

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

The above referenced verse explains why it is difficult if not nearly impossible at times to identify false teachers and false prophets. They seem to be just fine, in fact more often than not, *more* than “just fine,” they appear to be great. I remember several years ago in the midst of a conversation about the false teachings of Joel Osteen a friend said to me, “But there are so many people that go to his church and so many people who buy his books and watch him on TV, they can’t all be wrong.” Oh yes they can!

False teachers almost always (like Osteen) are pleasant and positive. They like to be with other Christians, they talk like Christians, and they like to be identified as Christians. They know and they use Biblical terminology and they often appear to be highly knowledgeable about God’s Word. The doctrines that they affirm appear to be Biblical.

Many false teachers also appear to be very sincere, and because of their sincerity they are able to more easily mislead people. Paul warned in 2 Timothy 3:13,

“But evil men and imposters will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.”

Most likely they are deceived by the great deceiver, so they are thoroughly convinced in their own minds that their perverted beliefs are true. They have become so deeply devoted to falsehood that darkness seems to be light, and blacks seems to be white.

Since they are so deceptive how do we identify them? Usually they eventually show their true colors by what they do not affirm. In other words, they do not identify so much by what they say as by what they don’t say. Rarely do they openly deny Jesus’ divinity, His substitutionary atonement, the depravity and lost-ness of man, the reality and penalty of sin, the destiny of hell for unbelievers, the need for repentance, humility and submission to the Lordship of Christ, and other such “negative” and undesirable truths. They just simply never talk about them.

In order for a false teacher to carry out their deceit in an effective manner, they usually live moral and upright lives, at least they do on the surface. John Broadus who was one of the first presidents of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in the 19th century wrote that many false teachers have come from traditional religious education and training, and because of their early training in traditional Christian moral values they find it difficult to out and out overcome those restrictions in their own minds. Outward morality gives the impression of spiritual genuineness and therefore helps to perpetuate deceit. But 1 Timothy 4:1-2 tells us that the truth is much different,

“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 Peter 5:2 says that they are motivated by the desire for **“sordid gain.”** Their false faith is unable to restrain their unregenerate flesh, so the true sensuality usually at some point becomes known to all. 2 Peter 2:19 says,

“promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves to corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved.”

2 Peter 2:3 says,

“and in their greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.”

Verse 14 says,

“having eyes full of adultery that never cease from sin, enticing unstable souls, having a heart trained in greed, accursed children.”

One of the earliest Christian writings after the New Testament is *The Didache* in this book there is a section devoted to false teachers. The Greek term that was used is *Christemporos*, which is translated to mean “Christ merchants.” False teachers use Jesus Christ and His gospel and His church as a way to serve their own greedy ends. They use the things of God as cheap merchandise to promote and to sell to their advantage.

In *The Didache* there are several ways that are given to distinguish true prophets, true teachers from the false ones. The first was that a true prophet will not remain as a house guest for more than two days, because he would need to leave so as to do the work of the Lord. A false prophet, however, would stay indefinitely, since he had no real mission to accomplish except serving his own interests. The second way to distinguish the true from the false teacher involved asking for money. The true teacher, the true prophet would only ask for bread and water it says in *The Didache*, but nothing more. In other words, they would only ask for what was necessary to meet their needs. A false teacher, a false prophet, on the other hand, is not the least bit shy about asking for or in some cases even demanding money. A third way to distinguish the false from the true teacher is in their life-style. A person who does not lead a life that matches up to the standards that he teaches is clearly not a man of God. One last test *The Didache* mentions is whether or not they are willing to work. If a person wanted to live off others and would not work for their own keep, then they are plain and simply trafficking in Christ.

The false teacher is always in ministry for his or her self. They are there to pad their own bank accounts, to satisfy their ego, to gain prestige, power, influence, and recognition for themselves.

Unfortunately, we live in day and age in which the people hawking their Christian wares are plentiful. Whether it be books, radio, television, movies, music, conferences, seminars, crusades, and all kinds of other means and packaging they are all selling the gospel in the same way that advertisers and marketing experts sell cars and detergent. They are insincere peddlers of the Word of God and they corrupt His Word for their own needs.

2 Corinthians 2:17 says,

“For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak Christ in the sight of God.”