

Church Discipline: Lesson Six

False Teachers

By Benjamin J. Williams

One particular class of heretic is the false teacher. Like all heretics, he serves the god of his belly and is entirely subverted. The distinguishing mark of the false teacher is that he uses a doctrine to accomplish his goals. They are the descendants of the false prophets of old.

False Prophets

A prophet was a mouthpiece of God. He was someone that spoke as God directed. They confirmed their words with signs and by foretelling future events that would later vindicate their prophecy as a whole. However, in the days of the prophets, some men claimed that their messages were from God when in fact they were not. Christ speaks of these men, saying, “Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves” (Matt. 7:15). These men were not men who were honestly mistaken. They did not themselves honestly believe that God spoke to them. They were ravening wolves looking for a following to satisfy their lusts. They used the reverence Jews had for prophets as a guise to gain their following. The false prophet is by definition deceptive. He is not false merely because his prophecy may be false, but because he himself is false and fraudulent in his claims and actions.

To counter this threat, God laid down a set of tests that were to be applied to anyone claiming to be a prophet, including a stiff penalty for the false prophet. The first test was for a sign to come to pass. “But the prophet, which shall presume to speak a word in my name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or that shall speak in the name of other gods, even that prophet shall die. [21] And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we know the word which the LORD hath not spoken? [22] When a prophet speaketh in the name of the LORD, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him” (Deut. 18:20-22). The second test was for all that the prophet spoke to be in agreement with the words of previously confirmed prophets. “If there arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and giveth thee a sign or a wonder, [2] And the sign or the wonder come to pass, whereof he spake unto thee, saying, Let us go after other gods, which thou hast not known, and let us serve them; [3] Thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams: for the LORD your God proveth you, to know whether ye love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deut. 13:1-3).

Of course, false prophets would try to slip by these tests. They would not openly teach rebellion against God’s will. They would subtly deceive the masses into taking small steps toward sin. They also worked false signs like the tricksters of today. Christ warned, “For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if *it were* possible, they shall deceive the very elect” (Matt. 24:24). Consequently, the early Christians were told to try the spirits, a reference to

employing their miraculous gift called the discerning of spirits (I Cor. 12:10) that allowed them to know whether or not a man was truly a prophet. “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world” (I John 4:1).

False Teachers

II Pet. 2:1 But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction.

In our own time, Christians know that a false prophet is a laughable matter. Any man claiming to be a prophet today is a false prophet because the age of miracles and prophecy ended with the completion of God’s word. However, Peter warns that false teachers would be the successors of the false prophets. Instead of claiming to be prophets of God, today’s preaching heretics claim to be sincere teachers of God’s word. Privately, they bring in heresies. Some will claim from the above verse that there was only one heresy and that was the denying of Christ as Lord. However, Peter uses “heresies” in the plural and makes use of that particular doctrine as an example of such.

The character of the false teacher is no different from that of the false prophet. The false teacher is not an honest man making an honest mistake. Like all heretics, he is subverted and condemned of himself. He himself is falsely claiming the office of teacher. A teacher of God’s word wants first and foremost for his students to grow in the knowledge of God’s word. A false teacher wants to fulfill his own interests. “And through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you: whose judgment now of a long time lingereth not, and their damnation slumbereth not” (II Pet. 2:3). The false teacher uses his malleable doctrine to make his followers merchandise for his own gain.

I want to emphasize again that a false teacher is a corrupt person. Everyone will misspeak at some point. Most preachers have put Moses on the Ark before. Sometimes we teach a doctrine that is false and dangerous without even knowing it. An honest teacher will see his error and correct it when it is pointed out to him. A false teacher will ignore reason and teach his error anyway because of what is in it for him.

How to Deal With Them

False teachers are dealt with like any other heretic. They are marked and avoided (Rom. 16:17-18) and are to be admonished no more than twice (Tit. 3:10). John speaks plainly of what this withdrawal entails. “Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. [10] If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into *your* house, neither bid him God speed: [11] For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds” (II John 9-11). The expression “Godspeed” is an old expression meaning that we wish the person good luck in their endeavors. The Greek

simply means to wish good cheer. We are not to encourage the false teacher. We are not to even welcome him into our home. If a preacher of truth needed a place to stay, Christians should open their homes gladly to him, and in so doing partake of his good work. Conversely, if a false teacher needs a place to stay, we do not quarter our enemy or our enemy's servant. The false teacher is a wicked servant of Satan and must be treated as such.

As before with other heretics, there is no command to go privately to the false teacher or even a requirement to go to him at all. The only requirement is to be sure that he is what we accuse him of being. We do not ever wish to accuse an honestly mistaken brother of being a false teacher. If a man will admit to his error when shown the truth, he may correct his error and be received as a brother. If a man will not, he shows his false character and his deceitfulness.

Watch and Be Sober

I Th. 5:5-6 Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness. [6] Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober.

The Bible commands constant watchfulness, but many of our own brethren have fallen spiritually asleep. They would not know a false teacher if he sat in their laps. They no longer love their brethren enough to practice proper church discipline. They no longer love the church enough to mark heretics and avoid them. They no longer love the truth enough to prevent false teachers from abusing it.

We must wake up. We are to be the children of light and of day. Others may sleep, but we must remain alert. Our Lord has not given us this task forever, but for such a small time as our mortal lives. Will we be as the apostles who could not be alert as their Lord prayed in the garden? Or will we watch and pray with him until his return?