

How Dangerous Are The False Teachers?

Series: Living Godly In A Corrupt World!

by Ron R. Ritchie

A couple of years ago I clipped out of a copy of Readers Digest a multi--page color supplement advertising a certain church that was celebrating its 150th year of existence. The supplement set out the history of the church (which claims to be made up of followers of Jesus Christ), the struggles, the growth pains, and how they had prospered through the years.

Summing up, they listed a number of very positive aspects of their church as an incentive to readers to write to them for further information. While they seldom make comparisons they said, ". . . statistics show that [we] have lower cancer and heart disease rates and greater longevity than much of the rest of the population." The supplement continued, "Not long ago a woman of another faith wrote an article for her church magazine. Mentioning the bursting--at--the--seams growth of [a church of our faith] in a town near hers, she asked, "What have [these people] got?" [We] have a strong moral code with an abhorrence of drugs, homosexuality, abortion, pre-marital sex, infidelity. [We] encourage good--sized families . . . Nothing keeps [us] from being with our children every Monday night. What does devotion to such values do for [us] ? And what do [we] hope to contribute to this world? Peace," the article concluded

This is very dangerous stuff. These people try to give the impression that all is well, that it would be a good idea to join with them. After all, look at all the good things they are for and all the bad things they are against. And look at what they are contributing towards: world peace! A study of the doctrine of this group claiming fellowship with Jesus Christ, however, reveals that they do not believe that Jesus is the Son of God, nor do they believe that He died for the sins of mankind and man is justified by faith in that finished work and nothing besides. You will find instead that they have added to the Scriptures and changed them to fit a new vision which their prophet claims to have received 150 years ago.

The apostle Peter was compelled to deal with similar subtle changes in doctrine back in the first century. That is one of the reasons he wrote his second letter to the Christians in Asia Minor, warning them about the false prophets and mockers who roamed that first century world seeking to mislead followers of Jesus. He had to deal with some dangerous heresies in that day, just as we have to face them in our time.

You know, the most dangerous aspect of the seemingly harmless advertising supplement I just read from is that you can stop using drugs, stop homosexual practices, stop adulterous relationships, stop drinking and using tobacco and be home every Monday night and still go to hell! Jesus said, "Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul. Rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." That is the issue. I'm not putting down these people. They are very nice. I meet them all the time. But we're not talking about people, we're talking about doctrine, about teachers who are bent on destroying the Word of God. They are destroying the lives of men, women and children both here on earth and in eternity.

Jesus said, "No one comes to the Father but through Me." "If you have seen the Father you have seen Me." How could He have said it more plainly? These words must have been in the forefront of Peter's mind as he began to write this letter to Christians who were under attack from both within their churches and without. From within they were pressured by the false teachers who tried to pry them away from their faith in Jesus and by the mockers who denied that Christ would come again in glory. From without they had to submit to the Roman Empire which proclaimed Caesar as god. They were surrounded by the pagan Greek religions which were allowed to freely practice their aberrations, plus a couple of thousand mystery religions complete with their rites and sacrificial systems. Peter was warning that all who forsook the Lord to follow these false teachers would not only experience hell on earth, but the eternal hell of separation from God forever. They would not share hell with their friends, as some vainly imagine today, but rather would live forever alone with

the knowledge that they had refused salvation through Jesus Christ, through him and him alone.

Not a whole lot has changed in the intervening 2,000 years. False teachers still strive to introduce destructive heresies into the church. For example, Sun Myung Moon, the founder of the Unification Church, was raised in a Presbyterian church. Jim Jones, founder of the People's Temple, was raised in a Nazarene church. He once pastored an interdenominational church, and before he founded his own movement pastored a Disciples of Christ church. Moses David, founder of the Children of God, was born to evangelical parents and was a pastor of the Missionary Alliance Church. Victor Paul Weirwille, founder of The Way, was a pastor of the Reformed Church and a professor of New Testament at a leading Christian college. Mary Baker Eddy, founder of the church of Christian Science, was raised in an orthodox Christian home. Charles Taze Russell, the founder of the Jehovah's Witnesses, was raised in an orthodox Christian home and attended orthodox Christian churches. All of these people strayed from the Christian faith as it is taught by the prophets in the Old Testament, revealed in the person of Christ, God incarnate who came and walked among us, and of which his apostles wrote in the New Testament. As a result, we today are reaping the bitter harvest of their heresy and error.

