

What Does A False Teacher Look Like?

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*But false prophets also arose among the people, **just as there will be false teachers among you**, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction (2 Peter 2:1)*

It is hard to get around the fact that Peter says we are going to encounter false teachers. He doesn't say it's just a possibility—or even a probability—but a *guarantee*. “There *will be* false teachers among you.”

Yet, in our timidity, many have watered down who actually qualifies as a false teacher. “You can't be a false teacher unless you have a corrupt character,” they argue. One blogger recently argued that the difference between a “mistaken teacher” and a “false teacher” boils down to whether or not they are “intentionally deceiving people.” (Many of those who make this tired argument would also say, “And who are we to ever judge someone's

character?”)

I understand the reluctance to label someone as a false teacher. “False teacher” is such an ugly term. We should indeed be slow to call someone this (Jas. 1:19). Perhaps the biggest difference between a true teacher and a false teacher is *not* that the true teacher never teaches anything that is incorrect, but that he is eager to repent when he learns the truth more accurately (Acts 18:24-28).¹

Notwithstanding, **the New Testament is chock full of warnings about false teachers** (Matt. 24:4-5; Mark 13:22; Acts 20:29-30; Rom. 16:17; 2 Cor. 11:13-15; Gal. 1:6-9; Eph. 4:14; Col. 2:8; 1 Tim. 1:3-4; 6:3-5; 2 Tim. 3:13; Heb. 13:9; 1 John 4:1). These false teachers or false prophets, whoever they are, seem to be **relatively common** so far as the Bible is concerned (Matt. 7:15; Matt. 24:11, 24; 1 Tim. 4:1-2; 6:20-21; 2 Tim. 4:3; 2 Pet. 2:1; 2 John 7-11; Jude 4).

Sometimes the Bible does, in fact, describe false prophets and teachers as having a corrupt character. But the underlying emphasis is not on the *intent* of the teacher, but whether or not their *words* are *true*. **It is about content, not character.**

False teachers are described as wolves (Matt. 7:15; Acts 20:27). I have a cat (well, my wife has a cat) named Baxter. Sometimes, Baxter forgets he’s a cat. He acts entitled like a human. I know dogs can be the same way. And if these “wolves in sheep’s clothing” are anything like dogs or cats, they don’t have to realize they are wolves to be wolves. **Is self-awareness a prerequisite to being a false teacher?** After all, there will be a lot of sincere religious leaders who are going to die lost (Matt. 7:21-23).

So, who is a false teacher? And how do we spot one? Peter has some helpful things to say in his second letter. Chapter 1 describes what teachers of the true gospel look like. Chapter 2 then describes those who are preaching a different gospel. Not all false teachers exhibit all of these traits at once, but sometimes they demonstrate a combination.

1. His teaching doesn’t come fundamentally from the Bible (2 Peter 2:3)

I like how the Christian Standard Bible (CSB) phrases it: “they will exploit you in their greed with made-up stories.” In other words, when you get to the heart of the message, where does this teaching come from? Does it sound like something that was picked up from the self-help aisle in the bookstore? Is it just the latest fad in human wisdom? Is it cleverly

disguised fluff that has been cloaked in fancy theological doublespeak?

On the other hand, teachers of the truth are different because their teachings are demonstrably true. Peter and the apostles taught from their own eyewitness testimony and by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. They didn't rely on clever quips and their ability to articulate in clever ways to convince people of their message (1 Cor. 2:1, 4). "For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty" (2 Pet. 1:16). Thus, *true* teachers recognize that their message is only true to the degree that it reflects the truth of the gospel. Thus, they make sure their words drip with Scripture.

2. His teaching doesn't revolve around the authority and sovereignty of Jesus (2 Peter 2:1).

Teachers of falsehood are ultimately "destructive" and their message fundamentally "denies the Master." The master of a house is the one who has final authority in a matter. Thus, a false teacher is one who has a cheap view of the authority of Christ's last will and testament. They quote the Bible like they would a proverb or poem at the end of a speech. To them, Scripture is just garnish, not the meat.

True teachers of the gospel, in contrast, stress the need for *Bible authority*. "His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him" (2 Pet. 1:3). As far as teachers of the truth are concerned, it's all about Jesus and living for Him. He is preeminent. Therefore, there is no way to live acceptably before Him that isn't in some way taught in the Bible. Everything we need to know and believe can be found in the Bible.

