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## TEN

### **Beware of False Teachers**

According to the New Testament, the outstanding characteristic of a false teacher is his underrating the necessity of holiness, which is reflected by his teaching and personal life. Numerous scriptures bear this out. For example, consider what Jesus taught about false prophets in His Sermon on the Mount:

Beware of the false prophets [or anyone claiming to speak God's word], who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor figs from thistles, are they? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit; but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits. Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness" (Matt. 7:15-23).

Jesus said that false prophets can be known by their fruits, which, within the context of the Sermon on the Mount, are obviously fruits of holiness and

obedience. Jesus said that only those who do the will of His Father “will enter the kingdom of heaven” (7:21). They may have prophesied, cast out demons and worked miracles, but if they practiced lawlessness, He will declare that He never knew them (7:23).

### **A Foreign Grace**

It is not only the fruit of people’s deeds that mark them as false teachers, but also the fruit of their words. If they teach what is contrary to essential New Testament doctrine, they are false teachers.

Of course, no teacher in the church is going to stand up and declare that he is teaching what is contrary to the New Testament. Rather, he will neglect certain important scriptures and twist others to persuade his constituency that he is teaching the truth. This is being done today by many very popular and influential teachers who teach about a grace that is foreign to the Bible. The grace they proclaim is not the true grace that leads to holiness, of which Paul, a true grace teacher, wrote:

*For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age (Titus 2:11-12, emphasis added).*

Rather, it is the false grace that Jude warned about, a grace that has been radically modified into a license to sin:

*Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ (Jude 3-4, emphasis added).*

How is it possible that people who denied the only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ, could have “crept in unnoticed”? The answer is that they were not standing in front of congregations declaring, “I deny Jesus Christ.” Rather, they were denying Jesus Christ through their false teaching about grace, turning it into licentiousness.

Their message could be summarized as follows: “Isn’t God’s grace wonderful? Because our salvation stems from His grace and not from our meritorious works, holiness is not essential for salvation. Because of God’s wonderful grace, adulterers and fornicators who believe in Jesus are saved.”

Forget the scripture that says without holiness, no one will see the Lord (see Heb. 12:14). Never mind that Jesus taught that we will not enter the kingdom of heaven unless our righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, and that it is only those who do the will of God who will enter the kingdom of heaven (see Matt. 5:20; 7:21). Don’t be concerned that He told us to strive to enter by the narrow gate, the only gate to life, and that His true brothers are those who “hear the word of God and do it” (see Matt. 7:13-14; Luke 8:21). Ignore the fact that James taught that faith without works is dead and cannot save us (see Jas. 2:14, 17). Pay no attention to Paul’s warnings that those who practice the works of the flesh will not inherit God’s kingdom (see Gal. 5:20-21). Close your eyes to John’s first epistle, all about the identifying marks of true Christians. And ignore the scores of other scriptures in the New Testament that emphasize these same truths.

“No, we are not like the legalists who emphasize works so much. We have discovered the truth about God’s grace.”

### **Denying the Master**

These false teachers literally *deny* (notice the titles Jude used) the “only *Master* and *Lord*” (Jude 4; emphasis added). Because obedience is, in their minds, optional for those on the way to heaven, Jesus need not be one’s Master and Lord. Thus they deny that He is who He is by their teaching and lifestyles.

To the undiscerning, the slogans of the false grace teachers sound scriptural, taken from Paul’s own writings (and ripped from their biblical context): “We’re

not under law, but grace!" "Praise God for the liberty we have in Christ!" And, "Even if we are faithless, He remains faithful!" Their twisting of Paul's words is as old as Paul's letters. To them and their predecessors, Peter warns:

And regard the patience of our Lord to be salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, *which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction* (2 Pet. 3:15-16, emphasis added).

Peter had more to say about those who distort Scripture to their own destruction. The entire second chapter of his second epistle warns about the "destructive heresies" that false teachers will "secretly introduce...even denying the Master who bought them" (2 Pet. 2:1).

Again, how could any doctrine that denies the Master be *secretly* introduced? Obviously, these false teachers were not publicly proclaiming, "We deny the Master!" No, they were denying the Master by denying the Master's role. They were downplaying the necessity of obedience. Peter wrote that they led people to "follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned" (2:2). These false teachers maintained that one could practice sensuality and be saved. Indulging in the desires of the flesh was perfectly acceptable, even encouraged; thus "the way of the truth" was maligned.

Refuting such grievous error, Peter cited historical examples of God's dealings with the godly and the ungodly. His point is unmistakable: The holy are saved, the unholy are condemned. Holiness is essential:

For if God did not spare angels when they sinned [unholy], but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment; and did not spare the ancient world [unholy], but preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness [holy], with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; and if He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah [unholy] to destruction by reducing them to ashes, *having made them an example to those who would live ungodly thereafter*; and if

He rescued righteous Lot [holy], oppressed by the *sensual conduct* of unprincipled men [unholy] (for by what he saw and heard that righteous man, while living among them, felt his righteous soul tormented day after day with their lawless deeds), then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly [holy] from temptation, and to keep the unrighteous [unholy] under punishment for the day of judgment, and especially those who indulge the flesh in its corrupt desires and despise authority... (2 Pet. 2:4-10, emphasis added).

