



False Teachers Among Us



By K Douglas Brown

Numerous Scriptures in the New Testament warn about false teachers, but who are these mysterious leaders? Are they still with us today or have they ceased to exist sometime in the past? One such warning about false teachers is found in Matthew 7:15 which calls us to, "Beware of false prophets." We're told to look out for them.

FALSE TEACHERS TEACH FALSE DOCTRINE

The terms, "false teacher," "false prophet," and "false apostle," are all used somewhat interchangeably in the Bible. What is a false teacher, as defined by Scripture? Generally, when we think of false teachers, we think of those who are guilty of teaching heresy. This brings to mind historical accounts of heretics being burned at the stake for teaching some unorthodox view. Some of these individuals such as Jan Hus, William Tyndale, and Joan of Arc, are now considered martyrs of the faith.

The word "heretic" literally means, "to choose for oneself." A heretic is one who chooses what they want to believe rather than drawing out the meaning of God's Word. There are Christian leaders who talk much about the sovereignty of God, all the while acting like little gods themselves. The call of biblical students, however, is found in 2 Timothy 2:15, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one

approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (NASB throughout). To be a false teacher, in part, is to incorrectly handle God’s Word, *choosing for oneself* what one understands as truth.

The concept of the false teacher in the New Testament grew out of the idea of the false prophets in the Old Testament. This highlights the seriousness of being a false teacher, as false prophets in the Old Testament were to be put to death for falsely prophesying. Deuteronomy 18:20 states, “But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, is to be put to death.” The Bible confirms that Christians leaders are called to a high standard. This is at the heart of James’ words in James 3:1, “Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.” It is always dangerous to misrepresent God.

In Jeremiah 14:14 there is a description of false prophets: “Then the LORD said to me, ‘The prophets are prophesying falsehood in My name. I have neither sent them nor commanded them nor speak to them; they are prophesying to you a false vision, divination, futility and the deception of their own minds.’” There we learn that three things defined the false prophets of the Old Testament. First, they prophesied lies in God’s name. Second, they were not appointed, nor sent, by God, and finally, they prophesied false visions resulting from divinations, idolatries, and delusions of their own mind.

In Lamentations 2:14 the prophecies of false prophets are described as being “false and misleading oracles.” This is one of the key characteristics of a false prophet or false teacher. **They mislead God’s people.** One wonders however, if this is always done through errant teaching or do false prophets employ other methods as well?

THE QUESTION

What is it that defines a false teacher? How do you know when you’re dealing with a false prophet? Why are they to be guarded against? We usually think of a false teacher as someone who is teaching a false doctrine, as is the clear case in 2 Peter 2:1: “But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves.” This passage speaks of false prophets who secretly introduce heresies. But are false teachers and false prophets only known for teaching false doctrine? Is the definition of a false teacher or false prophet limited to the teaching of heresy or are there other misdeeds that put an individual in the category of a false prophet?

THE RISE IN EVANGELICAL ABUSIVE BEHAVIOR

This is an important question as one views the current evangelical landscape, as we observe the increasing destruction from numerous errant Christian leaders. A simple internet search of the words, “Pastor accused of abuse,” will remove any doubt that there is a significant problem in our evangelical camp. How are we to categorize these leaders who have left, in their wake, scores of wounded and disillusioned followers?

Perhaps you are already aware that we're suffering under a blight of power abuses, fallen Christian leaders, and general evangelical bad behavior. Numerous celebrity-status pastors and leaders have been exposed for various abuses, leaving behind chaotic trails of destruction. This isn't only a megachurch or celebrity Christian problem. It's actually a "last days" problem.

I recall sitting at a lunch table during a conference a couple years ago with two ladies who told how they had served faithfully in their churches and were so deeply wounded by their abusive pastor that they hadn't been able to enter the doors of a church for nearly twenty years. I've heard numerous similar stories in recent years, and it breaks my heart. Many of these abusive leaders have been branded as false prophets, but we must ask ourselves if that label is really warranted?

