

The Disease of False Teachers

Our study is about false teachers and our passage is 1 Timothy 6:3-5. I pray the Holy Spirit helps everyone learn how to recognize a false teacher. Some of what Paul says may surprise some because we usually think false teachers are easy to recognize.

For example, if we need to find a new church, we visit different churches and listen to the pastor for a while. As long as we hear things that agree with what we believe, we think the preacher is like a good-looking red apple. Christians often join a church, and then two to three years later discover they made a serious mistake. By the time they discover the pastor is a false teacher, they have established friendships and do not want to leave.

Someone wrote to NeverThirsty once and complained that their new pastor did not believe what their old pastor believed. They felt deceived, and were very upset because his doctrine was different. Why did this occur? The answer is that when the pastor was a candidate, the congregation liked what they saw and heard. He was better than all of the other candidates. They forgot that his doctrine was more important than his teaching skill or his youthful age. Later, they discovered that though he had an appeal like a delicious red apple, he was in reality a bad apple with worms.

CONTENT OF FALSE TEACHERS (v 3). In this study, the apostle gives us four principles about false teachers. The first principle of a false teacher is that the content of their teaching

is false. What do these men and women teach? 1 Timothy 6:3 is our first verse and it says,

If anyone advocates a different doctrine and does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness . . . 1 Timothy 6:3 (NASB)

Immediately, the apostle warns us about the content of false teaching. We are told what to look for in a pastor's teaching.

Teachings of False Teachers are Not Healthy. Paul said they advocate "a different doctrine." The Greek word for "advocates a different doctrine" is *heterodidaskaleo*. It refers to a "teaching of a different kind." So, Paul was concerned about teachings that are unique and do not agree with "sound words."



The Greek word for "sound" is a very interesting word. From it we get the English word "hygiene." The word means "healthy." That is, their teaching is not healthy. Paul was helping Timothy identify an important fact about false teachers.

Their teachings are not healthy.

False Teachers Disagree with Christ. But what did Paul mean by "healthy words"? He gave us two points. First, notice Paul said that "sound words" are those words that agree with what "our Lord Jesus Christ" said. Now it is possible that Paul heard Jesus teach the Sermon on the Mount, perhaps some of the parables, or other teachings. It is also possible that Paul was referring to all that Jesus had told him. For example, in

1 Corinthians 11:23-24, Paul told the Corinthians that Jesus had directly spoken to him. Paul said,

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me." 1 Corinthians 11:23-24 (NASB)

Notice that Paul said, "For I received from the Lord." It is clear the Lord had spoken to him after he was made an apostle. But most likely Paul in verse 3 just referred to all of Scripture. A good example is found in Colossians 3:16. It says,

Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Colossians 3:16 (NASB)

Here it is clear that the "word of Christ" refers to more than just Jesus' teachings. The same is true in Romans 10:17. So, "sound words" refers to all of Scripture.

False Teachers Do Not Produce Godliness. Paul's second point about "sound words" is that they produce godliness. Paul said the same thing in Titus 1:1. In Hosea 4:9 we are told that the believers in a congregation eventually become like the pastor and the leaders of the church. It says,

And it will be, like people, like priest. Hosea 4:9 (NASB)

So if the people are ungodly, that reveals the teaching of the pastor is not healthy. It is not sound. There is also something wrong with the leadership of the church. Other signs of an unhealthy teaching ministry are that the Bible is not taught verse-by-verse and application is the primary emphasis. When this occurs, the teachers and preachers have become the authority and not Scripture. They read the passage of Scripture and then try to motivate the people to action, rather than first teaching the meaning of the text and depending upon the Holy Spirit to convict and motivate the believers to action. The message of Scripture is that the Holy Spirit causes the transformation of lives and not the preacher (1 Corinthians

3:7). Nevertheless, false teachers substitute themselves for the teaching of Scripture.

Some years ago a pastor admitted that he thought that all his congregation needed was himself—one message a week. He believed that he was enough. So, it should not have been a surprise that his congregation was anemic and spiritually immature.

Why Did Paul Give Us This Warning? Now why is Paul writing this warning about false teachers in verses 3-5? The answer is that he had just commanded Timothy in verse 2 to "Teach and preach these principles." When Paul said that, he was referring to everything that he had said in chapters one through five about how the church should conduct itself.

