

False Teachers part 2

2 John 1-13
March 25, 2018



Last week, we took a break from our series on False Teachers because we had some of our True Teachers in town, our Global Partners. In fact, we now have brand new pictures up in our Global Partners' hallway. Please go and take a look. Thanks SO MUCH to Megan Schultz and our Global Connections Team & Decorating Committee! Today, we return to part 2 of our series on False Teachers. We're going to read through John's 2nd letter. Once again, John writes to warn his dear bros/sis in Christ that these false teachers were out and about, spreading heresy and lies in their very own neighborhoods. Please turn in your Bible to 2 John. John introduces himself as simply, "The elder." He addresses his letter to "the lady chosen by God and to her children." This is another way of saying he is writing to one of the local churches in Asia Minor. In the New Testament, the church is sometimes referred to as the Bride of Christ.¹ So, John uses a kind of poetic feminine descriptor, to greet this local church and its membership.

2 John 1-13, "The elder, To the lady chosen by God and to her children, whom I love in the truth—and not I only, but also all who know the truth—because of the truth, which lives in us and will be with us forever: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, will be with us in truth and love. It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us. And now, dear lady, I am not writing you a new command but one we have had from the beginning. I ask that we love one another. And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love. I say this because many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch out that you do not lose what we have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take them into your house or welcome them. Anyone who welcomes them shares in their wicked work. I have much to write to you, but I do not want to use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to visit you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete. The children of your sister, who is chosen by God, send their greetings."

The main point of this letter seems to begin in 2 John 7, "I say this because MANY deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist." The fact that there are "many deceivers" should make us, all the more alert. They were active in John's day and they are active in our day. The fact that they are meddling with the teaching about Jesus should concern us greatly. These aren't minor disagreements about how we decorate the church or which type of music we should use in our services. These are key issues of orthodoxy! 2 John 9 goes on to say, "Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God...." By "runs ahead" John is saying they've left the original teachings of Christianity behind. Rather than continuing in the eyewitness accounts of guys like the Apostle John,² these deceivers are moving away from them. 2 John 10-11 give a clear directive: "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take them into your house or welcome them. Anyone who welcomes them shares in their wicked work." Let's notice that 2 John is the exact inverse of 3 John. Last week 3 John urged strong support for Christian missionaries. However, 2 John now warns against any support for missionaries who are false teachers. John is urging them to use discernment. That's what we are going to talk about today. I ended my sermon 2 weeks ago by asking: Who are the false teachers we should watch out for in

¹ See John 3:29, 2 Corinthians 11:2, Ephesians 5:25-27, Rev. 19:7, 21:2, 9.

² See 1 John 1:1-3.

2018?³ Are there any right here in Bemidji? I told you we'd talk about that today. Some of you may be hoping that I'll publish an official list of all the false teachers within a 50-mile radius of Bemidji. However, that is not my intent this morning. Not only would that be arrogant of me but I'm not sure it would really help us learn to be discerning.⁴ Therefore, instead of trying to make a specific list, let's do a few case studies together and consider how we can practice good discernment. Each of us can then decide for ourselves on a case-by-case basis, as we encounter false teachers in the days to come. Let's look at a few Case Studies together.

CASE STUDY #1 Oprah Winfrey does some amazing humanitarian work. She is highly respected by many people. My goal today is not to disparage her or anyone else we talk about. I'm just asking you to join me in practicing some careful discernment. Two weeks ago, I mentioned the practice of syncretism. This is when we take the original truth of Christianity and blend it with false ideas. Often this is a well-intentioned plan to modernize traditional Christianity and make it more intellectually respectable. That which is new or trending tempts us to make Christianity relevant in today's world. However, rather than supposedly "improving" on God's truth, we fall into heresy. This can happen surprisingly easily to some very nice people. One claim of false teachers today is that "there are many great religions in the world and many different paths to the one true God."⁵ Initially, this sounds really nice and tolerant. But, we need to really think about what they're saying. Oprah is a self-professed Christian. However, when pressed, she is hesitant to say that Jesus is the only way to God. We know this because she got herself backed into a corner on national TV a while back. I apologize for the poor video quality, but I think you'll be able to catch the gist of it. Watch the video at this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=noO_dCWtB1E&t=3s

Three times in a row Oprah declared, "there can't possibly be only one way!" However, Acts 4:12 teaches us that, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved." Again, I don't mean to pick on Oprah today. But this video clip is a potent example for us, of how quickly our culture can cause us to slip away from the truth. At times, Oprah and other people as well have found themselves in a tight corner because of their desire to be inclusive and accepting of other faiths.⁶ It is very appropriate for us as Christians to show respect for people of other faiths and other religions.⁷ But, there are limits to embracing diversity. There is a dividing line we must draw in the sand as Christians. We must hold fast to our understanding of the one true Gospel of Jesus Christ: He alone is the one way to God.⁸ Let's look at another Case Study.

