

“Warning: False Teaching Can Be Hazardous to Your Health”

Matthew 7:15-20

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February 4, 2024

A few weeks ago, I watched an ESPN “30 for 30” episode entitled, “The Minister of Defense.” The documentary tells the story of Reggie White, the legendary defensive end for the Philadelphia Eagles and Green Bay Packers, known as one of the best players in NFL history. The program tells the story of Reggie’s accomplishments on the field and his life off the field.

The focus of the latter was Reggie as a Christian pastor, preaching the gospel, sharing God’s love with others, and speaking out against immoral practices such as abortion and same-sex marriage. The program, however, implies that Reggie’s views may have been changing at the end of his life.

He retired from football after the 2000 season and then died suddenly in December of 2004 from heart and lung issues. Before his retirement, Reggie was a solid evangelical Christian. We showed his movie, “Reggie’s Prayer” here one Sunday night, and I think it is still in the library. Yet, following his retirement, Reggie got involved in the “Hebrew Roots” movement. On the surface, this involved developing a better understanding of the Old Testament by studying the Hebrew language, and exploring how the Old Testament provides the foundation for New Testament Christianity.

But Reggie apparently began to adopt some of the other beliefs of Hebrew Roots’ teachers. NO, this didn’t involve any change in his views on homosexuality or abortion, but he became convinced that most Christians don’t take the Old Testament seriously. Eventually Reggie seemed to conclude that Christian needed to keep a Saturday Sabbath and follow the Old Testament dietary rules. It was unclear whether he thought doing those things were necessary for salvation or just made one a better Christian.

Either way, these beliefs conflict with what is taught in the New Testament, especially in the books of Galatians and Hebrews, and contradict the gospel of grace. And they were also contrary to what almost all Christians believed for 2000 years. I think his motives were good. He said he

just wanted to follow what the Bible said. Yet, false teachers led Reggie astray. That story troubled me because I greatly admired him. Now, someone in my extended family has also gotten involved in the Hebrew Roots movement. It has kind of messed up his family, and I think it has messed up his soul.

Now, I want to be clear, that I am not making any judgement whether Reggie was truly saved or whether this family member was. At one time, both of them professed a clear evangelical faith in Jesus Christ alone. It is up to God, not me or any other human being, to whom they are accountable. But I do believe they both were led astray by false teaching.

Folks today as we continue our study of the book of Matthew, we explore verses 7:15-20. Here Jesus warns us of the danger of false prophets or false teachers. These are people who deny or distort God’s truth. Now, this may sound like a rather negative topic. Having one teacher warning you about other teachers whom he labels as false teachers may seem like one politician telling you how other politicians cannot be trusted, but implying he certainly can be. Yet, it is very important, especially in our current cultural climate, that we be able to distinguish between those who speak the truth and those who do not.

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

Friends, if we are unable or unwilling to identify these “wolves in sheep’s clothing,” we place God’s flock, the church of Jesus Christ, and our own souls in real danger. Let’s pause and pray that the Lord’s words would speak to our minds and hearts today, and that we might understand and apply them correctly.

I want to make four points, based on what Jesus says in this text.

#1 – There really are false teachers out there. In Minnesota, you will likely never see a sign that says, “Danger, Elephant Crossing.” Why??

Because we don't have elephants running around out there.

Jesus would not warn us about false prophets or teachers if there were not any. But He does because there are. In the Old Testament we often read about false prophets. Jesus regards the religious leaders of His day, the Pharisees and Sadducees, in the same light. They are the "blind leaders of the blind." In Matthew 24 Jesus tells us that as time passes, as the end of history comes closer, not only will the gospel be proclaimed in every part of the globe, but there will also be the rise of many false teachers who will lead people astray.

Listen to the apostle Paul's warning to the church in the city of Ephesians in Acts 20: 29,30 I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. This sign that says, "Danger, False Teachers," means we probably will have to deal with them.

This warning also implies there is indeed such a thing as truth. What these people teach deviates from what is true. Now to many of us this is common sense. Yet, we need to realize that many folks today question the whole concept of truth.

From the post-modern perspective, which still dominates American universities, all truth is relative. It is determined by one's perspective. So, what is true for you, may not be true for me. And certainly, what is true for me as an older, white male, will not be true for a younger, Black female. There is often an emphasis on deconstructing various truth narratives. The goal is not to determine truth, but to discern how a particular group is trying to use a truth claim to enhance their position of power.

Now, I know to many folks any discussion of post-modernism seems like philosophical gobbledygook, which is often not a bad description. I think of the college student who said, "Some people say God exists and some people say He does not. I think they may both be right." That is a clear example of both post-modern thinking and total nonsense.

