

# Beware of False Prophets (Deuteronomy 13)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Deuteronomy

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## I. Background / Review

### a. Why Should Christians Study This Book?

- i. From the apostle Paul: “For whatever things were written before were written *for our learning*, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.” (**Romans 15:4**, NKJV)
- ii. In **Romans 15**, Paul had just quoted from a passage in the Psalms. He then followed up with the statement above, to remind the Christians that everything written in the Old Testament was written *for our learning*.
  1. The things contained in Moses and the Prophets are meant for the *benefit of the Christians*, even more than for the Jews!
- iii. While what we study today may, at first glance, not seem relevant to us, let us take Paul at his word! We may need to dig a little deeper and think a little harder to realize the significance of the text to us today.
  1. Or it may be that the things we read today will be of great benefit to us at some time *in the future*, when we or close friends of ours face some unexpected challenges!
- b. The **Book of Deuteronomy** consists of a few speeches that Moses gave to the Israelites near the end of their 40 years of wandering in the Wilderness. The second of those addresses by Moses began in **Deuteronomy 5** with Moses recounting the Lord giving the 10 Commandments at Mount Sinai.
- c. We will now continue in **Deuteronomy 13**, still in that second speech of Moses.

## II. Do Not Add to, Nor Subtract from, God’s Commands.

- a. Read **Deuteronomy 13:1**, from the LXX [corresponding to **Deuteronomy 12:32** in Bibles based on the Masoretic Text].
  - i. Here Moses repeats the admonition he previously gave in **Deuteronomy 4:2**, namely:
    1. Do not *add to* the commandments given by the Lord, AND
    2. Do not *take away from* any of His commandments.

- ii. As straightforward as this directive is, very few Christian churches today are committed to following this simple instruction.
  - 1. Most churches today err on the side of not teaching, not following, explaining away or just ignoring challenging or counter-cultural teachings of Jesus and the apostles.
    - a. For example, relaxing the moral teachings of Jesus and the apostles related to purity, permanence of marriage, holiness, materialism, etc.
  - 2. On the other hand, the churches that do not fall into that pit, being stricter than the others, make the opposite error by *adding commandments* to what Jesus and the apostles handed down.
    - a. They make these man-made additions, whether added in the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, mandatory for their members to follow.
    - b. Jesus addressed this very tendency (of the religiously strict to go beyond the original faith handed down, and add commands not found in Scripture) in **Matthew 15** and **Mark 7**, regarding his disciples not performing a ceremonial washing of their hands before eating.
- iii. Since we addressed this problem at some length in a prior message in this series, when we were reading **Deuteronomy 4**, we will *not* discuss this important point further in the present lesson.

### III. Beware False Prophets Who Will Come in the Future

- a. Read **Deuteronomy 13:2-6**.
  - i. Note that the admonition to “*put away the evil from your midst*” (**Deuteronomy 13:6**) occurs elsewhere in **Deuteronomy**, and is the principle cited by Paul in **1 Corinthians 5:11-13** regarding why Christians must put immoral people out of the church.
  - ii. Even if a prophet shows a miraculous sign (telling of something unusual that comes to pass), if he calls you to worship other gods, have nothing to do with him!
  - iii. **Question:** Why would the Lord allow someone who was a false prophet, even showing great signs, to rise up among His people?

1. **Answer:** Even if this person is driven by Satan or demonic forces, the Lord would allow this to happen *in order to test His people*.

a. "...for the Lord your God *is testing you* to know *whether you love the Lord your God* with all your heart and with all your soul." (**Deuteronomy 13:4**)

b. Contrary to popular belief, "loving the Lord your God with all your heart and soul" is much more than just a warm feeling. Loving God is *proven by what we do* in a tough situation.

i. Will we obey His commands in the face of great pressure or temptation?

c. Recall how the Lord did this with Abraham, *testing him* by calling him to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac, in **Genesis 22**.

i. Afterward, the angel said that Abraham passed that test by showing he was willing to sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham's response *proved* that he feared God.

b. Read **Deuteronomy 13:7-12**.

i. No sentimentality is allowed. This is a call to love God and reject false prophets and wicked influences, even if doing so requires God's people to turn against their own spouses, brothers, children, or close friends.

