

Week V

Romans 15:20-32

20 It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation. 21 Rather, as it is written:

“Those who were not told about him will see,
and those who have not heard will understand.”

22 This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you.

23 But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to visit you, 24 I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to see you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while. 25 Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the Lord's people there. 26 For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the Lord's people in Jerusalem. 27 They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings. 28 So after I have completed this task and have made sure that they have received this contribution, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way. 29 I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ.

30 I urge you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. 31 Pray that I may be kept safe from the unbelievers in Judea and that the contribution I take to Jerusalem may be favorably received by the Lord's people there, 32 so that I may come to you with joy, by God's will, and in your company be refreshed.

In this section the book shifts to personal business between Paul and his readers in Rome. Paul tells them about his travel plans and his hope to pass through their city and visit them on his way to preach the gospel in Spain.

Spain was also a part of the Roman Empire at this time. Paul hopes that he can be the first to bring the good news about Jesus to the people of Spain. We know from the book of Acts that Paul spent much of his time after the beginning of his ministry traveling around the Roman Empire, especially in the area that is now Turkey, Greece, and Macedonia. Although Paul was a Jew living in Jerusalem when he first became a Christian and began his ministry he was actually from Tarsus, a city in modern Turkey.

This map shows the first “missionary journey” that Paul took with his companion Barnabas to expand the gospel into the Empire.



In later journeys Paul went further west than on this first journey and covered much of the area shown on this map.

Here in Romans Paul expresses his own philosophy of ministry, his “ambition” in verse 20. He does not want to build on the work that others have done, but rather

to be a pioneering preacher teaching those that have never heard. We know that most of his ministry that is recorded in the book of Acts was this kind of work. In his first epistle to the church in Corinth Paul explains it like this:

1 Corinthians 3:5-15

5 What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. 6 I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. 7 So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. 8 The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. 9 For we are co-workers in God’s service; you are God’s field, God’s building.

10 By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. 11 For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12 If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, 13 their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person’s work. 14 If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. 15 If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames.

Paul characterizes his work here as planting seeds which have now grown up into a thriving church in Corinth. He also describes his own work as laying a foundation. Clearly, he saw himself as the founder of the church in Corinth. Others, such as Apollos, who came after Paul were also doing great ministry, but Paul wanted to be spreading the gospel in new places where Jesus was not yet known.

It is not that Paul did not see the value of doing ministry in existing churches. He is clear in the passage above that the ministry of Apollos following him is also valid and blessed by God. Paul also went back and did ministry in the same towns where he had previously “planted” churches on later journeys. Paul also spent lengthy periods of time in some of the places where he traveled, especially Corinth where he lived for more than a year and a half and Ephesus where he lived about three years. He also made later visits to both of those cities.

Since Paul's ministry began only a few years after Jesus' life, he did not have to go too far to find areas where Jesus was not yet known. But as time went on the gospel spread more and more and Paul began to feel "that there is no more place for me to work in these regions". Certainly there were many people who had not yet heard about Jesus who were living in these regions, but Paul felt that his work of preaching in places where there was no knowledge of the gospel was running out of space. And so, Paul tells the Roman church about his plan to visit them on his way to Spain, a new area that had not yet been reached with the gospel.

Paul's ministry is the fulfillment of Jesus' instructions to his followers that he gave after his resurrection before he went back to heaven. These instructions were given several times in several ways over those few weeks. Here are two key texts:

Acts 1:8

"you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Jesus is telling his followers here that they are to be his witnesses far and wide, in fact the very ends of the earth. Of course, we all know, and Jesus knew, that the earth is a sphere and doesn't have any ends. The "ends of the earth" is an expression that means we are to be his witnesses *everywhere*. No place is too far away, too remote, or too obscure anywhere in the world. Be his witnesses everywhere. What part of the world is not included in this description? Nowhere.

Sometimes people who talk about the mission that Jesus gave us to spread the gospel seem to be really concerned that we get to the most remote and difficult to reach places. And that's good as long as it doesn't become a distraction to the main idea which is to be his witnesses everywhere. And of course the place where we live and spend the vast majority of our lives should be the main place where we are to be Jesus' witnesses.

It is a great thing when we go on mission trips to far away places to spread the gospel there. But the main emphasis in our witness can't be on occasionally sending teams to faraway places. We need to be his witnesses mainly in the places where we are and occasionally send out people to more remote places where those people too need to hear about Jesus.

But Paul himself had a special calling on his life to go and preach in places where people had not yet heard. His life was different from a modern Christian who lives in their own city and does ministry in their own local church and only rarely (if ever) goes out to a more remote place to do ministry.

