

ON GUARD

2 Peter 2:1-3; Jude 16-25

Have you ever seen or had counterfeit money? It is a good possibility that we have come across some counterfeit bills. Unless you are an expert or if it was a poorly printed bill, then you might not even know it. Do you know anyone who bought a fake Rolex watch? I guess you could tell it was a fake when it turned your wrist green. Apparently, there are a lot of fashion items, gadgets and software that are cleverly done copies of famous brands produced in some parts of the world and marketed as the real things.

What harm is there in such practices? We could list many possibilities. A few that come to mind are devaluation of the real thing, failure of the fake item to perform as advertised, safety concerns for products made without proper qualification, damage to health in the case of fake pharmaceuticals, etc. The buyer of the counterfeit item is certainly likely to be paying a lot more than the value received. You may be able to buy a “knock-off” of a \$10,000 Rolex for \$300 but what you wind up with is a \$15 watch. We could say there are two “parties” being harmed by the counterfeiters. The first would be the legitimate provider of what is being counterfeited and the person who “buys” the counterfeit.

It should not surprise us to realize that we can find spiritual parallels to counterfeiting that produce harmful outcomes in the spiritual realm. In fact, most of what the devil does is disguised as a counterfeit of the truth that comes from God. It started in the Garden of Eden and it is going on today. In his first letter, Peter admonished his readers to be alert and he returned to the need for all of us to be guarded against what is counterfeit.

Exposed – 2:1-3; Jude 16

¹ But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. ² Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; ³ and in *their* greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep. 2 Peter 2:1-3 (NASB95)

¹⁶ These are grumblers, finding fault, following after their *own* lusts; they speak arrogantly, flattering people for the sake of *gaining an* advantage. Jude 16 (NASB95)

Again, we see a reminder that those to whom Peter was writing were familiar with the history of Israel. Just as Israel (the people of verse one) had false prophets and suffered the consequences of choosing to follow those rather than the true prophets of God, the church will have counterfeit teachers who will try to lead the people of God in a wrong direction. Peter was obviously making a distinction between prophets and teachers. Many times we tend to think of these two ministries as being the same, however, there are differences.

A good summary statement of the difference is “Prophets are those through whom God reveals truth, while teachers are those who explain the truths of God’s Word.” We can expand on this idea and say that a prophet uncovers a message from God or the meaning of what is happening in life and presents it as a life principle or doctrine. A real prophet declares a doctrine that is true while a counterfeit prophet declares a doctrine that is a facsimile of truth. On the other hand, a teacher takes a life principle or doctrine and applies it to the way we live. A legitimate teacher starts with a doctrine of truth and applies it properly to life. A subtle counterfeit teacher may also start with a doctrine of truth and apply it in a counterfeit or incomplete way to life. An overtly counterfeit teacher will start with a false doctrine and apply it in a way that harms people.

What are the characteristics of false teachers? The first characteristic is being “secretive”

or as stated in verse four of Jude “they creep in unawares.” These people would become part of a local church group and they would have a hidden agenda of introducing a different doctrine or what Peter called destructive or damnable heresies.

The origin of the word heresies is related to making choices. The idea of “secretly or hidden” could also be thought of as a “subtle” suggestion. The false ideas get introduced in subtle ways such as the person suggesting that an alternate choice of a way of thinking about various ideas is an interpretation that they are ready to share. It is usually not a total frontal attack on the truth because people (who are familiar with the truth) would quickly recognize and reject the change. Once an idea has been accepted and several generations of Christian go by, then the new idea becomes generally regarded as the “gospel truth.” Any attempt to return to the original meaning of the Scriptures is then treated as heresy.

How does this happen? As in the Parable of the Tares, it happens while people are asleep. In that parable, the tares were pictured as people whom the enemy had used to contaminate the congregation of God’s people. The same idea would apply to tares being false ideas and doctrines that appear to be innocent when they are just developing but (in the end) are seen to be counterfeit.