Folks, though we have an epidemic of truth decay in our culture, we need to recognize that Jesus is right. There is such a thing as truth, thus there is such a thing as false teaching and false teachers.

#2 – False teachers deny, distort, and add to the truth. In the Old Testament, a true prophet was one who said what God had told him to say, and a false prophet was one who claimed to speak for God, but actually spoke his own words.

In our day, a true teacher is one who teaches the truth, who teaches what is consistent with what God has said in His Word – the Bible. A false teacher is anyone who claims to communicate God's message, but is, in reality, denying, distorting, and adding to what the Bible teaches. These folks claim to be concerned about what God wants, they are disguised as sheep, but really, they are wolves, not concerned about God's truth.

Jeremiah, a true prophet in the Old Testament, denounces false prophets this way. **Jeremiah 23:16, 17 Thus says the Lord of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord. They say continually to those who despise the word of the Lord, 'It shall be well with you'; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, 'No disaster shall come upon you.'"** These folks were telling people everything was okay when it really wasn't. That type of teaching is quite common today.

A Sunday School teacher asked her class, "What is false doctrine?" An 8-year-old boy responded, "It is when the doctor gives the wrong medicine to people who are sick." Well, that is pretty accurate. False teachers are spiritual quacks who are of little help to people who are spiritually ill. Often what they do is tell people they are not sick, that they are just fine, no matter how much spiritual pain they feel. False teachers today say things like this: "You cannot love other people unless you love yourself." "You need to focus on doing what is good for you." "Follow your heart wherever it leads you."

Or, when it comes to sexuality: "Jesus would never be against love." "You have to find your identity, embrace that. LGBTQ+, it is all good."

Or “We don’t need to send missionaries to those countries. God loves everyone. He will not send Muslims or Hindus to hell if they are sincere in their faith. In fact, the God of love would never send anyone to hell.”

Are you getting the picture? Teachers are telling people that it is okay to sin, to not worry about commands the Bible gives, because God is loving and will always forgive. Or sometimes they say things like “Jesus never condemned homosexuality.” The Bible doesn’t really teach that Jesus is the only way to God or that there is such a place as hell. This reminds me of what the apostle Paul says in **2 Timothy 4:3 For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead to suit their own desires they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.**

Hear in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warning about false teachers comes right after Jesus has told us that most people, because they don’t trust and follow him, are on the road that leads to hell. Perhaps the denial of the reality of hell is one of the false teaching Jesus had in mind when He gives this warning. It certainly is and has been a common false teaching.

Another type of false teaching is adding to the truth. Instead of always telling people everything is okay, these folks claim that unless you do what they say, or believe what they teach, you will be in trouble. This is what the Pharisees did in Jesus’ day. “You cannot really please God unless you follow all of our rules.”

Today these types of false teachers say things like, “Unless you are baptized in and speak in tongues, you are not going to be saved.” Or “You are not a true Christian unless you get rid of your TV, or drive an electric car, or chose this type of school for your children.” Or maybe, “If you don’t read your Bible and pray for at least 30 minutes before breakfast each morning you are not really a ‘disciple.’” These teachers make very definite statements about topics on which God is silent. They add to the truth.

Chuck Colson wrote an essay over 25 years ago that has had a big impact on my thinking. He titles it “Who Speaks for God?” He contrasts a

Baptist pastor who said, “AIDS is a plague God has sent to punish homosexual,” and an Episcopal bishop who said, “The idea that AIDS is God’s punishment on the homosexual is barbaric.”

Colson asked, “How do either of these men claim to know the mind of God? The Bible doesn’t say AIDS is or is not a punishment from the Lord. In fact, if you look in a Bible concordance, you will not find the word AIDS, because the Bible says nothing about it. Yes, the Bible says homosexual activity is sinful. But the view that AIDS is God’s judgement on any particular group of people is an *opinion*. The view that it is not God’s judgement is an *opinion*. It is fine to have opinions, but when a teacher starts presenting them as facts, then he is in danger of being a false teacher, because false teaching is anything that denies, distorts, or adds to the truth of God’s Word. One of the things I have tried to do in my sermons over the years is to clearly distinguish between opinions I share and truths that are revealed to us in God’s Word.

So, just to clarify, any statements I have made over the past 30 years indicating the Green Bay Packers are superior to a team from Minnesota is merely an *opinion*. It is not God’s revealed truth. Everyone has opinions. False teachers try to pretend their opinions equal God’s truth.