Even by modern missionary standards his calling was different. Most missionaries will go to a place and spend many years in that location learning the language and culture of the people that they are trying to reach and seeking to impact that community for Christ. Paul spent only a short time in each place that he visited, many places only a few weeks before he moved on. He only spent as long as two years in a couple of key cities. Paul was determined to be a witness to “the ends of the earth.”

Matthew 28:18-20

Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

In the first verse here Jesus tells us that all authority has been given to him. Therefore, we are to go and make disciples. His point about authority is an important one.

Jesus is telling us to make disciples. That means our goal is for people to give up their old way of life and become disciples of Jesus. In many cases that means to give up their old religious beliefs and embrace Christianity. Even if those religious beliefs have been passed down for generations and are a key part of their ancestral culture, the task that Jesus has set for us is to make them disciples, to make them Christians.

According to today’s most prominent way of thinking this is not a good thing to do. To tell someone to give up the religion that he was taught by his parents and his culture and to convert to Christianity is offensive to modern principles of equality. Many consider such an idea to be nothing but arrogant cultural imperialism. How can we go to a Hindu in India and tell him that he should no longer worship Brahma,

Vishnu, and Shiva but should only worship and pray to our God, Jesus. How can we tell them that our religion is true and theirs is false?

Or even for people right here in our own community a common attitude is that we all have our own belief system, and no one has the right to tell anyone else that there is anything wrong or bad about what they believe. To claim that we are right and others are wrong is seen as arrogance and many people today consider such an attitude to be firmly in the category of immoral behavior.

What are your initial thoughts about how we should respond to this kind of objection to telling people about Jesus and making disciples?



Here are some more things to think about on this subject.

First we need to make it clear that we are *not* claiming that American culture in general is better than other cultures. We are not saying that hamburgers and hotdogs are better than curry and tacos. Our culture is not the ideal Christian culture that all people around the world ought to adopt. In fact, American culture is full of sinful practices that must be avoided by all good Christians.

But when it comes to religion, we *are* saying that all people everywhere need to abandon any other system of worship and commit themselves to discipleship to Jesus. What gives us the right to go to people and tell them this? All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus, and he has commanded us to go and

make disciples. We preach repentance from false religions by the authority of Jesus who has commissioned us with this task.

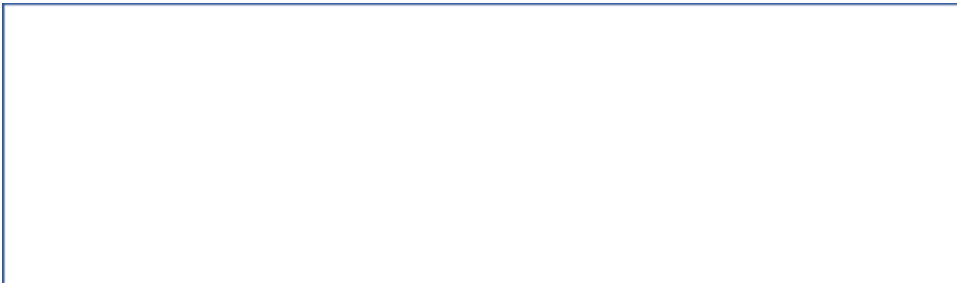
Acts 17 gives us another reason why it is right for us to correct the false religious ideas of non-Christians. Speaking to a group of religious people who worshipped the Greco-Roman gods Paul said:

Acts 17:24-31

24 “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. 25 And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. 26 From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. 27 God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 28 ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’

29 “Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. 30 In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 31 For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

What principles do you see in this passage that justify persuading someone to change their religion?





Final judgment is real. At that judgment everyone who has not put their faith in Jesus and become his disciple will be condemned to eternal punishment. The only way for them to avoid that fate is to repent of their false ideas about God and to accept the truth of the gospel message that forgiveness of sins is available through Jesus.

To explain to someone that what they believe about God is wrong and to warn them about the judgement that is coming is not mean and arrogant, it is kind, loving, and compassionate.

It is sadly true that over the years some Christians have had arrogant and condemning attitudes as they have sought to correct false religious beliefs. To bring discredit on God and the gospel in that way is a sin that we must avoid. But the basic idea of explaining that Christianity is true and other religions are false is not wrong. It is the most loving thing that we can do for someone.

But Paul has another plan before he can visit Rome on his way to Spain. He needs to first go to Jerusalem in order to present a contribution to the poor from the churches in another part of the Empire. This contribution is mentioned several times in the New Testament. In addition to the practical needs that this money would meet, it was important to Paul to show the Christians back in Jerusalem that the new Christians in other parts of the world cared about them.