Peter encourages his readers, however, that God is still in control. No one rebels against the truth and gets away with it, he counsels. As we saw last week, here is what he said of them, ". . . their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep" (2 Peter 2:3). He then went on to prove this principle by referring to three incidents from the Old Testament when God acted in judgment: the judgment of the fallen angels (Genesis 6), the judgment of the ancient world which preceded the Flood (also in Genesis 6), and the judgment of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19). From these three illustrations Peter drew out a principle that is both a warning for the false teachers and a light of hope for Christians living in an ungodly, corrupt and violent society.

Here is how we set out that principle: If God is willing to judge angels who have sinned, the ancient world, and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, then you had better believe that present-day false prophets will also be judged. At the same time, regardless of how corrupt the world becomes, or how many false prophets, Christs or teachers appear, the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation. Thus we can be encouraged to go out into our communities as salt and light in the midst of an unenlightened and corrupt generation.

So we discovered that Peter's response to our question, "How should we handle false teachers?" was that the Righteous Judge of all the earth was presently at work, that "their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep." Today we will seek to answer the question, "How dangerous are the false teachers?" To this, Peter replies, first, they are

1. Like Unreasoning Animals

2 Peter 2:12-14:

But these, like unreasoning animals, born as creatures of instinct to be captured and killed, reviling where they have no knowledge, will in the destruction of those creatures also be destroyed, suffering wrong as the wages of doing wrong. They count it a pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are stains and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions, as they carouse with you; having eyes full of adultery and that never cease from sin; enticing unstable souls, having a heart trained in greed, accursed children; . . .

In chapter 2 verses 1 through 3, Peter listed four characteristics of false teachers, calling them morally corrupt, sensual, blasphemous, and greedy. Then in 2:10 he listed five more characteristics. They were, he said, morally corrupt, they despised authority, they were daring, self-willed, and revilers of angelic majesties. Here in these verses we have just read the apostle lists five further characteristics of these people. First, he describes them as "unreasoning animals." His righteous anger seems to have reached a boiling point as he contemplates the destruction caused by the false teachers. We know that animals were created by God to help man by working for him, as food to feed him, as pets, etc. But animals were not given spirits so as to communicate with God. Animals have no sense of conscience, ethics or morals. They function by instinct and have no sense of moral accountability to a Righteous Judge. Back in the days when I raised rabbits I found that rabbits did

two things continually--they ate and they bred. I was constantly feeding them and preparing for the birth of their litters. They were predictable, their actions were so instinctive. That is how Peter describes false prophets--as "unreasoning animals."

One contemporary false prophet, although he is outside the fold of Christianity, certainly acts and speaks in the way the apostle describes. Here is how the Bagwan Rajneesh spoke of Jesus Christ and his followers when he recently broke a four--year silence:

India's free sex guru, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, managed to insult practically everyone from Jesus Christ to Werner Erhart. "Jesus was a crackpot," he said, "He was trying to save the whole world. He could not even save himself." When asked if he thought his followers would commit mass suicide if he ordered them, as did most of the 900 members of the Rev. Jim Jones' People's Temple, he replied, "How could I help them commit suicide? I love them and they love me . . . Jim Jones was a Christian. The whole responsibility of Jonestown is the responsibility of all the Christians from Jesus Christ to the pope of Poland. They teach that all that is beautiful is beyond life in death." (Quoted in the San Francisco Chronicle)

I was interested to read in the last couple of weeks that a number of this man's followers have abandoned him and taken off with a very large sum of money. He now fears that he will be poisoned so he has guards all around him. Those remaining in his commune have begun burning the orange garments they used to wear as well as some of the books they used to hold sacred. ". . . their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep."

