

There are few warnings in the Scriptures that are more frequent than the warnings against false teachings. There's so many, in fact, that I couldn't possibly again to list them all out. But just to give a few examples so that we can see what I mean here. Moses, for example, in Deuteronomy chapter 18 warns against false prophets, and he even gives a test at that point on how to tell who is a false prophet and who is true. If they say something is going to happen and it doesn't happen, then you will know that they are a false prophet. You don't need to listen to them. Peter and Jude in the New Testament also warned against false prophets, and they also tell us the judgment which is waiting for them because of their lies. It's not going to be an easy one. And even Jesus in our Gospel reading for today warns us of false prophets, saying that they are like wolves in sheep's clothing and that you will know them by their fruits. Because if their words and their actions don't meet up with each other, then they are not speaking the truth of God. And so all throughout the Scriptures, then, we see these examples, a warning against false teaching and a warning against false prophets.

But why? Why do we have all these warnings? Why is God so serious about this? Because, Christians, false teaching kills our souls. False teaching leads us away from God. It leads us into death. What you listen to, what you pay attention to, what you believe does something to your eternal soul. It's going to determine whether you end up in heaven or in hell, because false teaching can keep us out of heaven, just as Jesus tells us in our Gospel reading for today. So we must be on guard against it and pay attention so that we are not taken in by it.

So we can see, then, why there are so many warnings against this thing, because it is so serious. But Christians, do you see the danger which false teaching has for all of us? The danger which it poses to us, both to you and to me, and why it is something that we need to pay attention to? False teaching is not just something that kills the soul. False teaching is also something that is attractive to us. It sounds good. It sounds reasonable. It sounds like something we would want to pay attention to. It's easy to listen to, for that matter. It's like Paul says in 2 Timothy, chapter 4: "The time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth, and wander off into myths." So in other words, false teaching is like scratching an itch. It feels good. It makes us feel good about ourselves. It makes us feel comfortable. And in that way we can be taken in by it, even before we recognize what it is that is happening. So we have to be on guard against it, so we are not deceived.

This is ultimately the point of our Old Testament reading for today in the book of Jeremiah. And this is the situation that we find ourselves in. Zedekiah was one of the last kings of the kingdom of Israel. And his father Josiah was actually one of the very best kings that Israel ever had. But Zedekiah was nothing like his father. Zedekiah was a very wicked man. He was a man who loved money more than doing what was right. He was a man who loved being king more than doing what a king should be doing. But Zedekiah was also the servant of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon. But he decided he didn't want to do that anymore, and so he rebelled. But understandably, Nebuchadnezzar didn't like that, and so he was invading. The armies of Babylon were on the march, and Israel was in very serious trouble. So what was Zedekiah going to do? Where would he turn for help in the midst of his trouble?

He sends a message to the prophet Jeremiah in chapter 21. He says, "Inquire of the Lord for us, for Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, is making war against us. Perhaps the Lord will deal with us according to all his wonderful deeds and will make him withdraw from us." "Go ask God," he said. "Find out what he says. Come back to me and tell me what the Lord says, because maybe, just maybe," Zedekiah thinks, "He is going to help us out. He's going to drive Nebuchadnezzar away, and we will be able to win this war."

But Jeremiah brings back to Zedekiah a very hard message. He says to him, "This is the word of the Lord: surrender. Don't fight at all. Don't fight against Nebuchadnezzar. Surrender yourself to the king of Babylon. Turn away from your sins," he says, "Turn away from your love of money. Turn away from your injustice. Turn back towards the Lord, and give up. Don't fight back against Babylon, and you will live. But if you stay in this city," he says, "the Lord himself will fight against you. The Lord himself will fight for your enemies. And you will die. This is the word of the Lord." That's a very hard thing for Zedekiah to hear: to have to be told to humble himself, to turn away from his sins, to turn back towards the living God, and to just give up in the face of Babylon. What was he going to do?

But there was also a group of prophets, Christians, the same time as Jeremiah. A group of prophets who had a very different message for the king. They came to him and they said, "It shall be well with you." They came to him and they said, "No disaster shall come upon you." It's all going to be just fine, they said, and they filled him with vain hopes. It's as if they were saying to him, "God's not going to fight against you. God's going to fight for you. God is going to do all of these great things for you, because this is his land that he gave to us. This is his temple which he built for us. Surely God's not angry with us, right? Surely we can know that God is going to be for us. And in all of these things, God fought for our fathers all those times, delivering them from all of their troubles. And we are his people, so we don't need to be afraid." But not once in all of their preaching did they say to Zedekiah or to Israel, "Repent." Not once did they say, "God is angry with your sins. You need to turn away from those sins and turn towards life." Because they filled Zedekiah with vain hopes, because they spoke only peace when they should of spoken wrath, they led Israel astray, and in that way led them into death.