In the time of Israel, there were openly pagan prophets which lead people astray. These were like the prophets of Baal which Elijah encountered. We should be able to recognize and effectively counter such blatant error. This would be like people who promote Islam or Eastern religions and their practice. You would think that a nation with our Christian background would not be easily fooled by such false teachings. However, as we know, many are taken in by such lies. There are churches who have exercise programs featuring yoga. Thomas Nelson publishes “Yoga for Christians.” Such practices are in our schools, and it is available at your local YMCA. We can’t have an after school Bible Study but you can practice yoga.

Several years ago, it was not uncommon for LDS missionaries to show up at a church in order to look for prospects. You’ve probably encountered people who knock on your door and offer to give you some free literature and attempt to get you to invite them into your home so they can tell you their ideas about God and Jesus.

What sometimes happens in today’s environment is that we will find churches who call a pastor who has been influenced by liberal theologians who question such things as the virgin birth, the resurrection and the reality of being born again. This can happen if the congregation is made of members who are not aware of what’s going on in such areas. You can also find situations in which people will be eager to teach so they can introduce a particular idea on end-time prophecies or to change the thinking of people in the church to adopt a greater tolerance to alternate lifestyles or other religions. It is not too unusual to hear preachers who have new age terminology interspersed in their sermon material.

A more subtle danger comes from those who seem to be close to the truth but they have a really different understanding of the nature of God and Who Jesus is and that which is commonly believed by most who profess to be Christians.

One particular concern that Peter had was the error that was being introduced concerning the person of Jesus. The error was related to at least four areas regarding Jesus: His uniqueness, His absolute ownership and unlimited power over all creation, His Divinity, and His Supremacy. These errors are still problematic today. New Age teaches that there are many “Christs” who come into the world, that Jesus was not unique. The idea of Christ being Lord of all of creation is challenged by Mormon beliefs that there are different gods who are over various worlds and that each true believing Latter Day Saint will be a god over their own world. The Jehovah Witnesses deny the divinity of Jesus Christ. They say he is Lord but he is not God. The denial

of His supremacy is a problem with most false teachings that are around today.

Those errors are related to the situation Peter mentioned as “denying the Master Who bought them.” When Peter said that these pseudo teachers were “bought by the Master” does that mean they were saved? Apparently, this was not the case, since as we read in 1 John 2:2 “He is the offering for our sins; and not for ours only, but for all the world.” The price that Jesus paid on the Cross was effective and sufficient enough to purchase every human being in the entire world. However, the application of the atonement is limited those who believe and put their trust in what Christ did.

The extent of “ownership” is captured in the Greek word that is translated as either Lord or Master in most Bible versions. The NIV attempts to show this extent in rendering it as Sovereign Lord. The Greek word used is “despotes” from which we get the English transliteration of “despot” which carries a very negative connotation in the way we view that word today. It conveys the meaning of absolute ownership and uncontrolled power when applied to an owner-slave relationship. So, we could say that “denial of the One who bought” is as simple as a person who will not submit to the Lordship of Christ in their conduct of life. How many times have we heard a person say something to the effect, “I am my own man, nobody is going tell me what to do.”

Another false teaching that was a problem in the early church and one which is still around today and that is a “disconnect” between belief and behavior. Those who separate belief and behavior will argue that it does not matter how Christians behave, since grace could forgive every sin, no matter how great. This is what the Bible calls presumptuous sins. Some deliberately go on sinning rather than walking in the way of repentance and this is evidence that they discredit or think little of the high price that Christ paid to deliver them from a life of sin. He did not save us from sin so that we could go on sinning. Such false ideas lead to sensuality or shameful behavior that could be used to entice others in the church to participate in bad behavior and bring criticism to the cause of Christ.

Such practices may go on and those who do such things seem to not suffer any consequences for it. However, Peter warned his readers that God pronounced judgment on such false teaching a long time ago and that judgment is still in effect and they will eventually experience the consequences or wages of their wrong doing. Sometimes such “judgment” will come upon people as a direct consequence of the behavior or lifestyle they chose to adopt.

