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How do you deal with false teachers?

- I. Recognize their Lies
- II. Cling to God's Truth

(2 Peter 1:20-2:1-3) Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. {21} For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.) But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them-- bringing swift destruction on themselves. {2} Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. {3} In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping.

I expect you saw the news this week. In our nation's capital, a man tries to turn a baseball practice into a killing field. On the other end of the country, another man leaves three dead at a UPS facility. I don't have to tell you that the world we live in is a dangerous place. There are a lot of people who are intent on hurting other people. What do you maybe don't know is that some of the most dangerous people are not the ones holding up a gun, but rather, they're the ones holding up a Bible. They are the ones standing before a congregation of believers and gradually leading them astray. They are the preachers and teachers who, rather than telling people the truth, are telling them what their itching ears want to hear. And the result is something much worse than physical death. The result is spiritual, and ultimately, eternal separation from God.

My friends, that's why God issues the warnings he does. In his Word, God says, "Watch out for false prophets." He says, "Test the spirits." The question is, in order to protect ourselves, in order to protect our families—and really, this is our theme for today—

How are we to deal with false teachers?

Well, God's word offers us the answer. God says:

- I. Recognize their lies
- II. Cling to God's truth

Now, I expect you realize that down through the centuries, there have always been people who have sought to twist, or embellish, or to outright deny God's word, all to serve their own self-centered purposes. In the Old Testament lesson today, you have the example of Ahab's prophets telling the king not what God wanted him to hear, but rather telling him what he wanted to hear. They were false prophets.

In the New Testament, the apostles call out by name those who were teaching false doctrine—people like Hymenaeus and Philetus, Alexander and the Nikolaitans. Saint Paul refers to them with the words, "*Savage wolves will come in among you and not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arrive and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them (Acts 20:29-30).*" In fact here in our text Peter offers a similar warning. He speaks about both the past and the future when he writes, *There were also false prophets among the people, (namely among the children of Israel), just as there will be false teachers among you (namely*

those who are now reading Peter's words). *They will introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Sovereign Lord who bought them. And what's worse, Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute.* In other words, there will be a lot of people who get caught up in the false doctrine these men are peddling, and in the end, they'll give the Christian church a bad name.

The question is, are there any of these false teachers around today? And if so, how do we identify them? Well, as Jesus said in our Gospel reading, *"By their fruit you will recognize them."* (Matthew 7:20). In other words, as human beings, we don't have the ability to read anyone's heart. But we can and must judge their words. If what they teach doesn't line up with God's word, then God calls them false prophets, and so must we.

But now, maybe you're thinking to yourself, "I realize there are false prophets in the world, but I'm not always sure who's who. I mean, aren't there a lot of preachers these days who say that they are preaching "what the Bible says"? Can you give me an example of someone who preaches from the Bible but doesn't speak the truth?"

Okay, you want an example of a modern false prophet? Ok, I'll give you one. Do any of you recognize this face? Raise your hand if you recognize this face. Keep your hands up if you know his name. I won't ask how many of you read his books or watch his sermons. Who is this? Yes, it's Joel Osteen, pastor of the largest Christian congregation in the United States. Each week 42,000 people attend his services. Another 7 million watch his sermons on air and online each week. He's had 7 books on the New York Times best seller list. This man, sometimes called The Smiling preacher, is wildly popular. He's had a powerful effect on a lot of people, including maybe some of you. But I am here to tell you that this man is a false prophet.

But now, again, maybe you are thinking, "Pastor, how can you say that?" Well, don't judge him on the basis of my words. Judge him on the basis of his words. Let me share with you a few quotes from Joel Osteen: 1. *"God wants us to prosper financially, to have plenty of money, to fulfill the destiny he has laid out for us. It's God's will for you to live in prosperity instead of poverty."* This is sometimes referred to as Prosperity Theology, or the Gospel of Health & Wealth. It's the idea that God's will is that every Christian be physically healthy and financially wealthy. It's the idea that the only thing that is keeping you from getting the things you want in life is your own negative thinking.

Another quote from Osteen: *"I can guarantee you that your difficult situation will never improve as long as you stay in a negative frame of mind. But if you'll develop an attitude of faith and expect events to change positively, then at the right time, that situation will turn around."* Osteen teaches that if you really want something from God, just "name it and claim it". He refers to that as the "Word of Faith" or "the Positive Confession". In other words, Osteen is not asking you to confess your sins. He wants you to confess what you expect God to do for you. And in the end it's really up to you to think, speak and achieve the good things you want in life. How does Osteen put it? *"God has already done everything he's going to do. The ball is now in your court, if you want wisdom, if you want to be prosperous and healthy, you're going to have to do more than meditate and believe. You must boldly declare words of faith and victory over yourself and your family."*

My friends, do you see why this man's teaching is so appealing, why it's so popular? First, because he says some things that are true. Financial wealth is a blessing from God. Scripture says in Ecclesiastes 5:19, *When God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil—this is a gift of God.* And yes, God wants us to develop a positive thought life. St. Paul says in Philippians 4:8, *Whatever is*

true, whatever is noble, whatever is right...—think about such things. And God says, “Ask and it will be giving you.” There are a lot of things that Osteen says in his sermons that are true, things that you could agree with. But that's what makes him so dangerous. Because along with those good things, along with it talk about God and faith and prayer, he mixes some real poison. It's like the Kool-Aid that Jim Jones gave to all his followers. It tasted good going down, but in the end it killed them.