But be honest with yourselves, Christians. Which one of these is easier to listen to? The message of Jeremiah, the message which says, "Repent, stop doing what you're doing, turn away from your sins, and give up. Become a prisoner of war"? Or the message of the false prophets, who came and said that God is not angry, that God's not going to drive you away, that he's gonna take care of you? Which one of those is easier for us to hear? Now you begin to understand the great danger of false teaching. Because it scratches our itch. It gives us things that we like to hear, things are much easier to listen to. But in this way they lead us astray. Because false teaching leads us into sin by the broad and the easy way. False teaching leads us to not listen to God. When those prophets should have been preaching wrath against sin, the storm of the Lord which was going forth against Israel because of everything that they had done, they chose instead to preach peace, so that Israel thought they hadn't done anything wrong. So there was nothing to repent of. And in that way they led them to sin.

So Christians, how then do we avoid false teaching? How do we avoid being led astray from the Lord? By listening to him. By listening to what he has to say. But by listening especially to what

he actually says. Not what we think he says. Not what we want him to say. But what God actually says to us. And sometimes that's going to be really, really hard to hear. Something that's going to be painful to us even, just like Jeremiah's message was painful to Israel and to Zedekiah. But it is a message which we must listen to even when it hurts, because it is a message that leads us into everlasting life.

Let me use some examples here, so that you can understand what I'm getting at. I was driving around the other day trying to do some shopping, and we drove past a church sign that said: "God loves you. Always has, always will." Now, of course, with a message that short, you could probably interpret that any number of ways, because it's only seven words long. It could mean anything, I suppose. But based on the church that it was in front of, it was very reasonable to conclude that what they meant to say was God is only love. That God is love. He's always loved us. He's never had a reason to be angry with us. He accepts us just the way we are. So come on in and be a part of our church. That sounds pretty good, doesn't it? That sound like something we would want to hear. But the truth is, Christians, that the Bible also speaks about God's wrath, his wrath against sin. In fact, it puts it much more strongly than that. It says that God hates sin. God hates sin so much, in fact, that he can't stand to have it in his presence. God hates sin, and God hates hypocrisy. They are things that he cannot endure. But we don't want to hear that. Because that sounds so negative. That doesn't sound quite so nice. We love to talk about God's love. But if we talk about God's love without a hatred of sin, that's not going to lead us into the truth. That will lead people to think that they don't need to repent, that there's nothing wrong with them at all. And in that way, they are confirmed in their sins. So we have to keep both in mind, both God's love and God's wrath, and then we will know the truth.

Or to use another example. Sometimes you will hear preachers say things--from the pulpit even--that go against what the Bible has to say. Either they'll do that intentionally or maybe they'll do it well meaning, they don't actually mean to say it against the Bible, but because are trying to make a point, they end up saying something wrong. One thing that I've heard as an example of this would be the statement that "Jesus forgives those who can't forgive others." That sounds really good, doesn't it? That sounds like something we want to listen to. That God's going to forgive me even when I'm still holding onto my grudge, because maybe I'm right in the way that I feel! But it goes directly against what Jesus says. Jesus says very, very clearly that if we cannot forgive others, our Father in heaven will not forgive us. Of course, they try to explain that away, giving this long explanation why that doesn't actually mean what it says. Maybe Jesus didn't actually mean it. Maybe he meant it only in one specific way. Whatever it is, they try to get around what the Bible clearly says, and in that way promote a false teaching. So we need to listen to what God actually says, to forgive one another as God has first forgiven us and not to hold on to those grudges.

Or one last example in our Gospel reading for today. Jesus says very clearly that "not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven. By which he means, of course, that not everyone who claims to be a Christian is in fact a Christian. But that's a hard thing to hear too. Because we like to think that everyone who claims to be a Christian is in fact going to go to heaven, especially when it comes to our families, especially when it comes to our communities, whatever it may be. We want to think that everything is going to be just fine, and we don't need to worry about anything. But that's not what Jesus says. Jesus tells us that those

who are Christians, who are truly Christians, are those who listen to his voice, who listen to what he has to say. And just because someone claims to be a Christian doesn't mean that they are.

But this, then, is really the point, Christians: that all of these things that show how false teaching can become so alluring to us. How it can become so attractive, because it sounds so good. But we are called to listen to the voice of God, called to listen to his Word, even when it hurts to do so. Because it is a Word which brings us life. God's Word, Jeremiah says, is like a fire, a fire which burns, a fire which consumes, a fire which destroys. But it is also by fire that we are purified, made into something better than what we were. God's Word is like a hammer, Jeremiah says, that breaks the rock into pieces, a hammer which is destructive, a hammer which even seems violent. But God destroys in order to make us whole again, to rebuild us, to make us something better than what we were. God condemns our sins by his holy Word so that we would be built up again in his Son, Jesus Christ. And when we listen to Jesus and listen to the voice of our Good Shepherd, we will find the words of truth and of life. Even when it hurts, even when it's not easy to listen to, Jesus comes to us and gives us life through his Word.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have given us your Son, Jesus Christ, who is truth and life. We pray that you would strengthen us in the true faith and guard us against every false teaching, so that we may listen to your voice in everything, even when it is hard to do so. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.