Agreeing wholeheartedly with Paul, in no uncertain terms, Peter labels those who “indulge the flesh in its corrupt desires” as “unrighteous.” They are heading for hell, whether they claim to be Christians or not.

These false teachers have even lured true believers from the path of holiness; thus they are defiled once again, returning to a spiritual condition that is even worse than before they were first saved:

For speaking out arrogant words of vanity they entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality, those who barely escape from the ones who live in error, promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved. For if after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment delivered to them. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, “A dog returns to its own vomit,” and, “A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire” (2 Pet. 2:18-22).

We gain a better idea of the message of the false teachers from this passage. Peter wrote that they enticed “by fleshly desires, by sensuality,” and promised a freedom that actually resulted in slavery to sin. Their message sounded so much like the messages of the modern false grace teachers who have redefined holiness

as being legalism and obedience as “trusting in works.” “Enjoy the freedom you have in Christ” they proclaim. “Don’t listen to these grace-killers with their lists of dos and don’ts.”

The result is that even true believers are deceived, turn from the narrow path, and begin heading down the broad road to destruction. Thinking that they’ve discovered the grace that Jesus offers and Paul preached, they ignore Jesus’ list of dos and don’ts in the Sermon on the Mount and Paul’s lists of exclusionary sins throughout his epistles.

Note that the believers Peter wrote about had “escaped,” although just barely, from those who “live in error” (2:18) that is, the unsaved. He said the same thing again in the next sentence, declaring that they had “escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2:20). Make no mistake about this. These were not people who were considering becoming Christians. Neither were they false believers. They were people who had been born again and had been living differently than prior to their salvation.

But they were deceived by false teaching that downplayed the importance of holiness and emphasized a false grace. Consequently, they were once again, “entangled” in the “defilements of the world” and “overcome” (2:20). Now their “last state” had “become worse for them than the first” (2:20). Previously they had “known the way of *righteousness*,” but now they had turned away from “the holy commandment” (2:21, emphasis added).

Sadly, so many professing Christians today have *never* “known the way of righteousness,” because they heard a false gospel from the start. They’ve been enjoying their slavery to sin all of their “Christian” lives, thinking they’ve been enjoying the liberty of God’s wonderful grace. In this respect they are different from those about whom Peter wrote. They are not pigs who have returned to the mire after washing; they are pigs who have never left the mire.

### **“Tickle Our Ears, Please!”**

As in Paul’s day, many today flock to listen to false grace teachers who will tell them what they want to hear, just as Paul predicted:

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths (2 Tim. 4:3-4).

Clearly, the time which Paul said will come has arrived. People naturally love to hear the message of God's wonderful love and grace, how their sin has been dealt with by Jesus, how salvation is a free gift, and how it is received by faith and not earned by works, all of which are true. But this is where God's grace begins to be modified.

Today we are told that repentance is only a change of mind that may result in no change of actions. People can believe in Jesus and continue practicing sin. They can be born again and never give any outward indication of the Holy Spirit's indwelling. Christians can be adulterers and fornicators, and we certainly don't want to judge them because we don't know their hearts. Those who maintain that heaven is only for the holy are legalists. Faith without works can save. Those who *don't* do God's will are still heaven-bound as long as they've made a verbal profession of faith in Christ. If a person has faith for one minute of his life, he is eternally secure, regardless of whether he abandons his faith, becomes an atheist, and returns to a life of immorality. Many true Christians are indistinguishable from non-Christians, placed in a special category of believers called "carnal Christians."

These and many lies like them are being propagated to millions of unsuspecting people. Consider the following quotations from some of the most popular teachers in the church today, people whose names are household words in modern Christian circles:

Shortly after that campaign was held, the evangelist that led him to Christ defected from the faith. His family was broken apart. He wandered across the United States like an animal, finally died a drunkard in the gutter of South Chicago....If you have trusted the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior, you are still a child of God. You may deny Him, but He will never deny you.

Is this true? Jesus said, "But whoever shall deny Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 10:33). Additionally, Paul wrote that no drunkard will inherit God's kingdom (see 1 Cor. 6:9-10).

We are saved because at a moment in time we expressed faith in our enduring Lord....Even if a believer for all practical purposes becomes an unbeliever, his salvation is not in jeopardy.

Are we eternally secure in our salvation if we believe for just "a moment in time"? Is that what Jesus meant for us to believe when He said, "He who has believed...shall be saved" (Mark 16:16)? If so, then we must also conclude that if we disbelieve for a moment in time, then our damnation is eternally sealed, because Jesus went on to say, "He who has disbelieved shall be condemned" (Mark 16:16).

