

FALSE TEACHERS AMONG US

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The Lord Jesus warns against false teachers, and explains how they can be identified.

As recorded in Matthew 7:15-20, Jesus proclaimed, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. 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."

IDENTIFIED BY THEIR FRUIT, NOT JUST BY THEIR DOCTRINE

Interestingly, Jesus does not declare in this passage that false teachers should be identified merely by their doctrine or prayers. Yes, often false teachers can be identified by doctrines that violate the absolute truth of Scripture, and such error must be exposed and refuted both transparently and publicly. Yet sometimes a false teacher can craftily preach sound doctrine but either fail to implement it himself or misapply the application. In essence, a false teacher is then testifying falsely to that which he has not himself personally embraced. A false teacher is speaking of that which has not transformed him. He is trying to proclaim that which he does not himself know or believe. By definition, one cannot honestly testify to that which one has not experienced or known.

How then does our Lord actually tell us, according to Matthew 7:15-20, to identify false teachers? Jesus proclaims that by their fruit you will know false teachers, not merely by what they say they believe

The Church and mission field today needs shepherds who are themselves transformed, and who then go on to care for and equip all of God's people for ministry, reference Ephesians 4:11-12. Servant leaders do not just produce followers, but empower new leaders who themselves go on to produce new leaders who exemplify obedience to Christ. For that is what God has called the Church to do. A.W. Tozer rightly observed, "Have you noticed how much praying for revival has been going on of late – and how little revival has resulted? I believe the problem is that we have been trying to pray for obeying, and it simply will not work." Tozer also stated that if one is not changed by grace, then one is not saved by grace. Proof is in the outcome and not merely in talk. 1 Corinthians 4:20 clearly states, "For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power."

Sound theological doctrine based on the full context of

Scripture is essential. It is not genuine and authentic, however, until and unless it is exemplified. Satan, after all, knows sound theological doctrine, spoke with God, and is capable of quoting Scripture both in broad context and in line and verse. Nevertheless, the enemy doesn't know God and is not transformed. Mere knowledge of God does not equate to saving faith in God. Even serving as a pastor or missionary could become nothing more than works that exist apart from faith, regardless of how sound the doctrine may be. James 2:18-19 records, "But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe – and shudder!"

QUALIFICATIONS OF MINISTRY

The Lord's emphasis on fruit and not merely intellectual assent to doctrine in the passage from Matthew 7:15-20 also explains why the qualifications for ministry as delineated in 1 Timothy 3 has far more to say about conduct than just agreement with a statement of faith. For conduct demonstrates that doctrine is genuinely believed.

"The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore, an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil." – 1 Timothy 3:1-7

Rather than a legalistic litany, the list of qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 ensures that the Shepherd demonstrates a transformed life. It testifies to new life and to the power of Christ in the servant leader rather than just the assertion of an academic report about Christ. Isn't it only rightly so, after all? How can one teach or preach yet not have a life above reproach? How can one preach sound doctrine yet not be sober-minded and exemplify self-control, which is a Fruit of the Spirit? How can one claim to be qualified, yet not see others as created in God's image, eternal, valuable and redeemable, - which is necessary to behave with

hospitality? How can one minister the Gospel, yet be quarrelsome rather than gentle? Can someone claim to be qualified to care for others in God's family if his own household is not managed well first? Likewise, can a missionary be expected to make disciples on the foreign mission field if he is not first making disciples in his own country?

These qualifications are not to insinuate the qualified. They must possess a sinless life or the need to be perfect. For 1 John 1:8 reminds us that, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." No, rather, those who are qualified keep a short account of sin, instead of justifying sin or covering it up. They repent and exemplify that they know of what they preach. They are walking in the Spirit and are not fulfilling the desires of the flesh, reference Galatians 5:16. They are daily calling on Christ to transform them from glory to glory.

"Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." – 2 Corinthians 3:17-18

FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT VERSUS THE EVIDENCE OF THE FLESH

Galatians 5 delineates both the Fruit of the Spirit and also contrasts the evidence of the flesh. The evidence of the flesh includes: malice, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, and divisions, among others. Further, this passage includes a strict warning that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Then in the very next chapter, in Galatians 6:7-10, Scripture warns:

"Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith."

