

“WILL THE REAL APOSTLE PLEASE STAND UP”
(2 Corinthians 11:5-15)

One of the first and most popular games shows on TV was a show called *To Tell the Truth*. Some of you might remember the show, and it actually has been revived a few times, most recently in 2016. The show featured a panel of four celebrities who tried to determine out of a group of three contestants who was telling the truth. The host would start by saying, “One of these three is the real so-and-so,” and state their unique claim to fame – whether it was working as a rodeo clown or swimming the English Channel. The catch was that two of the contestants were imposters who pretended to be the person, while one really was the person. After the celebrities quizzed the contestants and voted on who they thought it was, the host said, “Would the real John Smith please stand up?”

I’ve watched several old reruns of the show on YouTube and it’s hard to figure out who’s lying and who’s telling the truth, and many times the panel was fooled. Imposters are good at what they do and are not always easy to spot. It’s not surprising that nearly every book of the New Testament gives some kind of warning about false teachers and prophets who claim to come from God but are actually working on behalf of Satan. The fact that there’s so many warnings in scripture highlights how we can be taken in by falsehoods without even knowing it.

This is the concern the Apostle Paul has as he concludes his second letter to the Corinthians. Certain false teaches had come into the church after he left and were leading people astray from the truth Paul had taught them. In order to get the people on their side they said that Paul was not a true apostle – he was not sent by God and had no authority over them – while insisted they were the real apostles they should listen to. As their spiritual father who led them to faith in Christ, Paul is not about to sit idly by and watch these intruders take over and led people away from the truth. In chapter 10-13 he defends himself against the attacks of his opponents, and exposes these imposters as teaching a different Jesus, a different Spirit, and a different gospel.

Today we’re going to look at chapter 11, verses 5-15, and see the marks of a true apostle, as well as the marks of a false apostle. This has great application for us today as our world is filled with preachers and teachers and authors and podcasters that claim to speak for God – and we have information coming at us from every direction. How do you know who to believe? How do you spot an imposter?

We start with how to spot a true apostle in verses 5-11, and they are identified by five marks. The first mark is **a knowledge of the true gospel**. In verses 5-6 Paul writes... **“Indeed, I consider that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles. Even if I am unskilled in speaking, I am not so in knowledge; indeed, in every way we have made this plain to you in all things.”**

Paul’s opponents had convinced the Corinthians that Paul was a sub-standard apostle, and one of the things that marked him as an inferior apostle was his lack of speaking skills. Greek culture placed a high value the art of speaking, and it was common for philosophers and teachers to travel from town to town, wowing crowds with their eloquence, wit, and humor. The best speakers had strong, magnetic personalities that could manipulate people into following them and their message, and were treated like celebrities.

In contrast, when Paul showed up in Corinth five years earlier, he looked bedraggled, penniless, and appearing altogether unimpressive. Instead of wowing people with great oratory skills, Paul simply preached the gospel of Christ and called people to repent and be saved. He purposefully chose not to show off and impress people, or to manipulate them with his words, and in 1 Corinthians 2:4-5 he explains why... “My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power.”

Paul was highly intellectual and could hold his own in rhetorical skills, but he wanted his message and his style to come from the Holy Spirit so that the Corinthian’s faith would rest not on human wisdom, but on God’s power. If Paul had used the typical Greek style of strong eloquent, rhetoric combined with persuasive manipulation, he would have gained followers, but they would not be Christ-followers, and their lives would remain unchanged apart from the gospel.

When you’re listening to someone speak for God, be careful not to be taken in by their charisma, their eloquence, or their popularity at the expense of what they’re actually saying. One of the draws of megachurches is that they are led by highly gifted preachers who have the naturally ability to motivate and convince people to do something. Many of these pastors use their skills to preach the gospel and sound doctrine, but some do not. Some use lots of spiritual and biblical-sounding words, but stop short of preaching the gospel – focusing instead on what people want to hear, not what they need to hear. Don’t be taken in by how something is said without paying attention to what is actually being said.

Charles Spurgeon, the great English preacher of the 1800s, says he was saved at a tiny little church on a snowy day when the regular minister couldn’t make it because of the snow. As a young man, decided he’d go to church that particular Sunday when there was no preacher to preach the sermon, so one of the deacons stood up and did his best to explain the gospel. There was no flash or eloquence to the sermon – he kind of sputtered along – but Spurgeon trusted Christ as his Savior. It was the power of God that saved him, not the eloquence of the preacher – and that’s the first mark of a true teacher.

