

Living in God's Church Today

Identifying False Teachers

1 Timothy 6:3-10

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Identifying of False Teachers

Scripture

Paul gave Timothy instructions about three groups of people in the church: widows (in 5:3-16), elders (in 5:17-25), and slaves (in 6:1-2). Then he turned his attention to a fourth group: false teachers (in 6:3-10). Their presence was a huge problem in the churches in Ephesus. Paul showed Timothy how to identify false teachers in the church.

Let us read about identifying false teachers in 1 Timothy 6:3-10:

³If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, ⁴he 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, ⁵and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain. ⁶But godliness with contentment is great gain, ⁷for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. ⁸But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. ⁹But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.
(1 Timothy 6:1-2)

Introduction

History is replete with deadly pandemics.

For example, you may have heard of the Black Death pandemic of the 14th century. That was a bubonic plague that affected Europe, Asia, and North Africa, and somewhere between 17% and 54% of the global population died. That was the most fatal pandemic recorded in world history.

Another fatal pandemic was the Spanish Flu that went worldwide in 1918-1920. As many as 5.4% of the world's population died during that pandemic.

We are all familiar with our current COVID-19 worldwide pandemic. It is still with us, although hopefully it is abating. So far, 0.3% of the world's population has died during the COVID-19 pandemic.

More deadly than any pandemic is the plague of false teaching that has afflicted the church throughout history. While viruses may kill the body, false teaching kills the soul. We are all familiar with how afraid people were during our current COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, people ought to be utterly terrified of false teaching because of its eternally deadly effects.

Pathologists study the causes and effects of disease. They are specialists who study what causes pandemics and its effects on people.

Every church elder needs to be a spiritual pathologist. He needs to be able to discern deviations from spiritual health. He needs to be able to diagnose false teaching and combat the errors of false teachers. He does this to shepherd God's people.

Lesson

1 Timothy 6:3-10 shows us how to identify false teachers.

Let's use the following outline:

1. False Teachers Deviate from the Truth (6:3-4a)
2. False Teachers Divide the Church (6:4b-5a)
3. False Teachers Desire Financial Gain (6:5b-10)

I. False Teachers Deviate from the Truth (6:3-4a)

First, false teachers deviate from the truth.

Paul identified three ways in which false teachers deviate from the truth. First, he wrote in verse 3a, **“If anyone teaches a different doctrine.”** The English phrase **“different doctrine”** is only one word in Greek (*heterodidaskaleo*). It is a compound word made up of two Greek words: *heteros*, which means “different” or “other,” and *didaskalos*, which means “doctrine” or “teaching.” The false teachers were teaching doctrine that was contrary to God’s revelation in Scripture.

Second, in verse 3b Paul noted that false teachers deviate from the truth because they do **“not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ.”** The false teachers did not agree with Jesus. They taught doctrine that contradicted the teaching of Jesus.

And third, in verse 3c Paul wrote that false teachers oppose **“teaching that accords with godliness.”** The goal of doctrine is to produce disciples of Jesus who look more and more like him. Believers are to grow in the knowledge and grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18). But rather than teach doctrine that promoted godliness, the false teachers produced sin rather than a life of godliness.

The result of this kind of false teaching that deviates from the truth is that a false teacher, according to Paul in verse 4a, **“is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing.”** The false teacher thinks he is a gifted teacher and that his teaching

is going to change people's lives. Well, his teaching will change people's lives but not for the better. The false teacher is deluded and he does not understand God's truth at all.

One sees this kind of false teaching in theologically liberal churches. They teach a different doctrine. Their teaching does not agree with the sound words of Jesus. And the result of their teaching is godlessness. They approve and endorse sexual orientation and gender identity that is contrary to God's word. False teaching wants to affirm people in their sin instead of calling them to a Biblical standard that is set by God himself. False teaching approves sin rather than confronting it and calling people to repentance. It is no wonder that liberal churches are seeing massive numbers leave the church because there is nothing supernatural and transformative in those churches. They are like the world and there is little difference between such a church and any other social club where people gather for friendship.

