

False Teaching Part 2

²⁰ If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— ²¹ “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch”
²² (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings?
²³ These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

Last time I preached we played the “Who am I” game. Do you remember the second person I mentioned? Maybe when I was saying things like “born under a special star” and “didn’t have much education” you thought of our Lord Jesus. But instead of Jesus I was talking about a man named William Branham.

Mr. Branham had one of the very first healing ministries in the early 1940s in America. This relatively obscure person had a strong influence on many other people who continued healing ministries. Branham denied the trinity, the biblical account of the Fall, and he taught a few other non-biblical doctrines. Perhaps the most unique doctrine that developed was the idea that he spoke for God. Many other people since his time have said similar things, but the people that began to follow Mr. Branham’s teachings really believed that he was the “voice of God.” Mr. Branham and his wife died in a car accident in 1965. His followers believe that he will come back to life as part of end-times events.

It is very likely that you have never heard of his followers, but they stick out in my mind because I met them once. When I was in seminary, I had a job cleaning and doing maintenance at a church in Indiana. A group of homeschool families wanted to rent our facility to perform a Christmas play. I thought it was strange because many of the children were named “William” and “Marion.” After speaking to one of the parents, I was told that they all went to the same church, and that most of the parents worked at the same place. They all worked at the publishing warehouse that printed Branham’s sermons and books. They had named their children after **William Marion** Branham. This was obviously a cult, but I had never heard of them before. The truth is that they were all really nice people, but the faith that they confessed, and the teacher they followed, did not match what the Scriptures teach. The thing that really struck me from that experience was that false teaching draws all kinds of people into the net. Mr. Branham’s charisma and powerful speaking convinced a lot of people.

There are many people who fall into the trap of believing and practicing things that are not taught in the Scriptures. Our challenge is that we need to be prepared for the kinds of false teaching that may present themselves to us.

Today I would like to talk about two things we can do to prepare ourselves to detect and avoid false teaching. First, we need to know our own faith well. Second, we need to improve our ability to interpret what we are hearing.

1. If with Christ you died....(v.20)

Let's think about the first point: We need to know our own faith well. This seems so obvious, but we need to take some time to think through what this means.

In Colossians 2:20, it says "If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—" The "if" in this verse is really important for us. If we are in Christ. Paul is appealing to the Colossians sense of identity as Christians. He has been teaching them about what it means to be a Christian throughout this letter. However, in verse 20, Paul does not explicitly go back and rehearse all of his teaching or the teaching that the church has already received. He simply says that "if with Christ you died" then they should know what is at stake in putting themselves under the yoke of these false teachings. Paul's entire argument in this part of the letter to the Colossians is contained in that "if". "IF" you are in Christ then you do not belong to the world and you do not need to go back to the world. False teaching should not have sway over us. However, Paul was concerned for the church in Colossae, and we should be concerned about the state of the church too.

So what have we said thus far? If we are in Christ, we should not go back to the burden of false teaching. But how can we find out if what we are listening to is false teaching or not? Well, first and foremost, does what you are listening to sound like what the Bible teaches about Christ? You see, the focus point of our faith is not on the doing of good deeds or the search for some deeper truth. The focus of our faith is on the person of the Lord Jesus. The focus of our faith is not on our own self-discovery. The focus of our faith is on the Triune God's work. The outward, objective truth of God's existence, character, and work is the basis for what we do. Let's put this another way. How are people taught to recognize false currency? Do you think that people are shown lots of fake copies of 一万円 bills? What would happen if a new fake was made that differed from all the other fakes they had seen before? Simply put, if we want to know what is fake, we need to know what is real. When people are trained to recognize fake money they have to study the real thing.

Think back to what we have been seeing in Colossians 1-2. All of the things that the text plainly teaches we should hold on to. Our Lord Jesus is creator and ruler. He is head of the church. He is our savior. He is the source of all spiritual blessing. He is the rock upon which our faith is built. In Christ, we meet God. In Christ, we are baptized and made alive. In Christ, we are forgiven of all our sins.

This is truly an amazing set of truths and these are only the obvious things from the verses we have already studied together. How much more could we learn from the rest of the Bible? Knowing Christ helps show us the weakness of false teaching. How could we trade Christ and his teaching for someone else's teaching? It makes for a pitiful trade. One more thing before we leave this point. Knowing Christ more deeply is not the task of people with a theological inclination only. This is a task for all Christians. The church bears a large burden for shaping your understanding of who Christ is, but you must also search the Scriptures for yourself. Herein lies a problem. What happens if you don't have the confidence to search the Scriptures for yourself?

I have two encouragements for you. 1. Take advantage of what is called *lectio divino*. This is the idea that just reading sacred Scripture is spiritually beneficial. Most people feel something when they read the Scriptures. However, most importantly when we make the Scriptures a regular part of our daily lives we really get to know the attitude of God on many points. 2. The more you read the Bible, the more comfortable you will be with the ways that the Bible speaks, and the more confident you will be in interpreting the Scriptures.

2. “Ears to hear and eyes to see” (Colossians 2:21-23)

False teaching tends to fall into one of the following two errors: making rules or creating “new” teachings. While we are especially concerned about the ways that false teaching will confront the Christian and the Christian church, you can find these same tendencies in other faiths. Sometimes these innovations are seen as good things, but most of the time it results in something more akin to a cult than the original religion. Because this phenomenon seems universal, we can draw some conclusions. In my experience, false teaching usually begins with good intentions. The motive for creating new rules to follow might be from a desire for assurance and control. Or, there might be a deep desire to know the truth and have wisdom. I am sure you can see these same things in your own life. On the other hand though, we know that Christ is our righteousness and in him we find all we need.