CASE STUDY #2 There are more and more popular "Christian" personalities that are teaching a Prosperity Gospel. The Prosperity Gospel is dangerous because it doesn't consider the whole counsel of God, the complete message of the Bible. It cherry picks only the easiest and most appealing teachings of the Bible and often distorts them to sound even more appealing. It either leaves out or significantly diminishes the challenging, life-changing parts of the Bible. Parts like becoming more like Jesus by dying to self and taking up our cross daily. So, who are these Prosperity Gospel teachers? Now, I realize that some of these names may be well-liked by people reading this sermon. I'm not trying to pick on anyone's particular hero. But, I am asking us to consider their message through a discerning lens. Here are two names that are connected with the Prosperity

³ It's much easier to identify a false teacher when they are antagonistic and openly rally against Christ and His cause. But Satan is far more cunning than that. The Apostle Paul warns about false teachers in 2 Corinthians 11:14-15, "And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve."

⁴ Even if I could publish an exhaustive and accurate list, that list would change over time. Some false teachers will repent and come back to Christian orthodoxy and still other new false teachers will come onto the scene.

⁵ Bahai is probably the best example of this.

⁶ If there are many different paths to the one true God, then apparently Jesus didn't have to come and die for everyone's sin after all, since there are other ways to God and other ways to heaven. This false teaching would suggest that sin isn't really that big of a problem after all, because we can somehow overcome sin without Jesus' help. (Consider this in light of all we learned back in 1 John 1:5-2:2.)

⁷ See 2 Timothy 2:25 and 1 Peter 3:15.

⁸ This video illustrates just how quickly Christians can slip into heresy. We don't want to be labeled a hater. We want to get along with everyone. But, the reality is, following Christ as Lord means that following His teachings will not be popular with everyone. (Consider John 15:18-19.)

Gospel: Joel and Victoria Osteen. The Osteen's may have helped a lot of people. But, our focus is not on the good they've done, but rather on the message that they are teaching about what it means to follow Jesus.

The Prosperity Gospel says in essence "Faith = Success." Because God is our King, every Christian should live like royalty. The focus is on how to have "Your Best Life Now." As we try to discern what they are teaching, some of our concern is regarding what they DO say and some of our concern is what they DON'T say. What they DON'T say is anything about what is unpopular in our culture. You won't hear sermons about sin and hell. We do not hear very much about promoting the supremacy of Christ. We don't learn much from them about being like Christ by being a servant leader and putting others first. What they DO say has a lot of focus on positive self-talk. It's about learning the financial benefits of following Jesus. The focus is on how to get a better life for you. It's about helping, improving, and blessing one's self. It's about how you can be happy, healthy, and wealthy. Not that these things are inherently bad, but they don't paint a comprehensive picture of what it means to truly follow God.

Let's consider this from a historical perspective. Many of the ancient heroes of the faith, suffered for their faith, and faced horrific deaths. Hebrews 11:36-39 says that, "Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated – the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith..." Hebrews 11 paints a very different picture than material prosperity. It disproves this false idea that genuine faith will always lead to a pleasure-filled, life of ease. There is a movie that just came out called "Tortured for Christ." How do we reconcile the amazing faith we see displayed in those who suffer for Christ, with the teachings of the Prosperity Gospel? The answer is: we don't!⁹ Let's look at one more Case Study.

CASE STUDY #3 For our final Case Study, let me just tell you a story. One Monday morning, back in the fall of 2015, I was quietly sitting in my living room enjoying my morning coffee. A car pulled into my driveway but I didn't recognize the people getting out of it. A woman named Karen came to my door with two friends. Before Karen asked me anything about who I was, she asked if I'd like to talk with her about God and the Bible? I responded, "sure." She seemed to have no idea that I was a pastor and didn't even ask if I was a Christian. In fact, I think she just assumed that I didn't know God.

Well, we visited for about an hour and a half and I mostly listened and tried to ask some good questions. When Karen was getting ready to leave, she asked if they could come back again next week. I responded, "sure." I prayed about this throughout the week and then, as expected, Karen pulled into the driveway the following Monday. As it turned out, we ended up meeting with each other over a series of several weeks. Over this time, Karen tried to teach me about Jesus. She insisted that He was not part of the Godhead. She insisted that Jesus was God's first creation but that He did not exist before creation. One of the verses I shared with her is John 17:5, where Jesus says, "And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began." I explained how this reveals the eternity of Jesus and also that He shared in the very glory of God. But no matter how many verses I showed her that proved the opposite of her teaching, she tried to configure a rebuttal for it. Her answers were convincing to her, but not to me.

Karen also taught me about Jehovah's "personal name." She insisted that it was not right to call God Yahweh or Lord or any other name. She claimed it was terrible how the NIV had translated the Hebrew tetragrammaton (YHWH or "יהוה"). This is a particular combination of 4 Hebrew consonants in the Old Testament. The NIV translates it "LORD" in all caps rather than "Jehovah."¹⁰ Her main point

⁹ Consider this from the perspective of Matthew 16:24-25, "Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it." To suggest that our financial prosperity is the proof of how godly we are, is to miss out on all that the Bible teaches about denying ourselves and living modestly. A prosperity message is a slap in the face to millions of desperately poor Christians all around the world. It's a message that their faith just isn't good enough for God. The irony, of course, is that many of the poorest Christians have a faith that puts ours to shame. They are living out very contented and joyful lives even in the midst of having very little in terms of material possessions.

