

FALSE TEACHERS

7 MARKS OF A FALSE TEACHER

TIM CHALLIES

No one enriches hell more than false teachers. No one finds greater joy in drawing people away from truth and leading them into error. False teachers have been present in every era of human history, they have always been a plague and have always been in the business of providing counterfeit truth. While their circumstances may change, their methods remain consistent.

Here are seven marks of false teachers.

1 False teachers are man pleasers. What they teach is meant to please the ear more than profit the heart. They tickle the ears of their followers with flattery and all the while they treat holy things with wit and carelessness rather than reverence and awe. This contrasts sharply with a true teacher of the Word who knows that he is answerable to God and who is therefore far more eager to please God than men. As Paul would say, “But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts” (1 Thessalonians 2:4).

2 False teachers save their harshest criticism for God’s most faithful servants.

False teachers criticize those who teach the truth, and save their sharpest criticism for those who hold most steadfastly to what is true. We see this in many places in the Bible, such as when Korah and his friends rose up against Moses and Aaron (Numbers 16:3) and when Paul’s ministry was threatened and undermined by those critics who said that while his words were strong, he himself was weak and unimportant (2 Corinthians 10:10). We see it most notably in the vicious attacks of the religious authorities against Jesus. False teachers continue to rebuke and belittle God’s faithful servants today. Yet, as Augustine declared, “He that willingly takes from my good name, unwillingly adds to my reward.”

3 False teachers teach their own wisdom and vision. This was certainly true in the days of Jeremiah when God would say, “The prophets are prophesying lies in my name. I did not send them, nor did I command them or speak to them. They are prophesying to you a lying vision, worthless divination, and the deceit of their own minds” (Jeremiah 14:14). And today, too, false teachers teach the foolishness of mere men instead of teaching the deeper, richer wisdom of God. Paul knew, “the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” (2 Timothy 4:3).

4 False teachers miss what is of central importance and focus instead on the small details. Jesus diagnosed this very tendency in the false teachers of his day, warning them, “Woe to

you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others” (Matthew 23:23). False teachers place great emphasis on their adherence to the smaller commands even as they ignore the greater ones. Paul warned Timothy of the one who “is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain” (1 Timothy 6:4-5).

5 False teachers obscure their false doctrine behind eloquent speech and what appears to be impressive logic. Just as a prostitute paints and perfumes herself to appear more attractive and more alluring, the false teacher hides his blasphemies and dangerous doctrine behind powerful arguments and eloquent use of language. He offers to his listeners the spiritual equivalent of a poisonous pill coated in gold; though it may appear beautiful and valuable, it is still deadly.

6 False teachers are more concerned with winning others to their opinions than in helping and bettering them. This was another of Jesus’ diagnoses as he considered the religious rulers of his day. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves” (Matthew 23:15). False teachers are ultimately not in the business of bettering lives and saving souls, but of convincing minds and winning followers.

7 False teachers exploit their followers. Peter would warn of this danger, saying: “But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. ... And in their greed they will exploit you with false words” (1 Peter 2:1-3). The false teachers exploit those who follow them because they are greedy and desire the riches of this world. This being true, will always teach principles that indulge the flesh. False teachers are concerned with your goods, not your good; they want to serve themselves more than save the lost; they are content for Satan to have your soul as long as they can have your stuff.

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LESSONS I'VE LEARNED FROM FALSE TEACHERS

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- FALSE TEACHERS ARE COMMON
 - FALSE TEACHERS ARE DECEPTIVE
 - FALSE TEACHERS ARE DANGEROUS
 - FALSE TEACHERS ARE DIVISIVE
 - FALSE TEACHERS GIVE PEOPLE WHAT THEY WANT
 - FALSE TEACHERS ARE NOT INNOCENT
 - FALSE TEACHERS CANNOT TOLERATE THE GOSPEL
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Here are a few lessons I've learned from false teachers.

- **False Teachers Are Common**

When and where there are teachers of truth, there will necessarily be teachers of error.

The first and most fundamental thing I learned about false teachers is that we ought to expect them and be on the lookout for them. They are common in every era of church history. This should not surprise us, since the Bible warns that we are on war footing in this world, and that Satan is on full-out offensive against God and his people. And sure enough, history shows that whenever the gospel advances, error follows in its wake. When and where there are teachers of truth, there will necessarily be teachers of error. Perhaps the most surprising thing about false teachers is that we continue to be surprised by them.

- **False Teachers Are Deceptive**

False teachers are deceptive. They do not announce themselves as false teachers, but proclaim themselves angels of light, people who have access to wisdom others have missed or misplaced. As Denny Burk says, "False teachers typically won't show up to your church wearing a sandwich board saying, 'I am a false teacher.'" Instead they begin within the bounds of orthodoxy and announce themselves only slowly and through their subtly-twisted doctrine. They turn away from orthodoxy one step at a time rather than all at once.

- **False Teachers Are Dangerous**

False teachers are dangerous, and part of what makes them so dangerous is that they will affirm so much that is good and true. They will not deny all of the doctrines upon which the Christian faith stands or falls, but only select parts of it. They draw in the unsuspecting with all they affirm and only later destroy them with all they deny. There is an important lesson: We only know a person when we understand both what he affirms and what he denies.

- **False Teachers Are Divisive**

The church often trusts a smiling false teacher ahead of a frowning defender.

False teachers cause division within the church and often cause division even among true Christians. Because false teachers tend to remain within the church, and because they claim to be

honoring the Bible, they confuse true believers and drive wedges between them. Amazingly, it is often those who stand fast against falsehood who get labeled as divisive. The church often trusts a smiling false teacher ahead of a frowning defender.

- **False Teachers Give People What They Want**

As Paul wrote his final letter to Timothy he warned that the time was coming when people would not endure sound teaching (and hence, sound teachers) but instead they would have itching ears and demand teachers who would satisfy this itch. False teachers do this very thing. Their concern is not for what people truly need, but for what people want. The concern of the Christian is the exact opposite—the gospel does not address what we want, but what we need!

- **False Teachers Are Not Innocent**

False teachers know they are false teachers. This may not be true all the time, and perhaps some false teachers deceive themselves before they deceive others. But I believe most know who and what they are; in fact, I believe most know and delight in who and what they are. They are not naive people who have taken a wrong turn in their theology, but evil people who are out to destroy others. Their attack on truth is far more brazen than we may like to think.

- **False Teachers Cannot Tolerate the Gospel**

False teachers simply cannot tolerate the gospel. At some level and in some way, they will always add to or subtract from the pure and sweet gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. They may affirm the Trinity or inerrancy or the deity of Jesus Christ, **but they will never fully affirm the gospel of the Bible.**

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