It's been my observation in recent years as I've studied a number of these smoldering trails of spiritual destruction that many of the perpetrators were actually quite orthodox in their teaching. Some of them were even leaders I had considered exemplary models of evangelical fidelity. Perhaps this is what makes these transgressions so cruel and heinous. It certainly begs the question, **can a person be a false teacher while holding to orthodoxy, and teaching the Word accurately?** I believe the answer is yes.

FALSE TEACHERS WILL INCREASE

Our general tendency is to think that the problem of false teachers was mostly confined to Bible times. Let us not, however, think of the problem of false teachers as only a Bible era problem. There's a reason we're given so many scriptural warnings; the problem is for our time as well. Apparently, we'll have false prophets among us until the end of the age. As a matter of fact, Scripture indicates that the problem of false teachers will only increase. In Matthew 24:11, Jesus warned that, ". . . many false prophets will appear and deceive many." Our tendency is to think of false prophets as a rarity, a small problem, but in 2 Peter 2:2 we are warned that **many** will follow the ways of false teachers. We shouldn't expect merely a few of them but rather many and in increasing variety and number as the end of church age approaches.

Our inclination is to think this can't happen in my church. "My church is a good church. Our leaders are exceptional," we argue. "After all, look at how dynamic and *likeable* my pastor is!" Scripture, however, indicates that false teachers can actually be perceived as "likeable." To these individuals Jesus directed one of His strongest warnings, "Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets" (Luke 6:26). Being likeable actually works very well for false prophets. I would add that where believers are unaware, there is a suitable environment for Satan to work through false prophets and lead God's people astray.

It is noteworthy that many of these false prophets actually taught the Scriptures correctly, believed in the doctrines of the faith, and clearly communicated the gospel message. Many believers heard the gospel message from those leaders, responded, and grew in their faith, under the solid biblical teaching of these false teachers.

So, I ask the question, should we be so quick to brand such leaders as “false teachers” if their teaching is seemingly faultless? Granted, they have wreaked great destruction and hurt many good followers but are they to be branded as a false teacher? This might initially seem like a difficult question to answer. I believe that it really isn’t all that complicated.

Too many believers today are simply unaware and don’t apply discernment in this area, if at all. Many reason that there’s no need to go splitting hairs and too often discernment is relegated to pastors or other Christian leaders. What happens, however, if the pastor or trusted leader is the false prophet? Or what if, solid-to-the-core, Christian leaders develop into false teachers? All believers are called to apply discernment.

A GROWING PROBLEM

The Bible tells us that false prophets and teachers have always been with us and will, in fact, increase until the end. The spirit of the false prophets of the Old Testament reappears in the form of false prophets and false teachers in the New Testament. Writing to first century believers in Asia Minor, Peter explains this connection in 2 Peter 2:1-3, “But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves. Many will follow their depraved conduct and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. In their greed these teachers will exploit you with fabricated stories. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping.”

Several Scriptures indicate that the situation with false teachers will only worsen as we near the end of the age. “While evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived” (2 Timothy 3:13). Because of this ongoing spiritual deception, believers are charged to be increasingly on guard against false teachers as time progresses. “Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction” (2 Thessalonians 2:3). Be encouraged, though, because we already know the end of the story, as revealed in the book of Revelation. There, we see Satan working through the beast and the false prophet, and the trio are thrown into the lake of fire for having conspired together to deceive the people (Revelation 19:20, 21). Be sure that the growing deception of false teachers we are witnessing will end in Satan’s ultimate demise.

FALSE TEACHERS WILL BE KNOWN BY THEIR FRUITS

According to Matthew 7:15, 16, **false prophets will be known by their fruits**, not just their teaching. In 2 Corinthians 11:13, false teachers are described as being “deceitful workers.” Be sure that deceit is not a mark of Christian leaders who are led by the Spirit of God. Deceit is the devil’s playground. Once, when Jesus was confronting a group of hypocritical religious leaders, he said to them, “You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). Deceit and lies are the mother tongue of

Satan. If he speaks any truth at all, even scriptural or doctrinal truth, it is simply for the purpose of ultimately leading God's children astray.