The second mark of true apostle is **financial integrity**. In verses 7-9 Paul says... “Was it a sin for me to lower myself in order to elevate you by preaching the gospel of God to you free of charge? I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you. And when I was with you and needed something, I was not a burden to anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied what I needed. I have kept myself from being a burden to you in any way, and will continue to do so.”

One of the criticisms of Paul was that, unlike other teachers and philosophers that came and went from Corinth, he refused to receive money. In that culture it was customary for teachers to receive financial support from their followers, and it proved your prestige and influence. The better speaker you were, the more money you received – if you were a so-so speaker, you didn’t make as much. Paul’s opponents said, “Why doesn’t he take money? If he is such a great apostle, why doesn’t he charge a speaking fee? Maybe it’s because he’s not really an apostle, and not worthy of being supported.”

Paul purposefully chose not to receive financial support from the Corinthians for a couple of reasons. One was because he didn’t want people to question his motives. In chapter 2 he said that he didn’t want to be like other teachers who peddle the gospel for profit – he didn’t want people to think he was only in it for the money and distract from his gospel message – so he chose to support himself by working as a tentmaker. He did not want to burden the people he was trying to reach with having to take care of him.

The other reason Paul didn't take money is because he didn't want to be obliged to anyone – like a politician who receives money from a special-interest group and is expected to return the favor by voting for their causes. Paul wanted to keep his gospel message pure and unadulterated by money.

He did say, however, that he received support from the churches in Macedonia that were already established. His general rule was that he would not accept support from a town or church where he was currently ministering – so that he could be free to share the gospel without strings attached – but he would accept financial support from previous churches he started that shared his vision for evangelizing new places. He says, “I robbed other churches to support me so I could serve you.” This was a witty way of saying that other churches gave – often out of their poverty – so that the Corinthians could be ministered to for free.

The lesson is to beware of ministers or ministries that focus on money. Money, of course, is needed to do ministry, and Paul says elsewhere that it's appropriate to pay ministers for the work they do – but a sure sign of a false teacher is an over emphasis on appeals for money, and living an indulgent lifestyle at the expense of people who sacrifice to support their lifestyle. One of the qualifications of a spiritual leader in 1 Timothy 3 is that he not be a “lover of money.” A true spiritual leader learns to live according to his means and do not have a strong appetite for material things that are fleeting and temporary.

The third mark of a true apostle is **personal character**. In verse 10 Paul says... “As surely as the truth of Christ is in me, nobody in the regions of Achaia will stop this boasting of mine.” Achaia is the region of Greece Corinth is in. He says, “I'm not changing my style and approach to ministry – I'm not going to be flashy and eloquent – I'm not going to ask for money – nobody is going to pressure me into changing – because he says, the truth of Christ is in me.” That's a deep statement – Paul did not just know truth, he didn't just speak truth, he lived the truth – the truth of Christ was in him.

Paul was like John the Baptist, who Jesus said was not a reed swayed by the wind – he was not the kind of leader who put his finger in the air and see what way the wind was blowing and base his message on popular opinion. He was a man of conviction – he was guided by the truth of Christ in him.

Billy Graham referred often to a crucial decision he made at the beginning of his ministry. In the summer of 1949, Graham and his team were preparing for the famous Los Angeles crusade when he went through a major crisis of faith. One of his fellow young evangelists began to express doubts to him about the Bible. He said, “Billy, you're fifty years out-of-date. People no longer accept the Bible as being inspired the way you do. Your faith is too simple.” This caused Graham to enter into an intense time of doubt about the Bible for several weeks which finally came to a boiling point while he was alone in a cabin in the San Bernardino Mountains.

Alone in his cabin he studied carefully what the Bible said about its divine origin. He recalled that the prophets clearly believed they were speaking God's Word; they used the phrase “Thus says the Lord” (or similar words) hundreds of times. He also observed how Jesus accepted scripture as the Word of God. Shouldn't I have the same view of Scripture as Jesus? Finally he went for a walk in the moonlit forest. He knelt down with his Bible on a tree stump in front of him and prayed, “Lord, there are many things in this book I don't understand. There are many problems in it for which I have no solution. ... But, Father, by faith I am going to accept this as thy Word. From this moment on I am going to trust the Bible as the Word of God.” Graham says this encounter was the single biggest turning point of his life and was a decision that launched his ministry as a preacher. That's the kind of conviction Paul had as he lived by the truth of Christ.

