

Explore the Bible: On Guard

November 2, 2016

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for Nov. 20 focuses on 2 Peter 2:1-3 and Jude 16-25.*

At a time of career uncertainty, I decided to attend what was billed as a career seminar. The program was promoted as helping people discover their true skills and interests and helping them get connected to a career doing work they loved and at which they would prosper.

All talk, no personal experience

The seminar was held in a hotel ballroom, with hundreds in attendance. As it turned out, a speaker promoted a certain aspect of successful people and then attempted to get participants to purchase books on that particular subject.

The seminar was free. The books were expensive. It was a typical bait-and-switch approach.

At one point, a speaker delivered a powerful speech on the value of speed-reading. Before the books were offered for sale, a person in the audience asked him if he had learned this skill and if it had helped his career. Although I don't remember his exact words, I remember his answer was so thin, he obviously had not learned the skill he was promoting. He deceptively was offering seminar attendees a skill he did not possess.

When he finished his speech, scores of people rushed to the sales table and purchased books, which was the seminar leader's intent all along. Whether the speed-reading course would help a person read faster or not I never knew. What I saw played out is the false promise of a person offering others something he'd never experienced himself.

False prophets

In every generation since the days of Jesus, one of the issues that has plagued the church has been those who offered spiritual advice or instruction who never experienced the benefits of those things themselves. Peter and Jude both refer to them as false prophets.

A prophet, in Scripture, is not so much someone who foretells the future as it is someone who speaks what he or she claims to be the word of God. Too often, they are successful and even well-paid because they are speaking to peoples' felt needs, or fears or dreams so powerfully that listeners don't pay much attention to the substance of what is said.

The challenge of vetting out false prophets is that they often cloak their message in just enough biblical truth so careless listeners believe them to speaking the whole truth when, in fact, they are barely mentioning truth. Peter also makes it clear their motives are self-centered and not Christ-centered.

It's a danger with which we all live, that of making ourselves the center of our own moral universe. We know just enough Scripture to make ourselves dangerously misleading to the spiritual welfare of others.

Jude gets very specific about those matters that give away false prophets in the church. Their teachings are disruptive in the church. False prophets grumble and complain and behave and teach in such ways that cause division among believers. If one listens carefully, they can hear words that even deny Christ.

Not always easy to spot

Again, these teachers are not always easy to spot—which places yet another responsibility on believers. We are responsible for what we accept as truth, no matter how good the teacher makes things sound.

Too often, in congregations today, fewer and fewer people even bring their own Bibles to church. They are willing to trust absolutely what the teacher says at face value without reading Scripture for themselves.

A colleague once told me how some of his congregants were complaining he didn't read Scripture enough. Even though he based his messages on Scripture, he didn't often read that Scripture directly from the Bible.

One Sunday, he didn't change a thing about the way he preached. The Scripture he was going to quote was included in his sermon notes. However, this one time, he held the Bible open in his left hand throughout the entire message. He never looked at it or read from it during the sermon. He simply held it open. His approach was an experimental biblical sleight of hand.

After the service was over, some of those who had complained came to him and said, "Pastor, that is the most biblical sermon I've ever heard you preach!" Again, there was no more or less biblical content to the sermon. All it took was the pastor holding the Bible to convince his congregation that he was preaching from the Bible. That's a frightening consideration.

We cannot be held accountable for what the teacher teaches. We are accountable for what we choose to believe. We surrender or dodge that accountability at great risk to our spiritual health and the health of our faith communities.

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