Deception is one of the favorite tools of false teachers. This is one of the keys to identifying false prophets and false teachers in both the Old Testament and the New Testament and this is key to identifying false teachers today as well. Scripture tells us that deception, promoted by false teachers, emanates from demonic sources. "But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron" (1 Timothy 4:1, 2).

We would do well to be aware of deception. If you observe a pastor or Christian leader playing fast and loose with the truth in one area, you can be assured that deceit will appear in other areas as well. **Deception is a sure sign of a false teacher.** In Ephesians Paul draws a couple of contrasts that are helpful in this discussion. First, in Ephesians 4:24 Paul charges his readers to, "put on the new self, which in *the likeness of God* has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth." Lies and deceit are associated with the old self and truth is associated with our new life in Christ and God's holiness.

A second contrast appears in Ephesians 5:1-21. Here Paul is encouraging his readers to walk as children of the light, reminding them that they were formerly of the darkness. Throughout this passage there is a contrast being drawn between the children of light and those who walk in darkness. Here, we learn that the fruit of light consists of truth (Ephesians 5:9), and conversely one of the fruits of those who practice darkness is deceit (Ephesians 5:6, 11). Truth and light go together just like deception and darkness do. According to James 4:4, "Friendship with the world is enmity against God."

Christian leaders who utilize the tools of the world such as deception and manipulation have not only aligned themselves with the system of the world but also with the ruler of this world, Satan. We would be wise to remember the words Jesus spoke that, "no man can serve two masters" (Matthew 6:24).

What we're talking about here is called *duplicity* in the book of Proverbs. Duplicity is when you say one thing but mean another. An example is given in Proverbs 20:14, "'It's no good, it's no good!' says the buyer— then goes off and boasts about the purchase." Proverbs also warns of the destruction that will come to leaders who practice duplicity. "The integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity" (Proverbs 11:3). Christian leaders are to be champions of integrity.

Another characteristic of false teachers and false prophets is that **they seek to lead God's people astray.** Matthew 24:24 states, in regard to the soon-coming Tribulation Period, "For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect." False teachers are not so concerned with the unelect, but rather seeks to cause disruption among God's children. Where you see God's people floundering and distressed you may be observing the fruit of a false teacher. If you're wondering if a particular Christian leader is a false prophet or God's servant, look at the condition of their flock. If you see the three 'dis'es; disunity, disagreements, and disharmony then you may be observing the fruit of a false prophet.

On the other hand, if there is harmony, peace, and unity within the flock, you are likely observing the work and fruit of the Spirit. The overriding characteristic of all false prophets is that they seek to lead people astray. This happens through false teaching, through deception, and through general discord and chaos.

Many times, I've heard a brother or sister in Christ, when confronted about the serious abuses of a Christian leader, respond by saying, "But look at all the good they're doing." This is another characteristic of false teachers, most often **they don't immediately look like a false teacher**, they actually look like an apostle of Christ. Paul warns in 2 Corinthians 11:13, 14, "For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light." Satan knows that he can wreak the most destruction from *within* the church rather than from without. Foxes always do the most damage when they're inside the henhouse. At the Last Supper, when Jesus said that one of the disciples would betray him, not one person pointed the finger at Judas (John 13:21, 22). The disciples didn't immediately discern that Judas would be the one to betray Jesus. False teachers won't always be readily obvious.



Jim Jones

Sometimes false teachers can be quite persuasive, even to great peril, as in the case of Jim Jones, who convinced 900 followers to commit suicide. Many of his followers had come from solid, evangelical, Bible teaching churches. Discernment involves looking beyond persuasiveness and seeing truth. Colossians 2:4-8 warns believers against being taken in by persuasive arguments. "I say this so that no one will delude you with persuasive argument. For even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ. Therefore, as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, *so* walk in Him, having been firmly rooted *and now* being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, *and* overflowing with gratitude. See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ." Discernment will keep faithful followers from being overcome by the persuasiveness of false teachers.