What's the poison that Joel Osteen is passing out? What are the lies he's telling? Let me focus on just 3. First, Joel Osteen has found a way to turn the sin of coveting into a Christian virtue. “You want a bigger house? You want a nicer car? Well,” says Osteen, “God wants that for you, too. So stop holding yourself back. Name it and claim it. Put your faith in God to give you what you want.”

Wait a minute. Where in Scripture does God say that he wants you to be wealthy? Or that it's a good thing for you to want to be wealthy? Nowhere! Scripture says just the opposite. How does St. Paul put it? “*People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. (1 Timothy 6:9)*

The second lie that Osteen tells. Osteen downplays, if not openly rejects, the innate sinfulness of man. He believes that everyone is basically good. It's just that sometimes we make poor choices. How does Osteen put it? “*You may make some mistakes, but that doesn't make you a sinner. You've got the very nature of God on the inside of you.*” In other words, in and of yourself, you have the ability to make yourself a better person. You just have to start thinking right. You have to start speaking positively about yourself.

And finally, Lie #3: Osteen promises that if you give your life to Jesus, if you believe with all your heart, then God will give you an “abundant life.” It will give you, as Osteen's book title declares, *Your Best Life Now*. But again, that promise just doesn't line up with what scripture says. God doesn't say that if you are a Christian, your life will be prosperous and carefree. No, quite the opposite. What does the Apostle Peter say? *Dear friends, do not be surprised at the Painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. (1 Peter 4:12)* Or the words of St. Paul in Acts 14:22, *We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.* As proof of that, you need only look at Jesus' disciples. Did any of them strike it rich for following Jesus? Did they all end up living in palaces because they put their faith in God? No, they ended up being persecuted, imprisoned and most of them, killed for their faith in Jesus.

But you see, false prophets like Joel Osteen don't want to tell you what Jesus really says about the Christian Life. You won't hear him quote Matthew 16:24 where Jesus says, “*If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.*” Why not? Why won't Osteen tell you about the Christian's life on this side of the grave? Because Joel Osteen is trying to gain followers by telling them what they want to hear rather than telling them what they need to hear.

And you can be sure that there will be plenty of people who are happy to have Osteen tell them what they want to hear. Isn't that what scripture said would happen? 2 Timothy 4:3-4, *For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.*

My friends, you realize, you and I are not immune to the itching ears syndrome. Satan tempts us to set our sights on earthly treasures, rather than heavenly ones. He tempts us to look to God only for what he can do for us on this side of the grave. The question is, how do we keep

from falling for those temptations? How do we deal with false teachers? I. We need to recognize their lies. And then: II. We need to cling to God's Truth.

And where will we find God's Truth? Well, I'll tell you where we won't find it. We won't find it here, in our own reason. We won't even find it here, in the human heart. No, what does Scripture say? "*The heart is deceitful above all things (Jer. 17:9)* and again, *The sinful mind is hostile to God (Romans 8:7)*. No, if we want to find the truth, we must look away from ourselves, away from what we think, away from what we want. And we must look to what God tells us in his holy, written Word. I'm not talking about the "word" that God revealed to some preacher in a dream. I'm not talking about "what God laid on someone's heart." No, I'm talking about the Holy, inspired, inerrant word that God the Holy Spirit recorded in the pages of Holy Scripture. The Word that originated not in man's heart, but in God's heart. How does St. Peter put it here in our text? *Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (1 Peter 1 20-22)*

My friends, because these words of the apostles and prophets were inspired by God, you can count on them to tell you maybe not what you want to hear, but rather what you need to here. You can count on God's Word to tell you the truth about yourself. To tell you that, by nature, you are a lost and condemned creature, unable to do a single thing to win God's favor. But more importantly, God's Word tells you the truth about your savior Jesus, who lived and died in your place, to make you right with God, to win for you the Father's favor, and when your life in this world comes to an end, bring you safely to his side in heaven. And God's Word tells you the truth about what your life will be like between here and the grave. God doesn't promise that your life will be easy. He doesn't promise that he'll give you the job, or the spouse or the family you always dreamed of. No, what God promises you is that for Jesus' sake, your sins are forgiven. He promises you that for Jesus' sake, you are his precious, blood bought child. He promises that for Jesus' sake, nothing will separate you from his love. My friends, cling to the precious, glorious truth. For then, when the winds blow and the rains come pouring down in life, your faith will not be shaken, for it is built on the rock solid foundation of God's holy Word. God grant it, for Jesus' sake. Amen.