

A Strong Warning About False Teaching and Its Effects

2 Timothy 2:16-19

2 Timothy 2:16-19: *“But shun profane and idle babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness. ¹⁷ And their message will spread like cancer. Hymenaeus and Philetus are of this sort, ¹⁸ who have strayed concerning the truth, saying that the resurrection is already past; and they overthrow the faith of some. ¹⁹ Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: “The Lord knows those who are His,” and, “Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity.”*

Background Notes

When Paul wrote this second letter to Timothy, false teaching was in circulation – in fact, some false teaching had already penetrated into the early churches. One brand of false teaching was early Gnosticism.

Gnosticism was a mixture: Christian teaching mixed with some ideas from Greek philosophy and other pagan philosophies. Gnosticism as a Christian heresy did not fully flower until about the 2nd century, but the seeds were already around in the 1st century - certainly by the time Paul wrote this letter to Timothy in about AD66. In fact, Paul strongly rebuked early Gnosticism in his letter to the Colossians, which was written a few years before 2 Timothy.

In view of verse 18, it seems that early Gnostic thought was the particular false teaching what Paul had in mind in this section of the letter. Gnostic teaching and thinking denied the bodily resurrection. To their way of thinking, the material world (including the human body) was evil. Only the spiritual world was good. Furthermore, the body was considered like a temporary prison for the soul. To Gnostic thought, the idea of a bodily resurrection was unthinkable! Therefore the resurrection was spiritualized to mean salvation or baptism.

Hymenaeus and Philetus were men who had strayed concerning the truth. They were teaching that the resurrection of believers was already in the past. They, and others who followed their false teaching, believed there was no future resurrection of believers. This false teaching was upsetting the faith of some people in the church.

It's hard to say whether Hymenaeus and Philetus were true believers who had been deceived by this false teaching, or whether they merely professed to be Christians and had infiltrated the church. If the Hymenaeus here is the same as the Hymenaeus who was mentioned in 1 Timothy 1:20, it would seem that he was a true believer but he strayed into false teaching. He had “made shipwreck” of his faith, and he had to be excluded or excommunicated from the local church.

Hymenaeus and Philetus had strayed from the truth, and they had *“overthrown the faith of some.”* Then and today, false teachers and their teachings are extremely dangerous. Their teachings can spread and destroy like cancer or gangrene (v17) and destroy the local body of believers. False teachers and false teaching must not be treated lightly.

Doctrinal Points

1. False teaching can devastate the faith of believers.

False teaching results in the ruin of hearers (v14). The *“profane and vain babblings”* of false teaching would result in an increase of ungodliness (v16). False teaching will spread like gangrene or cancer, destroying as they spread (v17). False teaching results in the overthrow of the faith of some (v18).

1 Timothy 6:20 says that false teaching leads to a straying from the faith: *“O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge. By professing it some have strayed concerning the faith.”*

False teaching can devastate the faith of believers. This does not mean that true believers can lose their salvation. No, that’s not the idea. However, it can lead to disappointment in the faith. It can lead to distortion of the faith. It can even lead to a life of ungodliness (v16).

“Profane and vain babbling” is godless talk; it’s worldly and empty chatting. Avoiding godless chatting doesn’t mean that you can’t talk about the weather or the Chicago Bears’ season! Profane and vain babblings has to do with talking of *sacred and holy matters in a worldly way.*

For example, talking about the Bible as merely a human book containing some good moral values, but also containing errors – that’s profane and vain talk. That is worldly chatter and it will lead to ungodliness. And another example: teaching that God is both male and female in order to be politically correct is worldly and empty chatter. It will lead to further ungodliness.

The false teaching of Hymenaeus and Philetus was upsetting the faith of some believers (v18). After all, if you deny the bodily resurrection of the believer, then what about the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, on which the truth of the Christian faith hinges? That’s the very argument that Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 15!

Furthermore, if you believe that the resurrection has already taken place, then why is there suffering now? And what hope do we have of Christ’s future kingdom here on earth? Any way you look at it, false teaching has bad fallout – ruin of the hearers, further ungodliness, and shipwrecking the faith of some. False teaching can devastate the faith of believers.

2. False teaching *cannot* destroy the Church of God.

False teaching can devastate the faith of some believers, but it **cannot** destroy the Church! “*Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: “The Lord knows those who are His,” and, “Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity” (v19).* That “*nevertheless*” is very encouraging. In spite of the false teachers and the false teaching, the solid foundation of God stands.

The true Church, which is composed of all genuine believers, is specifically in view here, because the true Church stands on the truth, and it is “*the pillar and ground of the truth*” (1 Timothy 3:15.) The true Church has a “seal” on it with two inscriptions. These inscriptions prove that it is the true Church.

- a. The first inscription is *from the divine side: “The Lord knows those who are His.”* We may not know who is (or is not) a true believer - but God knows. And no amount of false teaching can take away the life of a true believer!
- b. The second inscription is *from the human side: “Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity.”* True believers give evidence of their faith by departing from iniquity. People who say that they have faith but continue to live a sinful lifestyle may merely be professing Christians, not true believers.

Think of verse 19 as a prediction when Paul wrote it – a prediction that has definitely come true: “*God’s solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: ‘The Lord knows those who are His,’ and ‘Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.’*” The true Church has stood the test of time. There has been a continuous line of genuine believers down through history, in spite of persecutions and in spite of false teaching. False teaching cannot destroy the God’s Church.

Practical Application

Let’s practice preventive medicine!

Preventive medicine is eating the right foods, exercising, getting medical checkups, taking vitamins – doing what it takes to stay healthy. And preventive medicine also means avoiding the things that are bad for your body and your health. Avoid unhealthy foods! Don’t be a couch potato!

If you neglect a healthy lifestyle, you won’t be as healthy as you could be. And if you don’t practice preventive medicine, all your energy will go into trying to fix your body up when you become sick. I think of all of us will agree that it’s foolish not to practice preventive medicine - and it’s usually much more expensive as well!

“Spiritual preventive medicine” is true in the spiritual realm when it comes to false teaching. Avoid vain babblings! Stay away from worldly and empty talk and avoid godless chatter! Stay on the positive side of sound doctrine! That is definitely spiritual preventive medicine.

False teaching is like cancer or gangrene (v17). Once it gets started it spreads quickly. Look how quickly the false teaching that the Bible contains errors has spread throughout the Church. Look how rapidly the false teaching of theistic evolution has invaded and spread like cancer throughout the Church. It has “overthrown the faith of some.”

Once cancer or gangrene has invaded the body and gained a foothold, strong measures must be taken to eliminate it. The only solution is major surgery. This kind of surgery is not easy in the spiritual realm, but false teaching must be eliminated. The sooner it's done, the better it will be for the continued health of believers, and for the integrity of the local church. How much better it would be to emphasize the preventive medicine of sound doctrine before the disease of false teaching infiltrates and spreads!

Don't give time to fruitless discussions, like the politically correct gender-neutral Bibles, where God is made father/mother and he/she. Getting involved in useless discussions only gives publicity to the false teaching - and it leads to further ungodliness. Practice preventive medicine.

Constant emphasis on sound doctrine is the best preventive medicine - so let's practice preventive medicine! Day by day teaching of sound doctrine to our children in the home is great preventive medicine. The preaching and teaching of sound doctrine in the local church is great preventive medicine. And it's very important that preventive medicine starts early - in the Sunday school!

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