This same popular grace teacher, desperate to mold Scripture to accommodate his theology, has actually turned hell into heaven:

Where is this place represented by the "outer darkness" in Jesus' parables? To be in the "outer darkness" *is to be in the kingdom of God but outside the circle of men and women whose faithfulness on this earth earned them a special rank or position of authority.*

The "outer darkness" represents not so much an actual place as it does a sphere of influence and privilege. It is not a geographical area in the kingdom where certain men and women are consigned to stay. It is simply a figure of speech describing their low rank or status in God's kingdom (emphasis his).

Amazingly, this teacher also wants us to believe that "gnashing of teeth"...."does not symbolize pain as many have thought." Rather, it is symbolic for the frustration unfaithful believers will feel in heaven when they realize the rewards they could have earned by earthly obedience:



Just as those who are found faithful will rejoice, so those who suffer loss will weep. As some are celebrated for their faithfulness, others will gnash their teeth in frustration over their own short-sightedness and greed.

We do not know how long this time of rejoicing and sorrow will last. Those whose works are burned will not weep and gnash their teeth for eternity.

Is this all true? When Jesus spoke of the “outer darkness,” was He speaking of a place in heaven where unfaithful and *greedy* Christians will temporarily weep and gnash their teeth out of regret for the rewards they could have earned for themselves? For the obvious answer, see Matt. 8:10-12; 13:24-30, 36-43; 24:42-51; 25:14-30; Luke 13:22-28. And will there be any greedy people in heaven? See 1 Cor. 6:9-10; Eph. 5:3-6.

It is amazing how far some teachers will go to make allowance for Christians to practice grievous sins and still make it into heaven. In reference to Paul’s warning that those who practice the works of the flesh will not inherit the kingdom of God, one popular radio preacher says:

Inheriting the kingdom has to deal with the bonuses that you get in the kingdom. It’s not the same as entering the kingdom. So unless you distinguish between inheriting and entering, you’ll think you’re not gonna get in the kingdom because of these problems [notice he doesn’t even call them *sins*]. But you can lose benefits from the kingdom because of them.

Is this true? Compare 1 Cor. 6:9-10 with 1 Cor. 15:50-54 and Jesus’ words in Matt. 25:34-41.

While Jesus and Paul both stated that adulterers and fornicators will not gain heaven, one very influential television minister says:

But Christians may still lose rewards in heaven. Indeed, we can only wonder what some Christians will feel like and experience on that day when they lose those heavenly rewards because of the spiritually numbing and other consequences of *fornication* or *adultery* while on earth. It will

certainly be an infinitely poor exchange—losing eternal rewards in heaven for a few fleeting moments of sexual pleasure on earth (emphasis added).

Another long-standing radio minister is asked by a listener:

Q. I thought that I was born again when I was fifteen years old. I felt happy and secure in Christ. But over time, sin surely crept in, and I went the downward path. Three marriages, adultery, drinking. Was I born again?

A. The very fact that you were disturbed indicates to me that when you say you were born again at fifteen, you are accurate.

Is the test of authentic salvation a person's guilt? See Romans 2:14-15 for the answer. Are adulterers and drunkards saved? I think you know the answer to that by now.

### **Why Doesn't God Stop False Prophets and Teachers?**

Under the old covenant, there were also false prophets who arose to mislead God's people. They, too, could be known by their fruits. Their lives and lips gave testimony of their inward impurity, and as they downplayed the necessity of holiness, they led people away from whole-hearted obedience to the Lord.

We might ask why God doesn't just stop every false prophet and teacher, or at least somehow silence them when they make unbiblical assertions that turn God's grace into licentiousness. Perhaps the answer is found in the word of God through one of His true prophets, Moses:

If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, 'Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them,' you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; *for the Lord your God is testing you to find out if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You*

*shall follow the Lord your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him.* But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has counseled rebellion against the Lord your God who brought you from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, to seduce you from the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from among you (Deut. 13:1-5, emphasis added).

Could it be that God actually allows false teachers to propagate their false teachings as a means of testing us? What does it say about us when we are attracted to teaching that makes us feel good about our sin and even leads us away from the paths of righteousness? A sobering thought indeed.

What shall the discerning do? Under the old covenant, the discerning were commanded to purge from their midst those who attempted to seduce them “from the way in which the Lord [their] God commanded [them] to walk.” Death was the penalty.

The church, of course, does not have the right of capital punishment, but this does not mean that false teachers should be tolerated by us in the least. They should, at minimum, be lovingly confronted and corrected, in case they might be guilty of error only because of biblical ignorance. Many only parrot what they’ve learned from reading someone’s book. Those who will not cease propagating their heresies should be exposed and not supported in any way so that their “ministries” die (see 3 John 1:9-10). Few would survive long if people stopped giving them money and buying their books and tapes.

You can be certain, however, that no matter what we do, there will be false teachers right up until the end, because the Bible predicts it (see 1 Tim. 4:1-3; 2 Tim. 3:13; 4:3-4). Paul succinctly describes them in a warning to the Roman Christians as being men who *are not slaves* of “our Lord Jesus Christ,” which marks them as being unsaved. Let us beware.

Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances *contrary to the teaching which you learned*, and turn away from them. For *such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ* but of their own

appetites; and by their *smooth and flattering speech* they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting (Rom. 16:17-18, emphasis added).