So, the first way to identify false teachers is that false teachers deviate from the truth.

II. False Teachers Divide the Church (6:4b-5a)

Second, false teachers divide the church.

Paul went on to write of a false teacher in verses 4b-5a, **“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.”** Paul repeatedly told Timothy that false teachers were contentious.

For example, Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 1:3-4, “As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that

you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith.”

He wrote in 2 Timothy 2:14, “Remind them [the false teachers] of these things, and charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers.”

And he wrote in 2 Timothy 2:23, “Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels.”

And in his letter to Titus, Paul wrote in Titus 3:9, “But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless.”

Paul wanted Timothy to understand that the contentiousness of the false teachers produced disorder and division rather than peace and unity among God’s people. The false teachers did not necessarily intend to divide the church. No doubt they wanted as many adherents as possible to follow their teaching. Nevertheless, all false teaching divides the church.

This is what happened in the Reformation. Martin Luther never intended to see a new and different denomination. He saw false teaching in the Roman Catholic Church, particularly with respect to the doctrine of justification. The Roman Catholic Church taught that one is saved by faith plus works. Luther came to understand that one is not saved by faith plus works but rather one is saved by faith alone. Good works is a fruit or result of saving faith. Initially, he tried to correct the false teaching. But instead of correcting its false teaching, the Roman Catholic Church threw Luther out of the church by excommunicating him. Multitudes followed Luther as he had come to a correct understand of the truth. And many remained

in the Roman Catholic Church. They would not correct their false teaching and the result was a divided church.

So, the first way to identify false teachers is that false teachers deviate from the truth. Second, they divide the church.

III. False Teachers Desire Financial Gain (6:5b-10)

And third, false teachers desire financial gain.

Paul wrote in verse 5b that false teachers imagine **“that godliness is a means of gain.”** John Stott notes of false teachers, “They have no interest in godliness itself, but only if it proves to be financially profitable.”¹ Paul did not say how the false teachers were exploiting godliness for financial gain. However, we do know that the city of Ephesus where Timothy was living was a very wealthy city, in no small part due to trade that the cult of Artemis brought to the city. During Paul’s second visit to Ephesus he ran into difficulties with a silversmith named Demetrius. Paul’s preaching of the gospel resulted in a massive decline in sales of the silver shrines of Artemis (*cf.* Acts 19:24). It is possible that the false teachers were trying to find ways to turn their false teaching into some kind of financial gain since the citizens of Ephesus readily coughed up money for silver shrines.

One group of false teachers today is the prosperity preachers. They prey on people who are struggling financially and would love to get out of financial difficulty. So, they teach their error in such a way that they convince gullible people that God has a way of blessing them financially. Typically, they say

¹ John R. W. Stott, *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 148.

that if one “sows a seed of faith with finances,” then God will multiply that amount given back to the donor. Of course, that does not work. I remember driving to an impoverished community in Ciudad Victoria in Mexico. Next to scores of tiny shacks was a large two-story mansion. It belonged to an American missionary who was a prosperity preacher. He was milking the poor people of their money and they were so gullible that they could not see the massive inequity that was the result of false teaching.

Then Paul wrote in verse 6, **“But godliness with contentment is great gain.”** Godliness carries the idea of “God-likeness,” that is, developing attributes and attitudes that reflect the character of God. Contentment flows from such godliness. Paul used the word **“gain”** in a spiritual sense and not in a financial sense. The gain is peace with God, spiritual joy, assurance of salvation, and the conviction that all things work for the good of those who love God and are called by him (Romans 8:28).

Some years ago, I spent a few days in Haiti. Haiti is considered one of the materially poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere. But even though there was great poverty, it was striking how joyful were many of the Christians. The joy of the Lord seemed to exude from them. I did not speak their language but when they sang, they did so with great joy. They may not have had much materially and financially but their godliness with contentment was evident to me.

