

Wolves Don't Advertise: 7 Traits of False Teachers

A false teacher can be anyone in a position of spiritual authority, or claiming to be. Wolves don't often attack wolves, but they do go after sheep.

They bring destructive teachings and lies into the church, often, by telling people what they want to hear (Jer. 23). They provide layers of truth mixed with error, but even a broken clock is right twice a day.

Jesus said, "Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruit" (Matt. 7:15-16b).

"Beware" means to be on alert—to discern what is being said. False teachers take advantage of the fact that many people are not well educated in fundamental biblical truths. To detect a counterfeit, one must first know what the original looks like. It's impossible to gain a clear picture of absolute truth without going directly to God's Word. Unless one is firmly grounded in God's Word and led by His Spirit, one can easily be led astray.

Wolves don't advertise. Instead, they look like sheep. False teachers aren't dressed in red holding a pitchfork. They often look the same as everyone else. They subtly challenge the inerrancy and authority of Scripture, and they add to salvation, saying it's not in Christ alone. Legitimate teachers recognize the deity of Christ. False teachers promote salvation through works and not through faith alone. One must belong to their society, institution or church in order to be saved. This is a false gospel.

Jesus encourages His followers to be fruit inspectors. I came across a great article from the Gospel Coalition written by

Colin Smith titled 7 Traits of False Teachers. This precise article identifies the fruit of false teachers. I'm going to spend the next few minutes quoting directly from it. He compares the authentic with the counterfeit from 1 and 2 Peter. Colin wrote:

1. Different source – Where does their message come from? Peter says, “For we have not followed cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 1:16). And then he says the false teachers exploit you with stories they have made up (2 Pet. 2:3). So the true teacher sources what he says from the Bible. The false teacher relies on his own creativity.

2. Different message – What is the substance of the message? For the true teacher, Jesus Christ is central. “His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness through the knowledge of Him” (1 Pet. 1:3). For the false teacher, Jesus is at the margins: “There will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them” (2 Pet. 2:1). Notice the word “secretly.” It’s rare for someone in church to openly deny Jesus. Movement away from the centrality of Christ is subtle. The false teacher will speak about how other people can help change your life, but if you listen carefully to what he is saying, you will see that Jesus Christ is not essential to his message.

3. Different position – In what position will the message leave you? The true Christian will “escape the corruption that is in the world through lust” (2 Pet. 1:4). Listen to how Peter describes the counterfeit Christian: “Although they promise ... freedom, they themselves are slaves of corruption, for by that which a man is overcome, to this he is enslaved” (2 Pet. 2:19). The true believer is escaping corruption, while the counterfeit believer is mastered by it.

4. Different character – What kind of people does the message

produce? The true believer pursues goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness and love (2 Pet. 1:5-6). The counterfeit Christian is marked by arrogance and slander (2 Pet. 2:10). They are “trained in greed” and “they have eyes full of adultery” (2 Pet. 2:14).

5. Different appeal – Why should you listen to the message? The true teacher appeals to Scripture. “And we have a more reliable word of prophecy, which you would do well to follow” (2 Pet. 1:19). God has spoken, and the true teacher appeals to His Word. The false teacher makes a rather different appeal: “They entice by the lusts of the flesh and by depravity those who barely escaped from those who live in error” (2 Pet. 2:18).

6. Different fruit – What result does the message have in people’s lives? The true believer is effective and productive in his or her knowledge of Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 1:8). The counterfeit is like “wells without water” (2 Pet. 2:17). This is an extraordinary picture! They promise much but produce little.

7. Different end – Where does the message ultimately lead you? Here we find the most disturbing contrast of all. The true believer will receive “entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 1:11). The false believer will experience “swift destruction” (2 Pet. 2:1). “Their judgment, made long ago, does not linger, and their destruction does not slumber” (2 Pet. 2:3). Jesus tells us that there will be many who have been involved in ministry in His name, to whom He will say, “Depart from me; I never knew you” (Matt. 7:21).

Colin makes some great points, and it begs the question to pastors: If people are not changing and growing closer to God, are we challenging them, or are we catering to what they want to hear?

Wolves don't advertise, but God does. He offers hope and salvation: "Call on Me. I will never leave nor forsake you. Call on Me and I will heal your past and redeem your future. Call on Me and you will be saved" (Deut. 31:6; Ez. 34:16; Joel 2:32). You can trust God's marketing plan.

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