¹⁰ Learn more: *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, notes on Genesis 2:4; Exodus 3:14-15; and Deuteronomy 28:58.

was, “we can’t begin a relationship with God if we don’t know His real name.” Now, I’m no expert on the Hebrew language, but I’ve studied it a little, enough to understand her argument. But her argument was faulty in several key areas. After listening to her patiently, I tried to explain why I disagreed with her. I explained to her that there are many verses throughout the Bible that share many great names for God. He does not limit Himself to just one name or one descriptor. I also explained how the Hebrew Old Testament doesn’t use any vowels, so it would be hard for anyone, to know with certainty, exactly how Jehovah should be spelled or pronounced in English. She was unwilling to bend.

At some point it suddenly struck me: here is a woman who lives right in my community. She is going door to door in MY neighborhood, faithfully every week, teaching people what she was convinced was the truth about God. She was zealous and devoted. She was sincere, but she was sincerely wrong!¹¹ Karen eventually told me that she had been raised Lutheran. But, one day, a Jehovah’s Witness had come by her house and explained to her and her sister how to have a better understanding of the Bible by studying it according to the interpretation of the Watchtower. My heart goes out to Karen, it really does. I still pray for her to come to a right place of right doctrine. But, at the same time, I recognize that she is spreading some very dangerous false teachings. After many weeks of meeting with her, I just couldn’t get through to her. And she was frustrated that she couldn’t get through to me. She sure tried though. I can only assume that Karen continues to spread the false teachings of the Jehovah’s Witnesses to people all around our Bemidji community.¹²

1 John 4:1 warns us, “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because MANY false prophets have gone out into the world.”¹³ Whether it be on our very doorstep or whether it be through our TV screen or over the Internet, false teachers are active in our world today. We need to be alert and we need to know our Bibles well, so that we don’t get sucked in to the false teachings that are all around us.¹⁴ We need to be careful before we automatically buy into anyone’s message. So, Bros/Sis in Christ, we need to be discerning!^{15 16}

*This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on October 22, 2018 by Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson*

¹¹ She never asked me for any money but she did show me lots of compelling and well-produced video clips about her religion. On the surface, they were somewhat convincing.

¹² Over time, I began to realize that Karen wasn’t going to budge. I was wasting my time. I also found out that every time I accepted her “free” literature, I was actually creating more business for the Watchtower because Karen would go out and buy more. So, sadly, as much as I wanted to keep meeting with Karen and trying to help her, I didn’t want to share in her wicked work. To be clear, it’s not that I think Karen is a wicked person. But the work that she was doing door to door was false teaching and that is most certainly wicked work.

¹³ See also 1 John 2:18.

¹⁴ Hebrews 4:12 reminds us, “For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” Brothers and Sisters in Christ, with the help of God’s Word, let’s live out our Christian faith as careful discerners!

¹⁵ We don’t need new truth, we need to remember and put into practice what we already know; allow it to be active in our lives and to impact our daily living. (William Barclay, *The Letters of John and Jude*, Rev. Ed., Westminster, Philadelphia, PA, 1976, p. 66.)

² John 9 summarizes in nicely, “Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.” There is immense value in having pastors at our church be licensed/ordained by the EFCA. It protects pastors from straying from orthodoxy and, as a result, protects our church from veering into heretical doctrine. Pastoral licensing isn’t a guarantee, but it is certainly a great help in guarding against false teaching in churches. (Consider Ephesians 4:11-13 and 1 Corinthians 12:27-31. Also, ponder over Acts 10:38.) That’s not to say that we have to have access to seminary and ordination in order to avoid heresy. As noted above, our ultimate guide into understanding and rightly applying God’s Truth is the Holy Spirit. Consider Ephesians 1:17-19a.

¹⁶ Perhaps some of you noticed the seeming inconsistency in 1 John 2:27, “...you do not need anyone to teach you....” What is John getting at here? This sounds pretty strange. Is it wrong then to have pastors and Sunday School teachers in our church? The short answer is “no.” (See Romans 15:14.) We can be certain of this because of verses like Ephesians 4:11, “So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers” to build up believers. Not to mention, the Apostle John himself is writing this very letter to teach these dear brothers and sisters in the faith. Furthermore, the Great Commission commands us to go and make disciples by “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” What’s going on here is that John is pushing back against the false teachers who were saying they had some special hidden knowledge. They were confusing John’s readers by claiming that the only true way to ultimate, higher knowledge was through the gnostic teachers. Therefore, in 1 John 2:27, “John is not ruling out human teachers” but rather clarifying that the original message of the gospel and the teachings handed down by the Apostles was completely adequate. It was the only reliable truth they needed and they should HOLD FAST to it! (*NIV Study Bible*, 2011, verse 27 footnote on p. 2128. Consider also 1 John 1:1-4.)