But especially notice chapter one. There Paul had warned Timothy that false teachers are interested in the other doctrines, the sensational, and not the teachings revealed in Scripture (1 Timothy 1:3-7, 18-20). They wanted a following. In chapter four, verses 1-5, Paul warned that some false teachers forbid marriage and urge the believers to abstain from certain foods (1 Timothy 4:1-5). Chapters one and four are two very important examples of false teachers. Notice that someone can be a false teacher and not deny the trinity, the deity of Christ, the virgin birth, the deity of the Holy Spirit, that saving faith is not by works or baptism, the Bible is without error, and the Bible is inspired. A false teacher may not deny these truths, but still teach error. I had the privilege many years ago to accompany a group of students from a Bible institute to a church in Berkeley, California. It was an educational trip. They experienced a worship service that included a biblically accurate sermon. But later the students learned, as a result of talking with the pastor, that he was a heretic. He denied the deity of Christ and the virgin birth!

Some would not consider the acceptance of women pastors to be a false teaching, but Paul did in 1 Timothy 2:11-15. This helps us understand that Paul does not restrict false teaching to just major doctrines. That is, a false teacher is also one who is careless in his or her teaching of Scripture. I do not think Paul would be very happy if someone denied what Paul had written.

John Calvin wrote this about Paul's message,

... there is no ambiguity as to the meaning; for he condemns all those who do not agree with this manner of teaching, although they do not openly and avowedly oppose sound doctrine.¹

Lenski agrees but says this about the modern Christian culture,

The modern indifference to different doctrine is unapostolic.²

The message of Lenski is that the modern church has become tolerant of a wide range of different interpretations of Scripture. We must remember all of these interpretations of Scripture cannot be correct. Surely, one of them is correct, but not all.

So, *How Do We Recognize False Doctrines?* In Acts 20:28-32, the apostle Paul warned the Ephesian elders about false teachers. In verse 31, he told them to be on the alert. Then in verse 32, he said this,

And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace . . .
Acts 20:32 (NASB)

Paul told the Ephesian elders that in order to identify false teachers, they needed to study the Word of God. Jude 3-4, 17 also warns believers to remember the words of the apostles. That is, in order to identify false doctrines, we must study, learn, and remember what Christ and the apostles have taught us. That requires work. 1 John 2:12-14 tells us that spiritual growth requires a knowledge of the Bible. Hebrews 5:11-14 urges every believer to eat the meat of the Word and not milk. The result is a believer who knows and understands the difference between good and evil. Therefore, we must learn the tough parts of Scripture. Only then, can a believer identify teachings that do not agree with the teachings of Scripture and do not produce godliness. Only then can a believer identify a teacher who teaches another doctrine.

CHARACTER OF FALSE TEACHERS (v 4A). In verse 4, Paul now describes the character of false teachers. He says,

He is conceited and understands nothing; but he has a morbid interest in controversial questions and disputes about words . . . 1 Timothy 6:4a (NASB)

Conceited. The first characteristic of a false teacher is that he is “conceited.” The Greek word for conceited is *typhoo*. It literally means “puffed up.” He is like a puff of smoke. The Greek tense implies that he has been this way for a long time. This word teaches us that the false teacher believes he has a great understanding of Scripture even though he has not studied it very seriously. I had lunch with a man one time and during our conversation he informed me that he knew a lot of the Bible. Now he was not a pastor nor was he a false teacher. But he wanted to teach the Bible. But during our conversation, it became obvious that he needed to do a lot more studying. He was a nice man, but he did not understand that he knew very little about the Bible. He is a good example of an individual who was puffed up with the little that he knew. Unfortunately, I am afraid that he was not humbled by the study of the Word of God. A serious study of Scripture will humble a man or a woman, as they discover how much of the Bible they do not know. Scripture reveals that false teachers are conceited (2 Peter 2:18; Jude 16).

Understands Nothing. Next, Paul gives us the second characteristic of a false teacher. He says they “understand nothing.” Because he is puffed up, he knows nothing. 2 Peter 2:12 and Jude 10 agree. Both passages say that they “do not understand” the Bible. That is the result of conceit. They do not think they need to take the time to study, so they don’t. Some are “too busy doing ministry.” They may think that the people in the church or Bible study group are more important than studying the Bible in order to teach it. So, they do little study and then teach. As a result, they are untaught and unskilled in interpreting the Bible. The apostle Peter said it like this,

And regard the patience of our Lord as 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 Peter 3:15-16 (NASB)

1. John Calvin. 1 Timothy. Calvin’s Commentaries Volume XXI. Baker Book House. 1996. p. 153.

2. R. C. H. Lenski. 1 Timothy. Hendrickson Publishers. 1998. p. 697.

Peter says that parts of Scripture are difficult to understand. As a result, the untaught and unstable distort all of Scripture. Why? Because they do not study and may never have submitted themselves to some type of formal education. As a result, some teachers have a shallow grasp of Scripture. Consequently, they emphasize moral platitudes from Scripture, devoid of teaching and explaining the text. People love to hear moral platitudes. Sadly, they do not learn the Bible and the reason for the desired behavior.