1. Jesus would provide similar directives to His followers later on (for example, in **Matthew 10:35-37**); this principle is rooted in what was handed down by Moses.

c. Read **Deuteronomy 13:13-19**.

i. In the future, entire cities may turn against the Lord and follow other 'gods'.

ii. When the Israelites hear a report about things like this, they should investigate to find out whether or not the accusation is true.

1. They should not immediately assume these charges are true.

2. However, if the charge is found to be true, then the discipline commanded by God needs to be applied, *without partiality*.

#### IV. Why This Should Matter to Us – How It Applies Today

a. Read **2 Peter 1:19-2:3**.

- i. Just as there were false prophets among the Israelites in the past, *there will be false teachers among us Christians*, rising up in the church. (**2 Peter 2:1**)

1. Although this passage may be best known for defending the inspiration of Scripture, let us consider the reason Peter brings up that subject. It is in the context of a warning about false prophets.

- ii. The focus of most of this letter, Peter's second one, is warnings against wicked teachers and leaders who will come into the church.

- iii. His admonition to pay close attention to the Scriptures, which are inspired by God and a light shining in a dark place. Doing so is one of the best ways for us to detect and withstand false teachers.

b. What Peter said here is fully consistent with warnings Jesus gave.

i. Read **Matthew 24:3-14**.

1. Jesus warned that *many* false prophets will come, and they will *deceive many*.

ii. Read **Matthew 24:24**.

1. "For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders *to deceive, if possible, even the elect*." (**Matthew 24:24**, NKJV)
2. These people will be crafty deceivers; even some strong Christians will be deceived by them.

iii. Read **Matthew 7:15-23**.

1. In the Sermon on the Mount, one of Jesus' closing commands was to beware that false prophets would come, and even show miraculous signs.

a. There would be *many* of them!

b. "Beware false prophets...*Many* will say to Me in that day...' ...And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'" (from **Matthew 7:15-23**, NKJV)

2. These false teachers will look good and harmless on the outside (as sheep), yet inwardly they are like ferocious wolves.
    - a. This reminds me of the well-known children's story, '*Little Red Riding Hood*'. While the wolf outwardly looked like the kindly grandmother, the girl noticed something rather odd and remarked in a famous line:
      - i. "My, grandmother, what *sharp teeth* you have!"
  3. These false prophets would be known by their fruit.
  4. They would be guilty of practicing *lawlessness* (not following the commands of Jesus).
- c. Several of the other apostles, in addition to Peter, gave warnings similar to those of Jesus, regarding false prophets.
- i. From the apostle John: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because *many false prophets have gone out into the world.*" (**1 John 4:1**, NKJV)
  - ii. Paul to Timothy: "I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For *the time will come* when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, *because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth*, and be turned aside to fables. But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry." (**2 Timothy 4:1-5**, NKJV)
    1. **Question:** What do people's "itching ears" want to hear today? What do they want to hear (in contrast with what they need to hear)? Things like:
      - a. "God loves you just as you are; you don't really need to repent and turn away from your sins."
      - b. "There is no reason to fear God anymore."
      - c. Many popular Christian leaders and teachers will *explain away* the hard or countercultural teachings of Jesus and the apostles.
  - iii. Paul to the church in Thessalonica: "The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying

wonders, and with all unrighteous *deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth*, that they might be saved. *And for this reason God will send them strong delusion*, that they should believe the lie....” (**2 Thessalonians 2:9–11**, NKJV)

- iv. Paul in his farewell to Ephesian elders: “Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, *that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you*, not sparing the flock. Also *from among yourselves* men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.” (**Acts 20:28–31**, NKJV)
  1. ‘Savage wolves’ would come in among the flock. Even from among the elders, men would rise up and draw away disciples after themselves.
  2. Paul had warned them about these things day and night, “with tears”, for three years.
- v. Jude’s short letter is all about warning of wicked men who will come into the church and lead people astray.
  1. “Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. For *certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness* and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ.” (**Jude 3–4**, NKJV)
  2. “...These are spots in your love feasts, while they feast with you without fear, serving only themselves. They are clouds without water, carried about by the winds; late autumn trees without fruit, twice dead, pulled up by the roots; raging waves of the sea, foaming up their own shame; wandering stars for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever.” (**Jude 12–13**, NKJV)
  3. “...These are grumblers, complainers, *walking according to their own lusts*; and they mouth great swelling words, *flattering people to gain advantage*. But you, beloved, remember the words which were spoken before by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ: how they told you that there would be mockers in

the last time who would walk according to their own ungodly lusts.” (**Jude 16–18**, NKJV)