Paul wrote in verse 7, **“...for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world.”** Here is the reason why Christians can have a contented attitude. There is no difference between the death of a person with great material wealth and a person with no material wealth. One may have accumulated riches beyond imagination and the

other may have had nothing. Yet when each person dies, they are the same in that they take nothing with them.

Paul went on to say in verse 8, **“But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content.”** Christians should be content with the necessities of life. Paul is not opposed to having great material wealth if God has provided it (see 6:17). He is opposed, however, to an inappropriate desire for material wealth, which springs from discontent.

Our media constantly bombards us with advertising in which the good life is promised to those who have the product being advertised. It is hard to watch the advertisement without thinking that life would be improved and made better if one had that particular product. And yet for Christians, we are to strive to be content with the necessities of life. And should God bless us with greater resources, our goal must be to steward those resources to advance his kingdom.

I once read that John Wesley received an annual income of about 30 pounds per year. He gave 3 pounds per year to the work of the Lord and used the rest to house, feed, and clothe his family. Over the years, his income grew so that toward the later years of his life he made about 80 pounds per year. In those days of low inflation, he still lived on 27 pounds and gave 53 pounds to the work of the Lord. That is the kind of attitude and action that Paul commends.

Paul wrote in verse 9, **“But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.”** The Greek word for **“desire”** (*boulomai*) means to “want strongly.” The false teachers were greedy for more financial gain. Paul warned Timothy that people who are greedy for financial gain will eventually depart from the faith. The gospel and greed are mutually exclusive. Paul was perhaps thinking of

Jesus' teaching when said, "No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money" (Luke 16:13).

In 2019, Costi Hinn wrote a book titled, *God, Greed, and the (Prosperity) Gospel*. Costi is Benny Hinn's nephew. He had a front-row seat to the life and ministry of Prosperity Preacher Benny Hinn. He saw how a false gospel was preying on the poor and needy. Eventually, Costi withdrew from the family "business" as he came to a correct understanding of the gospel and eventually wrote this book that exposed the false gospel that plunged countless people into ruin and destruction.

It is not wrong to have money; we need money to provide for the necessities of life. However, what is wrong is the desire to have more than we need. Satan constantly exploits this desire and it causes untold grief to many.

Paul wrote in verse 10, **"For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs."** In Greek, the expression **"love of money"** (*philarguria*) occurs only here in the New Testament. It is literally "love of silver" and it means "extreme greed for material wealth." Paul saw this as a particular problem of the false teachers. But the principle is universally true for all people. Money itself is not evil since it is a gift from God. Moses told God's people in Deuteronomy 8:18, "You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers, as it is this day." So, the problem is not with money itself; the problem is with "the love of money," that is "extreme greed for material wealth." People who have a love of money have **"wandered away from the faith,"** from the body of

Christian truth. And here is the principle: when gold replaces God, one will not pursue godliness.

It seems to me that the modern-day prosperity teaching of the health and wealth gospel exemplifies Paul's statement in verse 10. The lifestyles of prosperity preachers are lavish and extravagant. Generally, pastors have an income that is roughly equivalent to the median income of the people they serve. However, that is simply not the case with prosperity preachers. Their income vastly exceeds what their parishioners make. But the problem of "love of money" can be a struggle for all Christians, even the poorest among us. May God make us content with what he gives us.

So, the first way to identify false teachers is that false teachers deviate from the truth. Second, they divide the church. And third, false teachers desire financial gain.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the topic of false teachers in 1 Timothy 6:3-10, let us learn to spot the characteristic traits of false teachers and also learn to be content with what we have.

Charles Thomas Studd was one of England's best cricket players in the 19th century. After his conversion to Christ, he decided to become a missionary to China. C. T. Studd came from an extremely wealthy family. And so before he went to China, he gave away his entire fortune to various Christian ministries. He never regretted giving away his fortune. He had learned that godliness with contentment is great gain.

How can we know that same truth? By studying God's truth for ourselves. And by not being duped by false teachers. May God help us to identify false teachers. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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