



AUGUST 8, 2016

The Surprising Truth About False Teachers



Article by [David Mathis](#) 

Executive Editor, [desiringGod.org](https://www.desiringgod.org)

The question is not whether you ever hear the voice of false teachers. You do — probably every day. The question is whether you can discern which messages are false.

If you watch any television, listen to any radio or podcasts, keep up on the news, or interact at depth with just about anyone in modern society, you are being exposed to some form of false teaching. If you cannot identify any voices you hear as false, it's not because you aren't being exposed, but because you're falling for it in some way.

For most of church history, it took extraordinary energy and effort to influence the masses. Messages had to be copied by hand, and teachers had to travel by foot or horseback. There were no cars or airplanes, and no printing presses, websites, or Facebook pages. But today just about every false teacher has a Twitter account.

How, then, does the church discern true teachers from false ones in a world like ours, where it's easier than ever to spread false teaching?

False Teachers Will Arise

We begin by acknowledging not just the possibility of false teaching, but the certainty of it. We should not be surprised to find false teaching in the church today. Jesus and his apostles are very clear that false teachers will arise. They promise it. As Jesus says,

“False christs and *false prophets will arise* and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But be on guard; I have told you all things beforehand.” ([Mark 13:22–23](#); see also [Matthew 24:24](#))

Likewise, Paul warns the Ephesian elders ([Acts 20:29–31](#)) and his protégé Timothy ([2 Timothy 4:3–4](#)) that false teaching is sure to come (also [1 Timothy 4:1](#) and [2 Timothy 3:1–6](#)). If we had any doubts at this point, Peter joins the refrain to add another voice: “There *will be* false teachers among you” ([2 Peter 2:1](#)).

So, we should not be caught off guard that false teachers have arisen throughout church history and likely have multiplied in our day.

Watch Their Doctrine — and Lives

What we might find surprising — both from Jesus and his apostles — is how revealing the everyday lives of false teachers are about their falseness. They are not just *false* in their teaching, but also in their living.

Beneath their doctrinal error, however subtle and deceptive, we will find ethical compromises in tow. And those don't usually come out overnight; they take time. But they will come. Here's how Jesus prepares us in [Matthew 7:15–20](#):

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.” (see also [Luke 6:43–44](#))

Jesus says it twice so that we won't miss it: *You will recognize them by their fruits*. His warning may sound clear and simple at first, but as we all know, trees don't bear fruit overnight. Eventually, however, the fruit (or lack thereof) will be manifest. And so it is with ethical compromise. What may begin as mere whispers in a private room will soon enough be proclaimed from the housetops ([Luke 12:3](#)). And so Paul instructs leaders not only to pay careful attention to their people and to their teaching, but also to their own lives ([Acts 20:28](#); [1 Timothy 4:16](#)).

No doubt, false teachers may be difficult to recognize *in the moment*. If we don't have access to their personal lives, or their doctrinal compromises haven't yet been manifest publicly in their behavior, we may find it

difficult to know whether they are true. But time will tell. They will be known by their fruit — not the fruit of ministry quantity and numbers, but quality and endurance — and ultimately the quality of their own lives.

Allure of Money, Sex, and Power

In particular, 2 Peter 2 is remarkable in how it fleshes out Jesus’s warning about the fruit of false teaching. Peter has very little to say about compromised teaching, but he gives a litany of descriptions about compromised lives.

Verses 1 and 3 mention the generalities “destructive heresies” and “false words” — which indeed relate to teaching — but then, nothing further in this chapter focuses on their teaching. Everything else is about their lives.

We can boil it down to three essential categories — and all three are about character and conduct, not teaching:

- Pride, or defying authority (verse 10) — verse 1: they deny “the Master who bought them” (also verses 12–13 and 18).
- Sensuality, which typically means sexual sin — verse 2: “many will follow their sensuality” (also verses 10, 12–14, and 19).
- Greed, for money and material gain — verse 3: “in their greed they will exploit you” (also verses 14–15).

Again and again, Peter’s descriptions relate to greed, sensuality, and pride — or *money, sex, and power*. What false teachers throughout history have shared in common is not the specific nature of their doctrinal error, but the inevitability of moral compromise in one of these three general areas.

Another way to see it is that their falseness comes out in sin against themselves, against others, or against God. In their greed, they fleece the flock for material gain. Or in their lust, they compromise sexually (whether fornication, adultery, or homosexuality, which 2 Peter 2 suggests). Or in their pride, they “despise authority” (2 Peter 2:10), and the greatest authority, who upholds all authorities, is God himself.

You Can’t Study All the Counterfeits

If false teaching, then, is not only about what our leaders say and write, but also how they live, how is the church to recognize and expose false teaching today? It’s easy to hear someone’s teaching online or at a large conference, but how can we know their lives are true?

The greatest defense against false teaching is a local church community that knows, enjoys, and lives the word of God — and holds its leaders accountable. Little, if anything, can be done to hold teachers accountable who are far away, but much should be realistic and actionable in the life of the local church.

Our leaders need to be held accountable, and not held in such high esteem that we give them a pass on the normal Christian life. Pastors should be with the people. Shepherds should smell like sheep, because they live

and walk among the sheep, and are not sequestered from the flock. We need pastors who know themselves first and foremost as sheep, and only secondarily as leaders and teachers — pastors who are manifestly more excited to have their names written in heaven than they are to be used as vessels in mighty ministry ([Luke 10:20](#)).

Jesus Will Rescue His Church

But you know what? We can have our systems of accountability (and we should), and we can do our best to watch both the lives and the doctrine of our leaders (and we should), but in the end there is no foolproof human system or effort. This is why [2 Peter 2:9](#), the apex of this chapter on false teaching, serves as such a sweet assurance — “the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials.”

No matter how twisted the teaching, no matter how publicly shamed the church may feel over the exposé of an unethical leader, no matter how dark the days become, no matter how helpless we may feel in guarding gospel doctrine and preserving gospel-worthy lives, we have this great sustaining hope: *Jesus knows how to rescue the godly.*

Jesus is not only the greatest and truest teacher who ever lived, but he also is the great rescuer, who has redeemed us from sin and will keep those who are truly his from soul-destroying error. No matter how small a minority the church becomes, and no matter how fragile we feel, the very one who is both the subject of true teaching and the model of true living is also our life-and-soul-preserver.

As God preserved Noah ([2 Peter 2:5](#)) and rescued Lot ([2 Peter 2:7](#)), so the Lord Jesus will rescue his true people from the false teaching — and false living — of false teachers.