It is vital that the messenger's life match his message. Not all false teachers are purveyors of heresy and false doctrine, but a person who is not *living* the message is spreading a type of false doctrine and that, indeed, makes them a false teacher. Clearly, it's possible to preach the gospel accurately and deny Christ in the way one lives. Jude 4 describes one such situation, "For certain individuals whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord."

The vital connection between the message and the messenger cannot be overstated. As theologian Michael Svigel has stated, "Our Christian baptism is not only a profession of faith but also a commitment to a way of life." We must ask ourselves; how can the unbelieving world understand the truth of the gospel if the teacher's life is marked by dishonesty and deceit? As Christian leaders and teachers we are not just disseminators of truth, we are discipling and shaping followers. As Luke 6:40 states, "The student is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher."

THE TIME HAS COME FOR CHRISTIANS TO WAKE UP

There is a hesitancy to call a false teacher what they are. We've been conditioned by our culture not to judge and so we shy away from inconvenient truths. Sadly, discernment has taken a back seat and a sleepy inattentive driver has taken the wheel. Just like Eve, we are susceptible to being seduced into error (2 Corinthians 11:32). There are numerous Scriptures which warn us against false teachers and it's time for Christians to take up the arms of discernment.

The problem of false teachers will only increase as we near the end of the age and these false teachers are predicted to lead many astray. For this reason, wise Christians will want to assert a new level of discernment preparing to take up arms against the coming onslaught. It is because false teachers are among us that we are instructed to test the spirits. "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1).

There is one encouraging truth however, as we face the increase of false prophets. Scripture indicates that God's wrath will always be directed at false teachers who practice deception. Proverbs 11:3 states, "The integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity." Further, James 4:6 tells us that, ". . . God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble." Naturally, the deeds of darkness are like a house of cards and easily become exposed when the light is shone upon them (Ephesians 5:13). Enlightened Christians can take great comfort in the fact that we already know the end for false teachers. Be encouraged, because, as children of the light, we are already on the winning side of history.

WHAT DO I DO NOW?

You might be asking, “What if I sense I’m dealing with a false prophet in my church or ministry? What should I do now?” First, recognize that **a false prophet is doing the work of the evil one**. It is ultimately the work of the evil one that we are called to oppose. Because of this, a Christian who enters a spiritual battle will want to carry into battle spiritual weapons. Wise believers will remember that we wrestle not against flesh and blood but against our spiritual enemy.

Next, **a believer who feels like they may be dealing with a false teacher must pray**. Prayer is our first line of defense in any battle. We must ask God for His protection and help. Pray that deceit, the enemy’s favored weaponry, will be brought out into the light.

Third, **take your concerns to the powers that be**. Often, when trouble has been allowed to fester in a church or Christian organization it’s because no one spoke up. Be forewarned however, that you may discover a deeper, more systemic, problem.

Fourth, **decide whether to stay or leave**, but know that each path has thorns of its own. If you choose to stay, realize that it may be many years before the false teacher is finally dealt with. Leaving will also carry a price. Often, those who choose to leave a false prophet behind are labeled “troublemakers.” It is the surest sign of an abusive environment when those who speak up against the deceit and duplicity of a false teacher are chastised and excoriated. Abusive environments exist because they have perfected the art of shunning evaluation and transparency because that’s what darkness does.

Finally, **be encouraged**. Take strength from knowing that the ultimate defeat of the evil one has already been secured and is prophesied in Revelation 19:20, 21. God’s wrath is always directed at the evil that is cultivated by a false teacher (James 4:6). Children of the light can take courage and solace that they are on the winning side of the battle against the forces of darkness.



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