- d. **Question:** How this warning by Peter (and similar ones by Jesus, Paul, John and Jude) are typically treated in churches today?
  - i. These and similar passages are typically ignored, since they don’t fit with the dominant ‘seeker-friendly’ message from modern pulpits. That message often features things like:
    - 1. “Our church is filled with good people”,
    - 2. “All our leaders and teachers are wonderful people you can fully trust”, and
    - 3. “Everyone will have a good life if they simply trust the leaders and follow what they say.”
  - ii. Or, if these uncomfortable passages *are* taught, they are applied to “those other churches” down the street or across town.
    - 1. These passages about ‘false teachers’ pertain to other churches, the ones that have wrong theology.
    - 2. The implication is that this does not apply to ‘good churches like ours’ who hold to X doctrine or practice, or who have such wonderful, inspiring leaders and eloquent teachers.
  - iii. As a result, when it becomes evident that false teachers have crept into our churches, Christians are often shocked, devastated, and completely unprepared.
    - 1. They can reject not only the false teacher, but all other Christian leaders and teachers, and even the faith itself.
    - 2. They feel they were sold a corrupt package and, therefore, decide to *reject it all*. They throw *the entire Christian faith* ‘out the window’ as a result!
  - iv. In sharp contrast to almost all churches today, Jesus and the apostles *warned the church* that false teachers would come into the church; so that they would be *prepared*!
- e. My own experience in the modern Christian world.
  - i. Personally, as a Christian I have been fooled many times by false teachers. Too many times!

- ii. Some of these people were champion-level deceivers. They sounded so good!
- iii. Eventually, the fruit of their lives became evident, and it was indeed rotten.
- iv. Many Christian leaders over the centuries, and right down to the present time, have been corrupted by money or sexual depravity.
- v. Some use flattery to draw people after themselves and their own religious movement, rather than to follow after Jesus Christ.
- vi. Some are corrupted by a desire for position, esteem, power or control over the lives of others.
- vii. It seems that no church group is completely immune to these kinds of people.
  - 1. Even a church that the apostle Paul taught in for three years would experience it.
  - 2. Having correct theology on certain doctrinal points, or modest outward dress and appearance, is no guaranteed protection against false teachers in your church.
  - 3. I have seen this in older churches that boast apostolic succession (Catholics), mainline Protestants, nondenominational mega-churches, charismatic/Pentecostal churches with claims of miraculous signs, 'common property' groups, missionaries in poor countries and Restoration Movement churches. It even happens in conservative plain or Anabaptist type churches

## V. What Can We Do to Avoid This Problem?

- a. **Question:** What do you think we can do to prevent it from happening here or in the groups we belong to?
  - i. **My Answer:** Unfortunately, there does not appear to be any way to *absolutely prevent* this from happening. There is no fool-proof 'vaccine' or 'silver bullet' that offers 100% protection against false teachers entering the church.
  - ii. *Even the apostles* could not prevent this in the churches they founded and influenced.
    - 1. One of Jesus' first teachings on the kingdom of God was that bad people would manage to get into it (Parable of the Wheat and Tares and the Parable of the Dragnet in **Matthew 13**).



