, as if people can’t discern God’s voice and make their own decisions. Furthermore, they often are identified by their lusts—sexual harassment and multiple affairs, among other vile acts, tend to follow them. False prophets will be identified by their character or lack thereof.

2. False teachers are identified by the fruit of their teaching.

READ: 2 Peter 2:1-3

Verse 1 there says, *“But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction.”*

They will be known by their destructive heresies, which not only destroy them but others.

Application Question: What are some examples of their destructive teaching?

Characteristics of their Destructive Teachings:

- (1) **False teachers tend to have unbalanced teaching** - Balanced teaching speaks about both God's love and judgment. However, false teachers tend to focus on one or the other. When they focus on love alone, it creates an undisciplined people who don't fear God or hate sin. One of the most popular teachers in the U.S. said that he wouldn't speak on sin because his people needed to hear about God's comfort more. The problem is without understanding sin and God's judgment, nobody can be saved. It is a crucial part of the gospel. One cannot accept the good news without first understanding the bad news. In Jeremiah 6:14, God described false prophets this way: "They offer only superficial help for the harm my people have suffered. They say, 'Everything will be all right!' But everything is not all right!" Some versions say, "Peace, peace, when there is no peace." These prophets focused on God's love and blessing but neglected other aspects of his character. Others only teach about God's wrath, often creating a fear in people, which allows them to be controlled and manipulated. Teaching about God's wrath apart from his love and grace ultimately fosters a works-based salvation and turns people into Pharisees who condemn and judge one another.
- (2) **False teachers often have a heretical view of the doctrine of salvation** - This is implied by the immediate context of choosing between the broad road and the narrow road (Matt 7:13-14). The narrow road leads to life, while the broad road leads to destruction. (1) Some lead people down the broad road by teaching belief in Christ without repentance, Lordship, or taking up one's cross. People can live any way they want (antinomianism). As long as they profess Christ, it is OK. Jude 1:4 says they turn "the grace of our God into a license for evil." Bonhoeffer called this "cheap grace"—a grace that doesn't change us. Some even teach that one can take Christ as savior first and Lord later. Again, the road has been broadened. Christ said that nobody could be his disciple without hating mother, father, brother, sister, and even one's own life. Whoever does not take up his cross cannot be Christ's disciple (Lk 14:26-27 paraphrase). (2) Some teach the broad road of works salvation—one needs to be baptized to be saved, practice the Lord's Supper, or do some other work. Every religion teaches the need of works for salvation except true Christianity. Salvation is by grace alone, through faith, and that not of ourselves. It is a gift of God, not of works lest anyone should boast (Eph 2:8-9). With that said, true faith will always produce godly works (Eph 2:10). But we are not saved by these works. (3) Others teach the broad road of universal salvation. Christ is the way to heaven, but only one out of many ways. Buddha, Muhammad, and others all speak of the same god and heaven. However, Christ said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me" (John 14:6 paraphrase).
- (3) **False teachers often have a heretical view of the doctrine of Christ** - In warning the believers about false teachers, John said in 1 John 4:1-3, *"Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to determine if they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses Jesus as the Christ who has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God, and this is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming, and now is already in the world."* The false teaching and teachers attacking these believers twisted the doctrine of Christ—denying either his humanity or deity. Modern cults do the same thing. Prominent ones often teach that Christ was a created being and is not God

or not eternally God. Some even say Christ was an angel. Beware of unorthodox teachings about Christ; they are the fruit of false teachers.

- (4) **False teachers often undermine the authority of Scripture itself** - Like Satan in the Garden of Eden, they challenge others with, *“Did God really say?”* They teach that one can’t believe everything the Bible says. One can’t believe the historicity and/or ethical requirements of the Bible. When Scripture is removed as the only basis for doctrine and living, other foundations can be established. The teacher himself can become the standard by which all things are tested. Beware of teachers who undermine the authority of God’s Word. When they do this, it is simply an opportunity to establish some other authority—including their own.

3. False teachers are identified by the fruit of their influence.

2 Peter 1:2 says, *“And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed.”* The influence of a false teacher’s life and teaching will bear bad fruit in his or her converts. Paul said their *“message will spread its infection like gangrene”* (2 Tim 2:17). Like cancer, it rots beliefs, then character, and ultimately pulls people away from Christ and his church. False teachers will be known by their ungodly influence on others.

Application Question: What types of false teaching are spreading rapidly around the world and what are the effects of these false doctrines? How should the church respond to the rampant spread of false doctrine?

