

1: Confused

While He was among them, Jesus repeatedly warned His followers that tares would *always* exist among the wheat (Matthew 13:24-30). "*Beware of false prophets*" (Matthew 7:15), He cautioned, "Many will seek to compromise My message. *Take heed that no one deceives you* (Matthew 24:4). *Many will come in My name...do not go after them* (Luke 21:8)."

After His departure, the apostles continued to warn the church that individuals would *continually* come into their midst preaching another Jesus (2 Corinthians 11:4). Even men "*from among yourselves...will rise up, speaking perverse things*" (Acts 20:30), distorting the simplicity of the gospel (2 Corinthians 11:3), seeking to draw disciples after themselves (Acts 20:30).

But despite warnings from Jesus, Paul, and other apostles, untruths infiltrated the church and drew many away. Today, the same "flagrant deceptions [are] accepted as gospel truth"ⁱ, leaving the masses more confused than ever.

And so, our study of John's first epistle begins by exposing the fallacies that plagued the churches to which it was sent (and continue to pervade the church today), while identifying what makes believers vulnerable to such heresies.

In this lesson, we will explore how false doctrines infiltrate the body of Christ, why untruths are so readily accepted, why individuals are easily deceived, and how believers can guard themselves from falling prey to false teachers and doctrines.

Known by Their Fruit

There has never been an age when individuals have not sought to compromise the gospel message. Claiming to speak on God's behalf, false teachers target the vulnerable, cunningly distort the Scripture, and impose their beliefs upon them. But Jesus said, "*You will know them by their fruits*" (Matthew 7:16).

Turn to Matthew 7 and read verses 15-23.

How does Christ describe false teachers per verse 15? What does this indicate about the way false teachers enter the church? _____

On whose behalf do they claim to speak? (v.21) _____

Why are believers often unsuspecting of their intent? (See also 2 Corinthians 11:13-15.) _____

Describe their speech and works according to verses 21-22 of Matthew 7. _____

Jesus stated that a true or false prophet can be identified by their *fruit*— what they *bear* (vv.17-18), bring forth, yield, or produce. Fruit is the external evidence of one's true nature— his inner beliefs, thoughts, motives, and intents. His inner nature is revealed by his words and actions.ⁱⁱ What is produced through a prophet's ministry (the byproduct) can also be defined as fruit. In other words, his inner nature can be seen in the lives of those who heed his teachings.

According to verses 21 and 23 of Matthew 7, what fruit marks the life and ministry of the false teacher? What fruit is likely to be borne by those who heed their teachings?ⁱⁱⁱ Also consider 1 Timothy 6:3. _____

Infiltrated

Turn to the letter of 1st John. False teachers had infiltrated the Asiatic churches, propagating alternative doctrinal, moral, and social beliefs. While some members were able to identify their heretical ideas, others fell prey to their influence and were convinced of their claims.

According to the following verses, what beliefs and behaviors did the false teachers encourage believers to embrace?

1. 1:6 _____
2. 1:8, 10 _____
3. 2:4, 5:2 _____
4. 2:6 _____
5. 2:9-11, 3:10, 15, 4:20 _____
6. 2:15-16 _____
7. 2:23 _____
8. 3:4, 6 _____
9. 3:17 _____
10. 4:1 _____
11. 4:8 _____
12. 5:10-12 _____

How are these beliefs and/or behaviors manifested in the church today? Explain. _____

In short, *doctrinally*, the false teachers taught that as a human it was impossible for Jesus to be sinless, and therefore impossible for Him to be God incarnate.^{iv} *Morally*, they minimized the seriousness of sin. They claimed to have fellowship with God despite their unrighteous behavior. *Socially*, "their teachings resulted in spiritual arrogance,"^v thus negating their responsibility to show love to others.

While the true gospel stands in stark contrast to the claims of the false teachers, these untruths were still accepted within the church. Why do you believe many individuals easily embrace such teachings? _____

Vulnerable

Jesus told His followers that preceding His return there would be an increase in false teachers and doctrines, leaving present-day believers even *more* vulnerable to the acceptance of false teachings. To guard ourselves against the present and coming onslaught, we must identify what makes us susceptible to their lies.

#1 Ignorance of God's Word

Read 1 Corinthians 3:1-3, 14:20, Ephesians 4:11-14, and Hebrews 5:12-14. In these passages, how are the believers described? _____

According to verse 13 of Hebrews 5, why are they easily "*tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine*" (Ephesians 4:14)? _____

What is required to discern between good and evil, true and false doctrine? (Hebrews 5:14) Also read Acts 17:11. _____

When new doctrines are subtly introduced to the church, those who are not "*skilled in the word of righteousness*" (Hebrews 5:13) will accept what *sounds* or *feels* right according to what they know.

Consider this: How did the serpent convince Eve to partake of the forbidden fruit in Genesis 3:1-5? _____

In the same way the serpent *subtly* twisted God's words and questioned His motives in the Garden (Genesis 3:1-5), false teachers use persuasive words and cunning arguments to convince you of their claims. How can quoting the Bible disarm you and deafen you to what else is being said? _____

Read 2 Corinthians 11:3-4.

How well do you know the Bible? If a false teacher approached you in the same way the adversary approached Christ in Luke 4:9-12, could you detect the subtle twisting of God's Word?^{vi}

Have you "left room" in your walk to be deceived? How? What can you do to change this? _____

Romans 16:18 says, "*For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ... by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naïve*" (ESV).

#2 "Hero" Worship

Read 2 Peter 2:1-3. What is the origin of many false teachers? (v.1) _____

Peter warns believers against blindly accepting someone's biblical perspective simply because they fellowship among them or have a relationship with them. How can your affections make you vulnerable to deception? _____

According to verse 2, *why* will individuals believe their heresies? _____

"Because of whom" (v.2). Believers can easily fall prey to false doctrine because they have an elevated view of the teacher. How can an individual's reputation, personality, appearance, or ability deafen listeners to the content they present? _____

Read 2 Corinthians 11:13-15.