From verse 16 of Jude we find other common characteristics of such pseudo teachers. The first thing we see is that nothing ever pleases them. They can find fault in anything and everything and they usually do. Whatever they do, they are going to do it the way they want to because they think their way is the best way it can possibly be. This is known as arrogance. Sometimes you will find them saying nice and positive things about a person. When that happens, we can be sure that the flattery had an ulterior motive of trying influence the person for their own advantage.

Predicted – Jude 17-19

¹⁷ But you, beloved, ought to remember the words that were spoken beforehand by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁸ that they were saying to you, “In the last time there will be mockers, following after their own ungodly lusts.” ¹⁹ These are the ones who cause divisions, worldly-minded, devoid of the Spirit. Jude 17-19 (NASB95)

What Peter (in a parallel passage) described could very well apply to some situations we see today in what we would call liberal denominations (falsely called churches). He had observed that these “false teachers” did not even try to hide the sin in which they indulged but carried it out in “broad open daylight.” In the past, people who practiced immorality had the decency to be discrete about it. Now we are beginning to see those who practice immorality

being proud of their lifestyle and bragging about it. While they are doing that, they have the gall to show up at church and blatantly participate in the Lord's Supper. Some even go to the point of ordaining people who are open or overt practitioners of perverted behavior. Apparently, this kind of thing was also going on in the first century.

Jude saw the same kinds of things among false teachers who were disruptive in the churches he knew about. Some in leadership positions in our churches today are there only because they have chosen church work as a vocation rather than having been called into the work. These have no spiritual substance and, consequently, are not able to benefit others in the church. The way they operate is to cultivate a close following of certain people who will support them regardless of what they do or how unsound their judgments are. Many will be in the ministry to make money or to build their reputation or to advance their careers. They use their position in the pulpit to mock or ridicule anyone who might oppose their bad decisions and even go so far as stating that anyone who does not agree with them must be inspired by the devil.

The result of such questionable leadership is that it creates division rather than unity in a church. The typical outcome is the church may split or the church may choose to get rid of the bad leadership. It is not surprising then to see so many small churches in an area and it is not too surprising to read the statistics that most pastors stay less than 18 months in a pastorate.

Peter's admonition to the church was to be watchful and be able to recognize these situations when they happen and to not let the negative influences of false teachers distract them from their calling to grow in grace, to become more like Christ and to take God's message of salvation to the world in which they lived.

Countered – Jude 20-25

²⁰ But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, ²¹ keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life. ²² And have mercy on some, who are doubting; ²³ save others, snatching them out of the fire; and on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh. ²⁴ Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, ²⁵ to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, *be* glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen. Jude 20-25 (NASB95)

We are in a spiritual battle; therefore, we must approach it with a spiritual solution. To do this we must be in good spiritual condition. We are to build ourselves up in our faith. The "how" of doing this is through prayer in the Spirit. Paul wrote about the Holy Spirit praying through us when we don't know what to ask in his letter to the church in Rome. The Holy Spirit, through us, prays the will of God because He knows the mind of God.

This spiritual battle is being waged on at least two fronts. The first and maybe the most difficult is on an individual personal level of looking out for our own welfare. When we are confronted with opposition and attacks by the enemy, we may have a tendency to fight fire with fire. The challenge is to keep ourselves operating and functioning "in the love of God." Very few people are ever won over from an entrenched position of error by strong arguments contrary to their position. Presenting the truth in love is the only thing that will work to bring about a real change in such people. In order to operate this way, we have to keep focused on the ultimate victory we have in Christ.

The second front where the spiritual battle is fought is with regard to reaching out to the lost. We must show compassion that will lead others to salvation. For some, this will be a real

rescue operation because they are so deeply involved in sin and the consequences of sin. When we approach people who are deeply involved in sin, we must do so on the basis of loving the people who are trapped in sin and hating the sin.

The benediction of Jude's brief letter puts the situations those early Christians were undergoing into proper perspective. The world around us may be falling apart, there may be liars and false teachers and people with hidden agendas that would seek to bring harm rather than benefit to the world, nevertheless, God is still on His throne. In His majestic glory, He has all dominion and authority from eternity past through all eternity future. The best news of all is that this all powerful, all knowing, eternal God has provided for our eternal deliverance and salvation from all the evils that we will ever encounter.