As a result of their animalistic lifestyle, "reviling where they have no knowledge," Peter says, "[they] will in the destruction of those creatures also be destroyed, suffering wrong as the wages of doing wrong." William Barclay comments: "If a man dedicates himself to those fleshly pleasures, in the end he so ruins himself in bodily health and in spiritual and mental character that he cannot even enjoy them. The glutton destroys his appetite, the drunkard his health, the sensualist his body, the self-indulgent his character and peace of mind and begins his experience of hell while still on earth."

The second characteristic of false teachers which Peter identifies in this section is that they are "daytime revelers." They are drunken rioters, in other words. They revel and party in luxurious style during the daylight hours, using the money of those who are hard at work. Even the Romans, as decadent as they were, looked down upon this practice. They believed that the daytime should be reserved for working. They did their drinking and partying at night. You can see even today how these false teachers lived. Check out a tailgate party at a Stanford or a 49ers football game. People begin drinking early in the morning, drink right up to and during the game, return to partying after the game and then continue on into the night.

But these false teachers of Peter's day presented themselves as servants of righteousness and joined in the fellowship of believers--the love feasts--seeking to mislead the body. Vicious rumors had been spread abroad about these Christian gatherings. Here is what one contemporary writer, Marcus Cornelius Fronto (100-160 A.D.) wrote about these feasts: "On special days they [Christians] gather in a feast with all their children, sisters and mothers, all sexes and all ages. There, flushed with the banquet after feasting and drinking, they begin to burn with incestuous passions. Then they provoke a dog tied to a lamp stand to leap and bound toward a scrap of food which they had tossed outside the reach of his chain. By this means the lamp is overturned and extinguished and with it the common knowledge of their actions. In the shameless dark, with unspeakable lust they copulate in random unions, all equally being guilty of incest...." When they heard about these incredible rumors, the Christians began to hold their love feasts in the daytime. But the false teachers infiltrated the feasts and continued, as Peter says, to "revel in the daytime," openly and boastfully. Jude said of them, "[they] are hidden reefs in your love--feasts when they feast with you without fear, caring for themselves." The apostle was warning Christians to beware lest they be sunk by these "hidden reefs." Peter says of them, "They are stains and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions, as they carouse with you."

Thirdly, Peter says, they have adulterous hearts: "having eyes full of adultery and that never cease from sin." They lusted after every woman they saw, viewing her as a potential adulteress. But their lust was never satisfied. Reporting on a certain cult, Time magazine in the late 1970's said that couples who wanted to get

married could not do so unless the woman first slept with the leader of the cult. Since he purported to be a "pure man," having sex with him was a form of blood cleansing that supposedly purified both body and soul. As a matter of fact, the marriages of other cultists were considered invalid until the wives had slept with him.

A few years ago while on vacation in Baja I became friendly with a young man who was on vacation with his 12--year--old daughter. We fished together all week and talked mainly about fishing and diving. On the last day of my vacation I asked him why his wife hadn't accompanied him and his daughter on their vacation. He told me he was divorced. They were having marital problems and they went to their pastor in Oregon and shared their situation with him, he continued. Following several visits with this pastor things began looking good for their marriage. But one day when he came home from work he found a note from his wife saying that she and the pastor were so attracted to each other they had decided to run away and get married. The clincher came right away. "Ron," he said, "what do you do for a living?" I said to him, "I don't have the courage to tell you." The hurt in his eyes and in the eyes of his daughter was too much for me. The words of Peter are a chilling reminder, "their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep."

Fourthly, Peter characterizes these false teachers as "enticers." They spend their time, in the apostle's words, "enticing unstable souls." The word means to lure with bait, to seduce the unstable, the weak in Christ. Here we have a picture of the false teachers moving around the Christian communities, like fishermen around a lake, casting one lure after another, trying to entice a "fish" to bite. Although the lures are fake, they look so much like the real thing hungry fish are apt to bite and get hooked. The way to discern whether what they offer is the real thing or not is to listen to what they have to say about Jesus Christ. Don't rely on how they look or how they present themselves (they are often quite charming), but listen to what they have to say.