#3 – False teachers can be identified by their “fruits.” Listen to Matthew 7:16-20 You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

Now, I am not an expert on horticulture, but Jesus’ point is pretty clear. Just as a plant will bear fruit consistent with its kind and quality, so the fruit of teachers will be consistent with their kind and quality.

At the beginning of chapter 7, Jesus tells us not to judge and warns us of the danger of having an overly critical attitude. Yet, that doesn’t mean we cannot identify false teachers. Jesus expects us to

do that. We should not judge someone's inner motives.

A comment, "Oh, that pastor just likes to hear himself talk. He probably preaches just to make money," is judgmental. You don't know that. Instead, we are to focus on the outside. We inspect the fruit. We look both at what the teacher says and how he lives.

We have already said that the nature of false teaching is to deny, distort, or add to the Word of God. Whenever you listen to a sermon, or read a book or article, you need to compare what is being taught to what God says in His Word. To be good fruit inspectors we need to be like the Bereans who Luke describes in **Acts 17:11 Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.**

Folks, we need to check it out. Whether you are listening to me or some teacher on a podcast, compare what we say to what God says in His Word. If there are any significant differences, then you are likely listening to a false teacher.

Another way to identify false teachers is by the way they live. Now, no teacher is perfect. Every pastor I know, me included, has to struggle to avoid sin. Yet teachers who fall into blatant immorality lose their credibility as teachers. A pastor who has a sexual affair, or embezzles money from a congregation, or frequently gets angry and swears at members of the church staff, maybe teaching things that are true, but he should not be trusted as a teacher.

Personal character matters when it comes to teachers. We should not trust those not living godly lives. That includes some of the best teachers like Ravi Zacharius. He seemed to be a great teacher in so many ways, but his involvement with prostitutes reflected that his heart was not where it should be, and he could not be trusted as a teacher. We need to inspect both the fruits of teachers and lifestyles.

#4 – False teaching can be very destructive. Some of you may be thinking, "Pastor Dan, you are making such a big deal about this. This is

America. Everyone has a right to their opinion. We all have some wrong beliefs."

Yes, however, it is not me, but Jesus who gives this warning. I am just trying to explain what this means for us. Teachers who deny, distort, or add to God's Word pose a danger to our spiritual health. They may not be malicious, they may not intend to harm our souls, but that is what their teaching will do.

There is a story of a man who, because of the high cost of oats, decided to slowly substitute sawdust into his mule's diet. Everything went fine for a while, but even though the mule became satisfied with the sawdust, he eventually died of malnourishment. Friends, whether it is out of ignorance or maliciousness, false teachers who are feeding people spiritual sawdust, will eventually kill their souls.

One of the most destructive false teachings is that the Bible "contains the Word of God." That sounds good on the surface, but what it usually means is that some parts of the Bible are inspired and inspiring and can be of great benefit to our souls. However, other parts are best to ignore. Folks, any teach who tells you it is okay to ignore parts of the Bible is a false teacher.

So, what are the **practical lessons** we learn from this text?

#1 – You need to be critical listeners and readers, especially when it comes to spiritual matters. When a TV preacher says something a little strange, you should say, "Prove it." "The Bible doesn't say that." "Why should I believe it?"

We need to listen and read with our mind, not in neutral, but actively in gear. It is also good to consult mature Christian friends and ask "Have you read this book, or have you heard this guy speak? Do you think he/she is on track, or do you need to be careful?" You must not blindly believe everything you read or hear.

#2 – You need to be able to distinguish between essential and non-essential doctrines. A pastor who says we should observe the Lord's Supper every Sunday is not a false teacher. A pastor who says if you don't observe the Lord's Supper every Sunday you are not saved and are going to hell is a false teacher. What

someone believes about how frequently we should do something is not an essential belief. What someone believes about salvation is.

My list of what is essential is relatively short. It includes the two great teachings of the reformation, that the Bible alone is our authority, and that salvation is by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ alone. It also includes a belief in the triune God, as is taught in the Apostle's Creed. Any pastor who denies any of those truths is a false teacher in my book.

#3 – What should you do when you recognize someone is a false teacher? In many cases you should just stop reading their books or listening to their sermons. Yes, sometimes it may be valuable to discover exactly what they teach, but we should never try to find spiritual nourishment from false teachers. Spiritual sawdust will make your soul sick.

If you have friends or family members who are being led astray by false teaching, you need to warn them. The truth is very important. Teachers must be very careful in handling the truth, so we don't deny, distort, or add to it. We all need to be very discernful as we listen to teachers, because as Jesus warned, false teaching can be hazardous, very hazardous to our spiritual health.