One of the places where there is a lengthy discussion about this contribution is in 2 Corinthians. It is discussed there for most of two chapters. Here are key sections:

2 Corinthians 8:1-5,8-9, 13-15, 9:6-13

And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. 2 In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. 3 For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, 4 they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. 5 And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. . . .

8 I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. 9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. . . .

13 Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. 14 At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality, 15 as it is written: "The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little."

9:6 Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. 7 Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 8 And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. 9 As it is written:

"They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor;
their righteousness endures forever."

10 Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. 11 You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

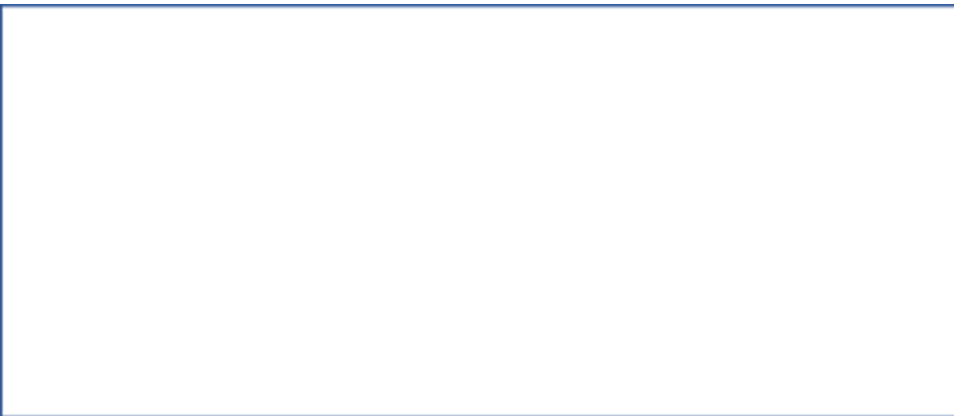
12 This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. 13 Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the

gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.

Why do you think this financial contribution was so important?



Notice that this contribution was about helping the poor, not about supporting ministry. What principles do you see in this passage about giving to the poor?



In our Romans passage Paul also asks for a different kind of a financial contribution from the church in Rome. In verse 24 Paul says “I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to see you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while.” This assistance is different from the gifts for the poor that Paul is bringing to Jerusalem. This is a gift specifically given to support the missionary work that Paul is planning in Spain.

In the Bible there are at least three different kinds of financial giving that are expected from Christians.

One is giving to the poor. It is a Christian duty to use the resources that God has given us to help alleviate the effects of poverty especially among our fellow Christians.

The second is giving to support the work of your own local church. We are responsible to contribute to the expenses of the ministry that we directly benefit from.

And the third is giving to support the work of missions around the world. Helping to pay the expenses of those who God has called to go out to help reach the ends of the earth with the gospel is also a Christian responsibility.

All three of these kinds of giving can be accomplished through giving to your local church. A good church budget includes not only paying their own expenses, but also using the pooled resources of their congregation to alleviate poverty and support missions.

Depending on your own personal convictions you might want to also give to help the poor through other giving to organizations of your own choice. The same applies to world missions. If you have a particular interest in a specific area of missions or a specific missionary it is also great to support those ministries. The important thing is that all Christians, especially those of us living in a prosperous nation like ours, have a responsibility to support all three of these areas.

What do you think is the right balance between the three kinds of giving; local church, helping the poor, and world missions?



Scholars are divided on whether Paul ever made good on his intention to preach the gospel in Spain. The book of Acts tells us that while Paul was in Jerusalem shortly after delivering the money that he speaks of here in Romans he was arrested and imprisoned. After spending several years in a Roman prison in Judea he felt that his best option to resolve his case was to appeal directly to Caesar for justice. And so he did eventually get to Rome and visit the Christians there, but he came as a prisoner and not as a missionary passing through.

The book of Acts ends with Paul in prison in Rome. But some believe that he later was released from prison and traveled to Spain as he intended only to be arrested again at a later date and executed in Rome. Since biblical history does not tell us what happened after the end of Acts, we cannot be certain.

Week VI

Romans 16:17-19

17 I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. 18 For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people. 19 Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I rejoice because of you; but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil.

This brief passage near the very end of Romans raises an important issue that we must not forget. There have always been false teachers who seek to mislead Christians and steer them away from the truth. In the Old Testament these were often referred to as false prophets. In the New Testament we are warned against both false prophets and false teachers. Whatever we call them, they are dangerous people who can lead us off the right path spiritually.

Here the harm that they are doing is described as causing divisions and putting obstacles in people's way. The theme of division is especially prominent in the biblical warnings about false teachers. God's desire is that Christians should have unity not division.