Verses 21-23 say this, “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch” (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings?

These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.” In particular notice what verse 23 says. “These have indeed an appearance of wisdom...but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.” Hidden in the human heart is a desire to know God, but that desire is polluted by our own sin and the evil in the world. We turn away from God to things that appeal to us. We have the propensity to follow our own hearts and distrust God. Because of that, false teaching is everywhere but chiefly it is in your heart.

That is why Jeremiah 17:9 says, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?”

Most likely, you will encounter some form of false teaching at some point in your Christian life. How do we recognize false teaching when we hear it? How should we respond?

First there are some standard things that should make you pay careful attention to what you are hearing. For example let’s think about entertainment, elevating obscure teachings, and changing the meaning of words.

Now, we all like entertainment. We may not all enjoy the same kinds of entertainment, but it is much easier to pay attention to something entertaining rather than something boring. However, entertainment here refers to what happens when we are laughing. Laughter is good medicine. It does good to our souls because it relaxes us, which is normally a good thing. There are times when listening to a sermon or some other teaching, the only thing that you can remember are the jokes or the stories they told. The message is lost in the entertainment. Almost all false teachers were “good teachers”. They have a way of drawing people into their orbit. Even if they can be scary or weird, they always seem to be able to keep people’s attention. So I say to you when you hear someone teach and it seems like this might be the best or deepest teaching you have ever heard, take some time and think back over what they taught. Try to compare it to what you already believe about the Lord Jesus.

Another thing that should make you pay close attention to what you are hearing is when something very obscure is made essential. While there are times when the small details of a biblical passage or theological point are the most important things, most of the time the essential things are the obvious things. Deep meaning is not hidden deep in the biblical texts. It is on the surface for the faithful reader to see. So if you hear detailed arguments about something that is not clearly in the text, pay careful attention. For example, we recently heard a story of someone making a big deal about Jesus spitting on

the blind man's eyes in Mark 8. The teacher was trying to find some significance in the act of spitting on someone's face. The focus of that text is not spit, but that Jesus can heal anyone in any way. In other words, a person may be on to something quite encouraging, but they may also be trying to force their own thinking on the Bible.

Another important way that false teaching comes to us is when the meaning of words changes. Rather I should say that when someone deliberately changes the meaning of words/ideas to make them say something else. This can be something like dividing the meaning of a word or idea into parts that are not present in the Scriptures, or when the meaning of a word or idea is made to mean something different than the way it is used in the Bible. In reality, it isn't very easy to say that our definition of a word or something in theology is *the* biblical one. We need to proceed with humility in all things, but the main point here is when the meaning of something you have heard many times is changed or explained in a new way you should be quick to take note of that change. We do not need to be afraid of hearing something new, but we do want to recognize that we are hearing something new. Let me give you a specific example of a false teaching that tries to change the meaning of a word. In the Mormon church, they say they believe in God. They say that they believe in the same God as all other Christians. However the Mormon definition of God is so different that it would be very difficult to see how the two things could be talking about the same God. Mormons believe that God was once a man. This man lived an exemplary life and is now God. The idea of becoming God is an essential teaching in mormonism, but it is very controversial. Very few Christians would accept the idea that a man became the God that we are following. But they continue to say that they believe in the same God that Christians believe in. You see the word is the same, but the meaning of the word has changed to mean something completely different. Do you think you have ever listened to someone teach in a way that changed the meaning of words?

The truth is that there are many more things we could do to prepare ourselves to evaluate what we are hearing, but if you begin to listen carefully in one or two areas you will likely start being aware of other patterns in the way people communicate. I think that if we really want to protect the teaching of the church and our own spiritual lives we need some help. The best help that I know of is having people you trust to help talk through what you are hearing. Perhaps the most insidious tendency of false teaching is the way that sows seeds of discord in the church. If you hear things that you aren't sure about, find someone to tell. This is not because we want to gossip or check up on people, but because no one is meant to go through life all by themselves. I have many people that I regularly call for help. I am sometimes asked for help too. In this way, I am serving the church and the church is serving me. This relationship is as it should be.

However there are some things that are easy to describe as false teaching. Anything that denies the Trinity, that denies the full humanity and divinity of Jesus, and denies that salvation is in Christ Jesus alone should be seen as unfit for Christian acceptance. You should not be disrespectful, but spending time with people who are denying the things that make up the core of the Christian faith may be hurtful to your soul. To this point, we need to be courageous. We are not called to be timid and submissive to ungodliness. We may be called to suffer, but when the truth of the gospel is at stake we should be quick to search for the truth and demand that no one who teaches depart from the truth. In the event that we have been deceived in the past we need to be humble enough to listen to what people are teaching. But if we see that what is being taught is not in accordance with the Bible, we must take a stand for the truth. We want to imitate our Lord Jesus. He endured suffering for the sake of others, but when his Father's house was being used for ungodly profit he defended God's house with passion and courage. Paul also

said he stood up to Peter on the issue of eating with Gentiles. What I am trying to say is that we must be a good mix of humility and courage. Our goal is not to win arguments or to show how spiritual we are. The goal we have is to believe in Christ Jesus our Lord and to make him known to the world. To that end, we must know Christ. The more intimately we know Christ the easier it will be for us to see where false teaching is coming from. We pray for the Holy Spirit to help guide us and for zeal for the glory of God. Lord Help us. Amen. Let's pray together....