2. Satan is active and will sow tares among the wheat before the Master returns. At the same time, God is using this to test us and to find out who really loves him and who is devoted to the truth.
- b. Like wildfires in Southern California (or snowstorms in New England), we know these things will happen, even if we do not know when. It is up to us to be aware and *prepared at all times*.
  - i. We prepare for (expected) natural catastrophes:
    1. **For Wildfires:** Maintain full reservoirs and functioning water mains and hydrants, train competent firefighters, clear out the brush, and mobilize early before fires get out of control.
    2. **For Snowstorms:** Have good tires and car batteries, snow shovels, proper clothing, salt or sand, snow plowing equipment ready, pay attention to weather forecasts, etc.
  - c. Imagine someone moving to New England in the summer, coming from a place where the climate was always warm, completely unaware of what our winters are like here.
    - i. **Question:** What would they think when the weather started to get colder in the fall, and then when it first started to snow?
    - ii. Wouldn't they be inclined to think things like:
      1. "What on earth is *this*?" and
      2. "How come *nobody told me* about this before I moved here?"
    - iii. Meanwhile, the native New Englanders (who are prepared for the snow when it starts falling) would be laughing at them, seeing how foolish and unprepared they were.
      1. Likewise, those who enter the church never expecting to see false teachers and bad leaders are similarly foolish.
      2. Although Jesus and the apostles warned them, they were emotionally and spiritually unprepared for what they would later experience.
  - d. **Question:** What should we do to be *better prepared* for false prophets and false teachers who will come into the church?
    - i. **Answer:** If we study what the Scriptures teach about false prophets and false teachers, we can become better prepared. Here are some of the things we should be doing:

1. The first key is to expect it. While we should not become totally distrustful, we do need to be wise.
2. Don't get fooled by outward appearances (sheep's clothing). Pay attention to the fruit of a person's life, their actions (not just their words).
3. *Study* the false prophets and false teachers of the past, and *learn their characteristics*. Learn how they can be distinguished from true prophets and teachers.
  - a. Balaam was the one false prophet the Israelites had experienced when Moses was writing **Deuteronomy**. Balaam, the archetypal false prophet, was later referred to by Jesus (**Revelation 2:14**), by Jude (**Jude v. 11**) and by Peter (**2 Peter 2:15**) as providing lessons for us.
    - i. Balaam, who "loved the wages of unrighteousness", as Peter pointed out. He was *in it for the money* (a common weakness of false teachers and bad leaders).
    - ii. And as Jesus said, Balaam had led God's people into idolatry and sexual immorality. That points back to the accounts recorded in **Numbers 25** and **Numbers 31:16**, where 24,000 Israelites died (in **1 Corinthians 10:8** it says 23,000 fell "in one day"), all because of Balaam's influence!
  - b. *Sometimes* there can be so many false prophets or false teachers that they *completely outnumber the good ones*!
    - i. In **1 Kings 18:17-19** (designated **3 Kingdoms** in the LXX), Elijah goes up against 450+400 = 850 false prophets who follow Baal and the sacred groves.
  - c. The false prophets and false teachers tend to be a lot more popular than the good ones.
    - i. Paul told Timothy that false teachers would tell people what their "itching ears" wanted to hear. They would appeal to the desires of the flesh (for pleasure, self-importance, pride of life, etc.).
    - ii. They tend to flatter other people, as Jude said.

- d. The *true prophets* speak the word of the Lord, which often is a warning to repent (considered by many to be “bad news” but is, in fact, part of the gospel).
  - i. Wicked king Ahab complained to Jehoshaphat that (after listening to 400 prophets giving them “good news” of victory in an impending battle), he did not want to hear from the one true prophet, Micaiah, “because he does not prophesy good things concerning me, but only bad”. (**1 Kings 22:6-18**, LES; designated **3 Kingdoms** in the LXX).
  - ii. In the time of Jeremiah, a false prophet gave people the “good news” that their captivity would only be for two years. In contrast, Jeremiah gave the “bad news” (the truth) that it would be *70 years* before they returned! (**Jeremiah 23:16-21, 35 and 36** in the LXX)
  - iii. True prophets tell people *what they need*. False prophets tell people *what the people want to hear*.
- 4. Be aware that false teachers and prophets will tend to draw people to themselves or to human-based movements, rather than leading them to Jesus Christ and His word.
- 5. Be aware that false prophets can be champion-level liars and deceivers.
  - a. Their fruit (actions) will reveal who they are on the inside.
  - b. The truth will come out eventually, and they will be dealt with in the end (on the Day of Judgment if not in this life).
- 6. Finally, as Peter admonished us, one of the best things we can do in order to avoid being deceived (or to catch it earlier) is to *heed the Scriptures*, which he described as a light shining in a dark place (**2 Peter 1:19-21**).