General Applications

Application Question: What applications can we take from the reality of false teachers and their destructive influence on the church?

Important Applications for the Church Today from Jesus Teaching on False Teachers:

1. Because of false teachers and their destructive influence, believers must constantly test the teachings they hear with Scripture.

Church members must be like the Bereans. Acts 17:11 said this about them, *“they eagerly received the message, examining the scriptures carefully every day to see if these things were so.”* God honors them in Scripture because they tested everything that Paul said to make sure it lined up with God’s Word. Each church must develop a culture of opening their Bible to test the teachings they hear, and not just accepting them. If the sermon is void of Scripture or not primarily based on Scripture, there is a problem. Our spiritual leaders must be held accountable for accurately preaching the Word. Good shepherds will appreciate this and encourage it. It means they are developing Bereans in their congregations!

2. Because of false teachers and their destructive influence, believers must be discerning without being judgmental.

In Matthew 7:1, Christ taught that his followers must not judge lest they be judged. This doesn’t mean we shouldn’t call out sin and false doctrine. It means we must call it out in ourselves first. We must take the plank out of our own eye before we take the speck out of another’s (Matt 7:3-

5). Also, we must be careful of our attitudes. A judgmental attitude takes joy in the failures of others. It's a way of exalting ourselves by pulling others down. **Though Christ calls us to be discerning, he doesn't give us freedom to become heresy hunters—attacking every doctrinal (or moral) failure of others.** All of us have some doctrinal error. Personal sin affects our ability to always properly understand God's Word (cf. John 7:17). Therefore, we must be gracious when others fail doctrinally and help them come to the truth. However, we must not tolerate heretical doctrinal errors that ultimately can be damning. When it came to the gospel, Paul said that anybody who taught another gospel should be accursed—condemned to hell (Gal 1:9).

3. Because of false teachers and their destructive influence, believers must become mature to protect themselves through deeply studying and knowing God's Word.

Scripture describes those who are commonly led astray by false teachers and doctrinal error as spiritual children **"tossed back and forth by waves and carried about by every wind of teaching by the trickery of people who craftily carry out their deceitful schemes" (Eph 4:14).** The spiritual child stage is a dangerous stage of life because like regular children, spiritual children lack wisdom and commonly endanger themselves because of it. This can lead them into various false doctrines that stay with them throughout their lives and potentially lead them away from Christ all together. Whatever we learn in our early childhood often stays with us and that is true with spiritual adults. Many of us have corrupt areas of doctrine that are hard to root out, which were planted during our spiritual childhood. When Paul warned the Ephesian elders that some of them would become wolves that taught false doctrine, he closed that teaching with this:

Acts 20:31-32 says it, "Therefore be alert, remembering that night and day for three years I did not stop warning each one of you with tears. And now I entrust you to God and to the message of his grace. This message is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified."

God's message will protect us as we study it deeply. Are you aiming to deeply study God's Word?

4. Because of false teachers and their destructive influence, believers must not only become mature to protect themselves, but also so they can protect others.

Though we all bear the responsibility to protect ourselves through deeply studying Scripture, God has specifically called spiritual leaders to protect the flock (Eph 4:11-14). **Few of us will do this from the office of an elder, but many of us will do this from the role of a spiritual mother or father, or older brother or sister** (1 John 2:12-14). If we never mature in Christ, we will never effectively protect others or deliver them when they are caught in sin. That is primarily what many of Paul's letters do. They are written to combat false doctrine, equip those fighting it, and deliver those caught in it. We must all develop Paul's pastoral affection and skill to effectively help others. During spiritual infancy, we primarily care about ourselves and our welfare. During spiritual adulthood, we become consumed with others and their spiritual welfare. Jude said this in calling us to minister to those caught in false doctrine: "And have mercy on those who waver; save others by snatching them out of the fire; have mercy on others, coupled with a fear of God,

hating even the clothes stained by the flesh” (Jude 1:22-23). Are you willing to minister to those struggling with sin and false doctrine?

Application Question: What experience do you have with helping someone caught in false doctrine? Is there anybody God currently has on your heart to help?

Conclusion

Many are heading down the broad road to destruction, unawares, because of false teachers and their teachings—ones they met at a Christian university, seminary, church, or ministry. False teachers are dangerous, and therefore, Scripture commonly warns us about them. Their appearance and influence are inevitable. Can you recognize them and their fruits? Being able to recognize them will protect you and others from their destructive influence.