One evening I was standing outside our church with some men I am training when an older man accompanied by two young men, all of them well dressed, approached us. He asked me if he could speak to one of the pastors of our church. When I told him I was one, he said to me, "We are from a church located down the street. We would like to share with you what we are teaching and invite you to visit us." I felt a surge of anger inside because I knew who this man was. "Let's get this straight," I said, "I can tell from the badge on your lapel that you are a false teacher. Further, God knows that you are a false teacher. I want the men with you to know that, and I want the men with me to know that also." "How can you say that?" he asked me. "Because I've read your literature," I told him, "and it says that Jesus Christ did not come in the flesh, that he is not the Son of God but a son of God, and that you believe in justification by works. Sir, you are a false teacher. You have distorted the word of God."

The fifth characteristic of the false teachers, the apostle says, is that they have "hearts trained in greed." Peter has already talked about their greed (verse 3): "and in their greed they will exploit you with false words." They were morally corrupt liars. Some time ago a certain cult was teaching that it was all right to lie. ("heavenly deception," they called it), especially during fund-raising drives. "If you tell a lie to make a person teeter," they said, "then that is not sin . . . even God tells lies at times. . . ." As a result of their lifestyle, Peter concludes that false teachers stand in the deadly position before God where all men who have rejected Jesus stand, as men who have rejected the way, the truth and the life. They stand as "accursed children" under the wrath of God, children of disobedience, children of Satan.

Keep in mind that there is a great need to love the people who have been deceived by false teachers and cultists. What are they teaching? That should be our question. Don't get angry at them. Remember that Jesus was angry at their teachers, not at those who had been misled. Their leaders were the ones who claimed to know the truth, but they were actually destroying the lives of their followers, not leading them in the way of truth and righteousness. We should be careful, however, to not join in with them merely because they dress well, they have good fellowship together, they don't drink or smoke, etc. Don't be taken in by such lures. The only issue is, what do they say of Jesus Christ?

How dangerous are the false teachers? They are extremely dangerous. Peter says they are like "unreasoning animals," and second, they are

2. Like the Prophet Balaam

2 Peter 2:15-16:

... forsaking the right way they have gone astray, having followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness, but he received a rebuke for his own transgression; for a dumb donkey, speaking with a voice of a man, restrained the madness of the prophet.

"... forsaking the right way they have gone astray. . ."

According to this phrase, it is clear that the false teachers once chose the right way, the way of righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ. But they went astray. As Proverbs 1 4:6 says, they "chose a way that seemed right in their own eyes, the end of which was death." Jesus once said, "Enter by the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction and many are those who enter by it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life and few are those who find it." Jesus was speaking of the way to the Father, how to have eternal life now through him. Yet in every generation since these words were spoken, false teachers have consciously and willfully forsaken the right way and the only Lord who could lead them to the Father. They have "gone astray."

Why did they go astray? Peter tells us, they "followed the way of Balaam. . . who loved the wages of unrighteousness." In other words, they hungered for money rather than godliness. Here Peter reaches back to "Exhibit A," to Balaam, the classic false prophet of Moses' time. The apostle charges that the false prophets of his own time were imitating the prophet of old who sought to commercialize his prophetic gift.