In this there can be no partially nor human manipulation. Both Galatians 5 and 6 refer to the flesh, the evidence of flesh, and the consequences. This also explains why our Lord further stated as recorded in Matthew 7:22-23, "On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"

If Jesus cursed a fig tree for not producing fruit and it died, can anyone expect to be praised for merely spouting sound doctrine but not producing fruit? "And seeing a fig tree by the wayside, he went to it

and found nothing on it but only leaves. And he said to it, 'May no fruit ever come from you again!' And the fig tree withered at once." – Matthew 21:19

NOT JUST EMPTY YET ACCURATE WORDS, BUT TRANSFORMED LIVES

Clearly, Jesus seeks for us to be known and transformed by Him, not just have accurate academic head knowledge and public speeches. Consequently, we see that sound doctrine must not only be preached but also practiced and biblically implemented.

This reality does in no way diminish the importance of sound theological doctrine, but only emphasizes what Jesus declares, that sound doctrine must be soundly practiced resulting in the bearing of good fruit in order to be real.

For example, it is not enough to just give intellectual assent to the authority of Scripture, if one's life exemplifies malice, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger (lack of emotional self-control), rivalries, dissensions, and divisions. If one still fights with the weapons of the world such as slander and backbiting instead of following direct biblical conflict resolution, can one seriously proclaim that the old is gone and behold all things are new? No, for then one is merely trying to obtain through illegitimate means what one fears could not be achieved through Christ.

Can anyone pretend to be direct and honest when they are not direct and not honest? Can anyone pretend to be encouraging others while they are discouraging others? Is rejection, indifference, critical bitterness, and disdain examples of the Fruit of the Spirit? Of course not! Are pastors and missionaries known for a shepherd's heart of reaching out to each and every sheep in compassion, based on truth? Or is the old man still unsettling the spirit of the pastor and missionary, thus causing them to dislike other members of the Body - members who Christ loves?

When sound doctrine is genuinely applied to life then it will first come alive within the one who ministers, and the Holy Spirit will produce the Fruit of the Spirit with the evidence of transformed lives. Sound doctrine that changes lives is testified to both by and through godly relationships. Only then is it authentic. The teacher will die to self (with its pride, bitterness, self-promotion, and backbiting), the old is gone and all things become new (reference 2 Corinthians 5:17). Then the teacher will not only agree with Holy Scripture, but will be transformed into exemplifying it.

CLANGING CYMBALS?

To preach and minister as a pastor or missionary without exemplifying the Fruit of the Spirit is to proclaim one's own guilt. Sound doctrine testifies against the ministry leader who has head knowledge but is without transformation. Galatians 5:22-23 delineates the Fruit of the Spirit, and the first among

them is love.

Scripture declares that mere head knowledge and preaching sound doctrine without being transformed by the Holy Spirit and producing the fruit of the spirit is worthless. "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful, it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." - 1 Corinthians 13:1-7

It is possible, therefore, for even pastors and missionaries to look very good on the outside, to be accurate theologically, to come so close, and yet fail miserably.

Is there bragging, stubbornness, a critical spirit, lack of humility, authoritarianism instead of submission to biblical conflict resolution, prideful arrogance, or a lack of biblical accountability? Nominal Christians often want to critically focus on the weaknesses of others and reject them, not recognizing that in doing so they also reject the God who is able to save the utmost. Those who minister the grace and mercy of Christ must also exemplify it in their own lives and declare it to others who are equally undeserving as they themselves are. Christ came in grace and truth (John 1:14), and grace and truth are not mutually exclusive. In fact, one without the other is neither.

Preaching sound biblical doctrine does not substitute for a transformed life. Some pastors and missionaries need a pastor or missionary themselves! No one can authentically give away what they do not first possess themselves.

DIVISION WITHIN THE CHURCH

Doctrinal differences create conflict within a church or mission organization, and even between churches and between mission organizations. Sound theological doctrine must, after all, be embraced and clearly articulated. Still, even when doctrine is theologically sound and agreed upon, conflict can still arise within a church or mission organization when the truth of doctrine is not practiced.