Morbid Interest in Controversies and Disputes. The third characteristic of a false teacher is that he has a morbid interest in controversies and disputes. The Greek word for morbid is *noseo*. It means “being sick” or “having a disease.” That is, the false teacher has a disease. Paul has already told us in verse 3 that the false teacher does not agree with the healthy words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the doctrines that produce godliness. He said the false teachers are sick. They are spiritually diseased because they are preoccupied with controversies and disputes.

The Greek word for controversial questions is *zetesis*. It just means “debates.” They love to debate. “Disputes about words” comes from the Greek *logomachia* that means “wars about words,” or “word battles.” They love to fight about words. It is a picture of someone who loves to fight about the unimportant and unnecessary.

A few examples might help to explain what Paul is teaching us. The first example is the modern battle among Christians who claim that Genesis 1 describes the process of evolution. They argue that the meaning of the Hebrew word for day in Genesis 1 is not a twenty-four-hour period, but millions and millions of years. As a result, they pack millions of years into Genesis 1. They forget that death and dying are the result of sin and are not introduced until two chapters later in Genesis 3.

Another example is false teachers who claim biblical prophecies were written after the historical events had taken place; thus they just look like prophecies. Other false teachers accuse the Bible of contradictions in order to discredit it as the Word of God. There are other examples, but that helps us understand what Paul is describing.

THE ILLNESS SPREAD BY FALSE TEACHERS (v 4B-5A). Paul now says the illness of these false teachers spreads. He says that due to their morbid interest in controversial questions and disputes about words, they cause . . .

... envy, strife, abusive language, evil suspicions, and constant friction between men of depraved mind and deprived of the truth
... 1 Timothy 6:4b-5a (NASB)

This is further proof that false teachers are spiritually diseased. I have to admit this is an amazing description of false teachers and it reveals how wicked these individuals truly are. Paul gives us five evil effects they create.

First, they motivate people to be greedy. Their followers crave more things and positions of honor. Second, strife increases among their followers, and then so does abusive language. A better translation is malicious talk or malicious gossip. Fourth, evil suspicions or evil speculations result. Fifth, constant friction follows. The Greek refers to constant rubbing against one another. Lenski says that John Chrysostom, an early church father who was called the golden mouth, thought of the false teachers as “infected sheep, rubbing, and spreading their disease....”

Then Paul says the false teachers have a depraved mind and are deprived of the truth. That is, they are unbelievers and do not know Scripture. So they twist and distort the meaning of Scripture because they cannot understand it. As a result, they argue that Scripture supports the latest cultural definitions of morality, such as homosexuality, women pastors, and abortion. Such teachers have abandoned the truth.

MOTIVE OF FALSE TEACHERS (v 5B). The fourth principle about false teachers is that they have the wrong motive.

... who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. 1 Timothy 6:5b (NASB)

Now Paul tells us why false teachers teach in the church. They do it for gain. False teachers teach due to pride and financial gain. The typical pattern is that as their following increases in size, their pride and financial gain grows. Here Paul emphasizes their greed. They seek money. Some pastors preach about

money constantly. We can understand why this would be the motivation of a false or unbelieving pastor. But the heart of a godly pastor is to serve Christ first and foremost. Money is not the goal.

CONCLUSION. We have discovered that the disease of the false teacher is that he is not really interested in the truth of the Scripture. He is interested in the sensational and in pleasing the people. As a result, his disease spreads to his followers and the congregation is filled with conflict.

In sharp contrast, a godly teacher accurately teaches the Bible. As a result, his teaching is healthy and the people become more godly. The godly teacher labors hard to understand the Bible and explain the meaning of Scripture. He is not interested in pleasing or entertaining the people, but in teaching what God wrote. Listen to what the teacher or pastor teaches and observe the character of his followers. This will help you in evaluating any church, whether you are attending or visiting.