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How to Identify a False Teacher, Part 3

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To identify false teachers, we must understand that they come disguised as true followers of Christ. Exercising discernment, therefore, demands that we examine those who claim to speak God's Word to distinguish who is true from who is false. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught us that one way we distinguish between true and false teachers is by looking at their fruits. What is the product of their lips, their lives, and their leadership? Good fruit indicates someone who is a genuine follower of Christ speaking His Word faithfully. Bad fruit, conversely, exposes someone as a false teacher.

One person present when Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount was the Apostle Peter, and he also gave instructions to help us identify deceivers in the church. Peter knew that his time remaining on this earth was short, so he felt a significant urgency in writing this letter, with the ultimate goal of preserving his readers' faith in the truth of the gospel (2 Peter 1:12-15). However, merely giving a positive exposition of the truth was insufficient for the task. If his readers were to remain faithful to the truth as it is in Jesus, they also would need to be armed with the ability to identify and avoid false teachers who would seek to distort, pervert, and corrupt that truth. Peter, therefore, spent most of chapter two in his letter exposing the characteristics of false teachers. While we cannot cover everything Peter wrote in this chapter, let's consider four of these destructive traits.

First, false teachers are *sneaky*. 2 Peter 2:1 tells us that false teachers introduce destructive heresies *secretly*. Like Jesus warned the disciples in the Sermon on the Mount, Peter urges his readers to realize that false teachers are deceptive by nature. They do not advertise their false teaching, and most of the time they do not place it front and center. False teachers will look for vulnerable members of the church who might be open to false teaching, and they begin to sow the seeds of their false doctrine with them first. They try to keep what they are doing under the shadow of secrecy so as not to be discovered until they have formed their own following. Another tactic they use to hide their destructive heresies is that they seek to add to the truth rather than take away from it. When Peter says that they "secretly introduce heresies," the language used speaks of bringing

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something in addition to something already there. False teachers do not always speak against what is accepted as Christian doctrine, but they sometimes seek to add to what people in the church already believe. They introduce novelty that they claim will only enhance what a Christian practices. By seeking out the vulnerable and pretending to believe the same things the church believes but with a few innovations, false teachers craftily sneak in their destructive heresies, often undetected. Christians need to beware of those who innovate with God's Word or who seek to isolate younger believers as unsuspecting targets.

A second trait Peter mentions is that false teachers are *sensual* (2 Peter 2:2). Sensuality includes sexual immorality, indecent acts, and illicit desires. False teachers tap into what the natural person wants and give divine approval to humanity's sinful desires. Because people naturally desire what God forbids, false teachers have many people who follow them because they give rest to troubled consciences who want to be free from the pangs of guilt but not the power of sin. The rest they give, however, is not the peace of Christ in the gospel that forgives sin and transforms the heart to desire what is holy; it is a false peace that results in destruction. It is reminiscent of the false prophets in the Old Testament who promised peace when there was no peace (Jeremiah 6:14). Furthermore, because false teachers are not regenerate themselves, they are enslaved to lusts and pleasures. Their false teaching not only validates the sinful desires of their hearers but excuses the sinful desires of their own hearts. Those who claim to be teachers of God's Word but who are ensnared in sexual sin and dominated by the lusts of the flesh and the lusts of eyes give evidence that they are false teachers.

Peter also marks false teachers as *self-centered* in verse 3. False teachers talk much of God and heaven but the true desires of their hearts are located on earth. Their hearts are far from the psalmist in Psalm 73, who cried out, "Besides You, I desire nothing on earth" (Psalm 73:25). The false teacher instead would have to confess that he desires nothing in heaven and everything on earth. While they seek to hide their true motivation, the false teacher is driven by a desire to accumulate wealth. He is not in ministry to serve the people of God but to be served, taking the mindset that is diametrically opposed to that of our Lord (Mark 10:45). Because of the false teacher's greed, he exploits the people he falsely claims to serve. The word translated *will exploit* is a word that speaks of engaging in business, and in this context it has the idea of someone who is misrepresenting what he is selling. We might think of an unethical salesman who will say whatever it takes to close the sale and earn a commission. He has no scruples about lying to customers; his only rule is to turn a profit at any cost. The false teacher is not a genuine preacher or teacher of God's people but a salesman, and a predatory one at that. He says what people want to hear to enrich himself with this world's goods.

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A final trait Peter mentions is that false teachers are *self-willed* (2 Peter 2:10). The self-willed person knows no authority but his own. Whatever he wants and is able to do, he does. One way this manifests itself in false teachers is by false teachers being unwilling to submit themselves to the authority of other godly leaders. In the local church, God desires for a plurality of qualified men to serve as overseers and pastors, shepherding His people as a team. The plurality of leadership ensures that each leader has accountability. No fallen human being is above becoming entangled in sin, using poor judgment, or abusing authority, even those who are genuine followers of Christ. Godly leaders recognize their propensity to sin and their inability to assess their own performance objectively. Faithful men of God crave the accountability of other godly men because they know their own weaknesses. False teachers, to the contrary, eschew accountability because they are self-willed. Their heart's desire is not to submit to God's authority and faithfully shepherd the church but to achieve their own selfish desires. They are a law unto themselves. Those who claim to be speaking for God but who refuse to submit to any authority but their own manifest an incriminating trait of false teachers.

These four vices mark false teachers: they are sneaky, sensual, self-centered, and self-willed. While any true teacher might lapse into one or more of these sins periodically, the false teacher is consistently marked by these defects. His life and ministry are characterized by rejecting the authority of God's Word, establishing himself as the authority, and promoting himself for his own wealth and gratification. Furthermore, these rebellious and selfish acts are done secretly to preserve the ruse of authenticity. In time, a person's true character manifests itself. When someone claims to speak for God but manifests these ungodly traits, discerning Christians will mark and avoid such people. Through this exercise of biblical discernment, we will be strengthened by grace to remain firmly established in the truth of God's Word.



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