3. He minimizes the seriousness of sin and makes light of those who live holy lives (2 Peter 2:19).

"They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption." Their mantra is "freedom in Christ," but in reality, they are just teaching "freedom to do what you please." That is slavery to sin. These teachers have a dismissive attitude toward those who have personal scruples regarding morality and holiness. As a result, they are still plagued with moral problems themselves. Even though they may have been involved with the church for decades, sin has still woven itself throughout their lives. Forms of worldly entertainment, addiction, anger, bitterness, sexual sins, and infidelity are present (and even defended) in the lives of their families. This is no surprise, because when a person's theology has

deteriorated, so will his morality.

However, true teachers of the gospel stress the need for holiness. “Having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire” (2 Pet. 1:4). They place no fine line between them and sin—it is a thick boundary. In fact, true teachers are happy to suffer ridicule for their doctrinal and moral standards.

4. He is bold, sacrilegious, and despises authority (2 Pet. 2:10).

“Bold and willful, they do not tremble as they blaspheme the glorious ones.” Thus, the Bible portrays the false teacher as often having a loud, arrogant personality. There’s something about how they speak that says, “I have arrived. I deserve your attention. Where would you be without me? Listen as your ears are graced by my words.” They don’t mind mocking and making light of holy things. Jude comments that they “blaspheme all that they do not understand” (Jude 10).

True teachers of the gospel, on the other hand, are distinctly different. They are humble, affectionate toward those who are lowly, gentle, and have an attitude of patience with others (2 Pet. 1:5-7). Because they model biblical love, they are not “arrogant” or “rude,” nor “do they insist on their own way” (1 Cor. 13:4-7).

5. He says what people want to hear (2 Pet. 2:18).

“For, speaking loud boasts of folly, they entice by sensual passions of the flesh those who are barely escaping from those who live in error.” Whether he realizes it or not, the false teacher is more concerned with addressing the felt needs of others rather than their real needs. He asks, “What do people want to hear? What will appeal to their animal instincts?” Young Christians are especially drawn to this because they lack adequate discernment. They are often drawn to what appeals to the flesh rather than the spirit. There are plenty of people who like these teachers. “Having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions” (2 Tim. 4:3).

With refreshing distinction, true teachers of the gospel ground themselves in God’s Word. “What does the Bible say?” “Let’s study the Bible on this issue.” The Scriptures “will do [us] well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place” (2 Pet. 1:19).

6. He produces shallow spiritual depth (2 Pet. 2:17).

“These are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm.” People are drawn to them. They engage the audience with impressive rhetoric and speech. They make people laugh. They seem smart. They’re witty. They’re smooth. They’re “safe.” But at the end of the day, very little substance has been communicated.

True teachers of the gospel, however, are interested in going deeper into the word of God. Humor, wit, and power will forever be qualities of good public speaking. Yet, what makes a teacher of the truth most impressive is his emphasis on becoming more fruitful “in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 1:8).

7. He will lead you to hell (2 Pet. 2:1).

They will “secretly bring in destructive heresies,” thus “bringing upon themselves swift destruction.” What has happened to the souls in their wake? What is the necessary result of their teaching? Will their words lead us to greater faithfulness or greater indifference? Rest assured, their destruction hasn’t fallen asleep (2 Pet. 2:3).

Something that describes teachers of the truth, however, is their eager expectation of heaven (2 Pet. 1:11). Their message is about preparing people for the Judgment.

How do we protect ourselves?

Don’t be naïve. Peter promises in no uncertain terms that “there will be false teachers among you.” Thus, Christians should read blogs, internet articles, and publications knowing “there will be false teachers among you.” Elders need to scrutinize those who want to identify with the flock of God, knowing “there will be false teachers among you.” It is a fact that there are self-identifying Christians who will do more harm than good.

Knowing false teachers are identified primarily because of content (and not just character), learn the Scriptures. Become so dedicated to the Bible that people almost don’t recognize you without one in your hand. Only by handling the real thing can we spot a fraud.

Some people reject Christianity on the basis that “there are too many hypocrites in the church.” This is a bizarre reason to reject the church. Why should the existence of frauds cause us to lose interest in the real thing? Personally, it is due to the fact that fakes exist that make me even more passionate about the real thing.

Footnotes

1. A point of clarification is in order. If a teacher teaches something that is false, as it relates to that particular false or misleading information, he is a false teacher on that given subject. If everything else he teaches is true, he is a teacher of truth on those subjects. If we hear (or read) someone teaching something that is wrong—barring any evidence of a corrupt character (cf. Matt. 7:6)—we should assume that he is honestly mistaken and be courageous enough to show him or her the truth in a kind, gentle way.