This short article from www.gotquestions.org gives a good summary of the need for Christian unity.

Shortly before He went to the cross, Jesus prayed for unity among His followers: "Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one" (John 17:11).

Later in the same prayer, Jesus asked "that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us. . . . I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity" (John 17:21–23). Obviously, Christian unity is important to our Lord.

Jesus not only prayed for unity, but He gave the reasons that Christian unity is important: He asked that all believers may be in the Father and the Son, “so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21). And then Jesus prayed for “complete unity” so that “the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (verse 23). When Christians are united in Christ, the world sees two things clearly: Jesus was sent by the Father, and Jesus loves His church.

In Romans 15:5–6, we see another, more general reason that Christian unity is important: “May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (ESV). The bottom line is God’s glory. God’s people should be speaking with one voice in glorifying God.

Christian unity comes with Christian maturity, and it is always something that we strive to attain. Paul instructs us to “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). Helping us toward that unity are the gifts of the Spirit. God has given each Christian different gifts, and their exercise in the edification of the church leads to more and more unity. One purpose of the gifts is that “we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13).

To promote Christian unity, God presents the church in 1 Corinthians 12:12–27 as a living body. The body has many members, each with specialized work to do, but all the parts are united in the Head of the Body, which is Christ (see Ephesians 4:15).

Christians naturally form local communities in which no one needs to rejoice or suffer alone (Romans 12:15; 1 Corinthians 12:26). Christians from many different backgrounds working in unity display the power of the gospel and the universality of its saving message (Galatians 3:26–28). Christians bring honor to God’s name by pursuing unity in the power of the Holy Spirit who brings us together as one through faith in Christ.

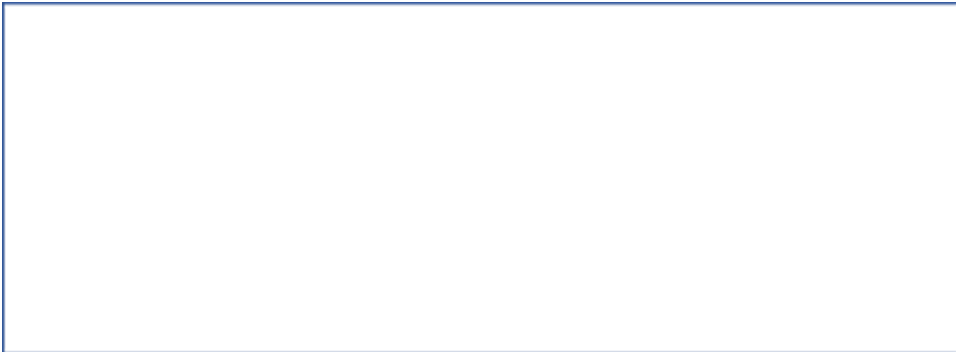
Christian unity is a virtue, but there are some things that can and should limit unity. We don’t pursue unity simply for the sake of unity; it is Christ and His truth that unite us. Scripturally, we are to separate from professed brothers and sisters in Christ who live in persistent, unrepentant sin (Matthew 18:15–17; 1 Corinthians 5:1–2) and from those who teach false doctrine (Revelation 2:14–15). “Watch out for those who

cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them” (Romans 16:17).

As Ephesians 4:13 intimates, we won’t reach full Christian unity until we attain “to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” So we probably won’t fully realize Christian unity in this world. But we strive for it. The unity that faith in Christ brings extends God’s love on earth and demonstrates the truth of who Jesus is. Unity in the church also foreshadows the worship in heaven, where a great multitude “from every nation, tribe, people and language” stands before God and cries out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb” (Revelation 7:9–10).

In addition to threatening Christian unity these teachers in Rome were putting obstacles in the way of Christians. What exactly these obstacles were Paul does not say. We know from other parts of the Bible that it was common for people to insist on various legalistic ethical rules for Christians. Some even wanted Christians to follow the kosher dietary rules and keep the Sabbath. Putting additional ethical requirements on Christians that go beyond what the Bible demands is a common form of “putting obstacles in the way.”

What kinds of obstacles like this have you seen promoted?