For example, it is unlikely that many biblical pastors or missionaries would attempt to justify murder, yet some would diminish the significance of a transformed life that leaves no room for angry insults, gossip or slander. Still, gossip, slander and anger are forms of hate that the Lord equates to murder within the heart, reference Matthew 5:21-22.

Likewise, it is unlikely that many biblical pastors or missionaries would attempt to justify adultery, yet some would diminish the significance of a

transformed life that leaves no room for lust. Still, Jesus equates lust with committing adultery in the heart, reference Matthew 5:27-28.

Further, though most pastors and missionaries I personally know would publicly declare their commitment to sound doctrine, not as many would exemplify a shepherd's heart.

"For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized." - 1 Corinthians 11:18-19

DECEIVED TEACHERS WHO DENY THE FAITH

God's people are called to be in one accord with sound theological doctrine, but not with the failure to implement it. Dr. Martyn-Lloyd Jones rightly applied Scripture to life by stating:

"It is no good being a great theologian if you deny it all by your behavior. If you are rude to your wife or your children or to your next door neighbors, you are a denier of the Gospel."

Matthew 7:21-23 records the extent of deception:

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"

Sadly, many of these deniers of the faith may not see themselves as such, proving the extent of the enemy's deception. The worst aspect of deception is that, when it is most effective, it leaves the victim completely convinced they are not deceived. This can include pastors and missionaries who know sound doctrine, but may only possess head knowledge without spiritual transformation.

In contrast, let this be a cautionary warning to individually reflect on 2 Corinthians 13:5-6: "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? — unless indeed you fail to meet the test! I hope you will find out that we have not failed the test."

CONCLUSION

The Good News is that after examining yourself, if there is bad news, it need not be permanent. A number of years ago I met an elderly chaplain serving with an internationally recognized mission organization. He shared his ministry passion to prepare new missionaries for the foreign field, to help them avoid pitfalls he experienced. This missionary chaplain openly explained his personal testimony. He admitted he had served 12 years on the foreign mission field before ever repenting of his own sins and becoming

a Christian. Before that he only knew facts and head knowledge, but was not a Christian. As shocking as this may sound, it is perhaps not as uncommon in ministry among pastors and missionaries as it may at first appear.

God's servants must not merely have a form of godliness that denies the power thereof, and be always learning but never able to arrive at the knowledge of the truth, reference 2 Timothy 3:1-7. As a pastor, missionary, or teacher, let no one resort to preaching or giving mere academic assent to sound doctrine that first hasn't changed their own life. For no matter how succinctly stated, accurately asserted, or loudly proclaimed, sound theological doctrine that is head knowledge alone will not avail much. It certainly is not acceptable to God. Partial obedience is often acceptable to men, but not to the Lord. Let us not be left peddling to others a message that hasn't yet worked in us, deceiving ourselves.

Jesus is relational and restorative, and has called us be the same. Christ came to restore us to a personal relationship with God, and also made it possible for us to be restored to personal relationships with others. Restored relationships are significant, because they are both the result of salvation in Christ and the evidence of it.

This transformation and the evidence of changed relationships are proclaimed in 2 Corinthians 5:16-21, "From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us

to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

In the Great Commission as recorded in Matthew 28, Jesus declared that all power in Heaven and earth is given to Him. Let us therefore fear only God, yet let us be sure to fear and honor Him in truth and action and not merely words. Only the Holy Spirit can change a man. Wise men and qualified men are those who submit to Him.



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asian missions advance

Quarterly Bulletin of the Asia Missions Association *published by*

ASIAN MISSIONS ADVANCE, published from 1978 to 1993 by the East-West Center for Missions Research & Development as the Occasional Bulletin of the Asia Missions Association, has re-started publishing from August 2011 as the Quarterly Bulletin of the Asia Missions Association by the East-West Center for Missions Research & Development

1520 James M Wood Blvd, #303, Los Angeles, CA 90015, USA
www.asiamissions.net | www.ewcmrd.org
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ISSN 2765-0936

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