Let us pick up part of this story from the Book of Numbers. First, we will look at the context. Moses was about to lead the Israelites into the promised land after the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. They were traversing the King's Highway towards the land of Moab, on the east side of the Jordan, overlooking the city of Jericho. Moses requested permission from the Amorites to pass through their land but was refused. Instead, the Amorites attacked the Israelites and were wiped out. As Israel arrived in Moab, Balak, the king of the Moabites, heard what they had done to the Amorites. When he saw how numerous the Israelites were he became filled with fear. He sent for Balaam the soothsayer, promising him fortune and fame if he would come and curse Israel. Balaam consulted God and God told him not to do what Balak had requested of him because, he said, Israel was blessed by him. Balak responded by sending a second delegation to Balaam This time God told the prophet to go, but to speak only what God told him to. Numbers 22:21-35 tells us what happened next:

So Balaam arose in the morning, and saddled his donkey, and went with the leaders of Moab. But God was angry because he was going, and the angel of the Lord took his stand in the way as an adversary against him. Now he was riding on his donkey and his two servants were with him. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way with his drawn sword in his hand, the donkey turned off from the way and went into the field; but Balaam struck the donkey to turn her back into the way. Then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path of the vineyards, with a wall on this side and a wall on that side. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, she pressed herself to the wall and pressed Balaam's foot against the wall, so he struck her again. And the angel of the Lord went further, and stood in a narrow place where there was no way to turn to the right hand or the left. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, she lay down under Balaam; so Balaam was angry and struck the donkey with his stick. And the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" Then Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have made a mockery of me! If there had been a sword in my hand, I would have killed you by now." And the donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your donkey on which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I ever been accustomed to do so to you?" And he said, "No." Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way with his drawn sword in his hand; and he bowed all the way to the ground. And the angel of the Lord said to him, "Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out as an adversary, because your way was contrary to me. But the donkey saw me and turned aside from me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, I would surely have killed you just now, and let her live." And Balaam said to the angel of the Lord, "I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the

way against me. Now then, if it is displeasing to you, I will turn back." But the angel of the Lord said to Balaam, "Go with the men, but you shall speak only the word which I shall I tell you." So Balaam went along with the leaders of Balak.

It was during this ride towards Balak that Balaam "received a rebuke for his own transgression for a dumb donkey. speaking with the voice of man restrained the madness of the prophet." As we have just seen in Numbers, as Balaam was riding to Balak's camp, God became angry with him and the angel of the Lord stood in his way as an adversary against him.

Here is the key statement of this section: in order to stop the madness of the prophet in his rebellion against God, the angel of the Lord said to Balaam, ". . . Behold, I have come out as an adversary, because your way was contrary to me" (verse 32). Balaam loved "the wages of unrighteousness," and acted contrary to the will of God. His heart was filled with greed. He was riding toward Balak's camp, hoping that somehow God would change his mind and allow him to curse rather than bless Israel. During his third visit, however, Balaam blessed Israel, prophesied the downfall of Moab and Edom, and also prophesied the coming of the Messiah.

Before he rode off into the sunset, however, Balaam taught Balak this principle: "If you can't get God to change his mind about blessing Israel, then devise a plan to get God's people to change their hearts about God."

Look at Numbers 25:1-3:

While Israel remained at Shittim, the people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab. For they invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. So Israel joined themselves to Baal of Peor, and the Lord was angry against Israel.

Revelation 2:14 says, ". . . Balaam kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit acts of immorality." The Israelites were deceived and became involved in Baal worship while they waited to enter the promised land God became so angry he told Moses, "Take all the leaders of the people and execute them in broad daylight before the Lord, so that the fierce anger of the Lord may turn away from Israel " Twenty-four thousand of the men of Israel who had sexual relations with Moabite women died of a plague.

How dangerous are the false prophets? You can lose your life if you follow them.

Later Balaam lost his life in the battle between Israel and the Midianites (Numbers 3) "Their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep." Balaam will forever be remembered as the false prophet of Israel He spoke the words of God, he blessed Israel, yet he taught Balak how to deceive the people of God, teaching him that if he could not get God to change his mind about his people, he could get the people to change their mind about God. And what about Israel? Her sin was purged. "The Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation."

How dangerous are the false prophets? They can kill you emotionally, they can kill you spiritually, and at times they can kill you physically. Are we to fear them? No, not at all. The God who judges false prophets can protect and rescue those who love him right in the midst of temptation What then is our responsibility? The apostle John tells us in his letter:

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God, and this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world. You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world. They are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit

of truth and the spirit of error.

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