Do you readily accept the teachings of those whom you perceive to have more knowledge or better biblical understanding than yourself? Why? _____

Verse 2 of 2 Peter 2 stated that *"many will follow their destructive ways"* (emphasis mine). Is observable popularity or success an indicator that an individual is authentically and correctly teaching the Bible? Consider Matthew 7:13-14. _____

#3 Fleshly Appeal

Continue reading in 2 Peter 2, verses 12-19.

False teachers often allure individuals to accept their claims by appealing to their fleshly inclinations. Per 1 John 2:15-17, what does this include? _____

Why are individuals easily deceived by those who appeal to their pride and desires? _____

Second Peter 2:18 also revealed that individuals are often enticed by teachers who condone their behaviors prior to Christ. Why? _____

According to 2 Timothy 4:3-4. What criteria do many individuals use to select who they will listen to? (Also consider Judges 17:6.) _____

Ultimately, what will occur in the lives of those who follow after teachers who accommodate their lifestyles and personal beliefs? (v.4) _____

Per Proverbs 21:2, Jeremiah 17:9-10, and Hebrews 3:12-15. Why can't you allow your flesh, emotions, or desires to determine truth? _____

#4 False Promises

Second Peter 2:19 began with these words, *"While they promise liberty."* Why are promises of abundance, safety, and well-being enticing to listeners? _____

Isaiah 30:10 says, *"They tell the seers, 'Stop having visions!' They tell the prophets, 'Don't tell us what is right. Tell us nice things. Tell us lies'"* (NLT). According to this verse, what do many people want to hear? (Also see Jeremiah 5:31.) _____

Read Jeremiah 23:16. How will such teachings ultimately harm the listener? _____

#5 Emotional Need

Reread 2 Peter 2:14. What phrase is used to describe those whom false teachers seek to exploit? _____

Why do you believe that unfulfilled emotional or relational needs make a person susceptible to false teachings? How can the need for a sense of belonging blind their eyes to the truth? _____

Why might an individual remain under a teacher they suspect to be false? _____

#6 Supernatural Abilities

Review Matthew 7:22; also read Matthew 24:24 and Exodus 7:8-12, 19-22. Is the ability to perform signs and wonders an indication of God's endorsement? Explain. _____

Why do hyper-spiritual experiences appeal to many believers? _____

Per Matthew 24:24, why might this be the most effective tool of deception used by false teachers? Who is at risk? _____

#7 Access to Many Voices

Online platforms allow a myriad of self-acclaimed religious experts to promote their teachings and opinions on biblical subjects. Per 1 Timothy 1:7, what danger lies in this? _____

How can accessibility to countless “teachers” create confusion and promote the acceptance of false doctrines? _____

How do you select which biblical teachers to listen to? Explain why you should put forth the effort to research the individual and their associations. _____

#8 Societal Pressures

In what ways do you feel pressured to adapt your beliefs to accommodate the world’s ideals? Why are many believers conforming? _____

According to 2 Corinthians 6:14-17, what are they seeking to accomplish? _____

#9 Fear of Others

What do you fear will occur if you choose *not* to adopt the world's beliefs and practices? _____

In Matthew 10:21-39, what did Christ say would occur if you chose to follow Him and adhere to His teachings? _____

In what ways do you seek to avoid or prevent being *treated as your Master* (v.24)—i.e. conflict, ridicule, rejection, persecution, loss of family, friends, or community? Are you willing to endure such treatment to uphold biblical truth? _____

Read Proverbs 29:25 and Galatians 1:10. What do these verses reveal about succumbing to fear? _____

#10 Misplaced Focus

Finally, believers often ignore or excuse a leader's faulty biblical teachings and ungodly behaviors if they support a just cause or advocate for the "greater-good."

How can an overt focus on societal issues cause a Christian to become susceptible to worldly ideals, and forget Christ's primary mission—to save men's souls? _____

How does Colossians 2:8 apply? _____

To which of the ten susceptibilities listed above do you believe you are the most vulnerable? Why? _____

Tragically, untruths are finding their way into our churches and convincing listeners that they can be in fellowship with God, while disparaging Jesus and His Word, and while living a lifestyle that contradicts biblical truth. Just as Jesus predicted, "*Many false teachers [have and] will rise up and deceive many*" (Matthew 24:11).

The believer's greatest defense against false teachers and their deceptive words is to *know* the Word of God. Just as God instructed His people to talk of His words when they sat in their house, walked by the way, when they lied down, and rose up; to bind them on their person, and write them on their doors and gates (Deuteronomy 8:7-9), we would do well to "*give [steady] attention to reading, to exhortation, [and] to doctrine*" (1 Timothy 4:13).

ⁱ Phillips, John.

ⁱⁱ We will study the motives of false teachers and how to identify them in Lesson 10, *Volatile*.

ⁱⁱⁱ The word *follow* in 2 Peter 2:2 means, "metaphorically, to copy after, conform to; to behave in accordance or in agreement with." (Zodhiates, Spiros. 2000. In *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, electronic ed. Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.) Followers imitate their leaders by conforming to their teachings and modeling their behavior.

^{iv} While there is conjecture regarding which group or groups were ultimately responsible for the spread of false doctrine within the Asiatic churches, it is obvious that teachers of Gnosticism had infiltrated its walls and influenced its members.

^v Source unknown.

^{vi} Like the adversary, false teachers often quote the Bible correctly but out of context, thus distorting its meaning. Additionally, they neglect to present God's Word in its entirety to support their claim.