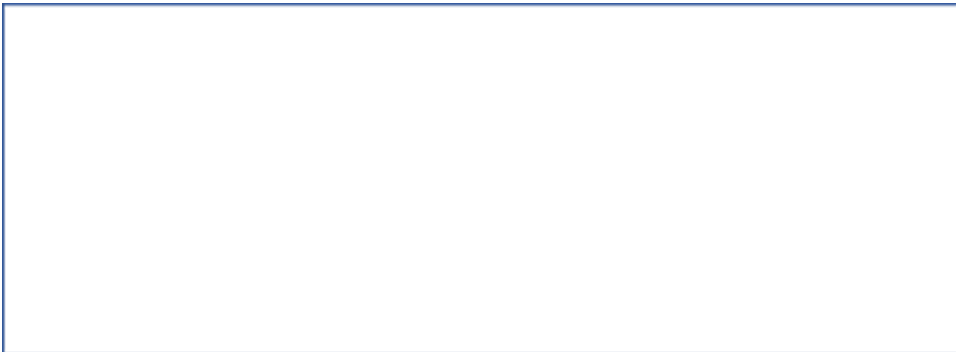


Another key biblical text that talks about false teachers is the epistle of Jude. Here are key sections from that book:

3 Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt compelled to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people. 4 For certain individuals whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.

We see here that the trouble makers that Jude warns about were doing the opposite of the ones who put obstacles in people's way by adding additional ethical requirements for Christians. These people were using the grace of God as a license for immorality. Their argument was something along the lines of, "Jesus offers you forgiveness for all sin. Therefore, sinning is not a big problem. As long as you claim Jesus' payment for your sins you can do what you want."

Stated in such stark terms it seems obviously false, but more subtle versions of this claim can be more persuasive. What more nuanced and subtle form of this kind of thinking do you think would be enough to lead people astray?



Another section from Jude:

17 But, dear friends, remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold. 18 They said to you, "In the last times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires." 19 These are the people who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit.

20 But you, dear friends, by building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, 21 keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.

22 Be merciful to those who doubt; 23 save others by snatching them from the fire; to others show mercy, mixed with fear—hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.

Those last two verses give interesting and colorful advice for dealing with false teaching. First we are told to be merciful toward doubters. In other words, if someone is unsure and tempted to follow these false ideas, that is a time to show mercy and compassion for that person, not to harshly condemn them for their uncertainty. As we show mercy toward these people we are also encouraged to snatch them from the fire.

Obviously this is not a literal fire, what do you think Jude means to communicate by using this dramatic metaphor?



The final phrase of that section about mercy mixed with fear and hating the clothing stained by corrupted flesh is another colorful way of speaking. This is true about entirety of Jude's epistle that is full of this kind of word pictures. The point of the saying is that we must be careful as we seek to help people to stay clear of or escape from false teaching that we do not fall into the trap ourselves.


Jesus himself also warned us about the dangers of false teaching.

Matthew 7:15-20

15 “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. 16 By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? 17 Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

Jesus’ warning here emphasizes the difficulty of recognizing false prophets. They are wearing disguises. If wolves openly approach sheep know to run away. But Jesus creates this image of a wolf disguised as a sheep in order to show how the false prophets can sneak in among us without us knowing in order to lead Christians astray.

How does Jesus say that we can recognize false prophets? The metaphor is fruit, but what does fruit mean?



Clearly not every pastor or teacher who has a wrong idea about some part of Christian teaching is a “false teacher”. False teachers are not those who mistakenly believe an incorrect interpretation of some of the details of the faith.

What are some of the key character traits of the false teachers that have been warning about in the passages we have read so far in this section of the study guide?



Despite the fact that these false teachers are said to have bad motivations as well as bad teaching, that does not mean that one cannot teach dangerous false theology with good intentions. Sometimes teachers themselves have been led astray and make “honest mistakes” in their teaching. In that case I would prefer to say that they are teaching falsehood rather than that they are false teachers.

This danger of accidentally teaching things that lead people astray is part of the reason that it is a great responsibility to become a Christian teacher. James warns us that

“Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.”

This warning shows that it is very difficult to never mis-speak in our teaching, but also that teachers are accountable for the things that they teach. So be careful what you teach!

One last note on false teachers is a story from the book of Acts in which a group of Jews to whom Paul came and told about Jesus wondered whether he was a false teacher.

Acts 17:10-12

10 As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. 11 Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they

received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. 12 As a result, many of them believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.

The Berean Jews are praised as having “noble character”, but the sign of their character was that they were interested in this new teaching, but then studied their Bibles to see if what Paul and Silas were saying was really in agreement with the revealed will of God. They neither rejected outright this new teaching about Jesus, nor did they immediately accept it. This is our “gold standard” for how to respond to new religious teaching. Does this teaching match up with the Bible? If it does, then fine. If not then reject the teaching and try to determine if the teacher is making an honest mistake or has impure motives. A teacher who makes an honest mistake can be dialogued with and perhaps persuaded. A false teacher we should simply keep our distance from.