The fourth mark of a true apostle is **a love for people**. In verse 11 Paul says... “Why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do!” Paul’s opponents had convinced the Corinthians that Paul’s style of ministry proved that he really didn’t love them... “If he really loved you, why won’t he accept money from you which and form a bond of connection between you. By refusing to take your gift Paul is showing disdain for you and showing that he really doesn’t love you.”

Every time Paul turned around his opponents were lobbing accusations meant to tear him down. Imagine what it must have been like after pouring your heart and soul in the church at Corinth, and suffering so many adversities to bring them the gospel, only to be told you don’t love them. “Well,” he says, “God knows I do! I may not be able to convince you, but I rest in the fact that God knows my heart.”

It’s ironic that Paul’s opponents were saying Paul didn’t love the Corinthians when they were the ones who were using the Corinthians for their own selfish means – they claimed to love people but were using people for their own selfish gain. This is a classic sign of cult leaders – they use and manipulate their followers to gain power and control and feed their own ego. Unfortunately, we see this in churches as well where pastors use their authority to dominate and control people.

In contrast, 1 Peter 5:2-3 instructs elders to... “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.” A true spiritual leader loves people and serves them rather than use them for his own selfish goals.

The fifth mark of a true apostle is **consistent conduct**. Verse 12 says... “And I will keep on doing what I am doing in order to cut the ground from under those who want an opportunity to be considered equal with us in the things they boast about.” The fact that Paul didn’t receive financial support struck a nerve with false teachers because they knew deep inside that it made him look pure and authentic – while it made them look money-hungry and selfish. They probably tried to goad him into taking money so that he would stoop to their level.

Paul says, “I’m going to keep ministering the way I always have been – I’m not going to get caught up in the theatrics of speaking or appeal to you for money – I’m going to just keep preaching Christ and good news of salvation.” He hoped that over time the Corinthians would come to see that the false teachers were more interested in the Corinthian’s money than in their spiritual wellbeing. Paul’s consistent lifestyle would silence his critics.

He was much like Daniel in the Old Testament whose enemies tried to find dirt on him, and the only thing they could find is that he worshipped the God of Israel. They coerced the king into making it a law to not pray to anyone but the king, but Daniel continued doing what he did every day – he opened his window toward Jerusalem – for everyone to see – and prayed three times a day, giving thanks to God. He didn’t change, and in the end, he silenced his critics and God was glorified throughout the kingdom.

The lesson for us is: Live a consistent life – don’t give into the pressure to adapt to what is popular or safe – and over time the cream will rise to the top – people will notice your consistency – they will notice the contrast – and it will point them to God and to the truth.

In verses 13-15 Paul shines the light on false apostles and exposes them for what they are... “For such people are false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.” Just as there are ways to spot a true apostle, there are tell-tale signs of a false apostle. The first is **false teaching**. There are four key tests in evaluating any teacher who claims to come from God speaking the words of God...

Number one, do they teach that Jesus is God? 1 John 4:2-3a says, “This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God.” While on earth Jesus claimed to be God come in the flesh, and He backed up His claim when He rose again from the dead. This proves that He was not just another religious leader – He is God come down from heaven to save us from our sins. If Jesus is not God, there is no gospel.

Number two, do they teach that Jesus is the only way to heaven? Jesus claimed to be the exclusive way to eternal life – He is the only one who can forgive our sins and make us right with God. Beware of anyone who teaches there are many ways to God and denies the exclusivity of Christ. If Jesus is not the only way, there is no gospel.

Number three, do they teach from the Bible? If someone claims to be from God speaking the words of God, then they are going to teach directly from the revealed Word of God. Paul told Timothy, “Preach the word.” Billy Graham was known for saying, “The Bible says,” in his sermons. Our church doctrinal statements says that the Bible is our final authority in all matters of faith and practice. The Bible is a plumb line by which we can test every teaching. If it matches scripture, it’s sound teaching. If it deviates from scripture, it’s false teaching.

Number four, do they teach all of the Bible, including the parts that difficult to hear? One of the tell-tale signs of a false prophet in our day is that you rarely hear them say anything hard or negative – it’s not even so much what they say, but what they don’t say – they never talk about sin, they never talk about repentance, and they never talk about a future judgment – all of which are an integral part of the gospel.

The second sign of a false apostle is their **deceitful character**. True messengers of God display the Christ-like qualities of humility, servanthood, and compassion. False teachers appear to have these qualities, but time eventually reveals that that’s not who they really are. Jim Jones, the infamous cult leader convinced hundreds of people in the 70s to come live with him in a commune near Ukiah, California and devote their lives to him. He targeted poor, marginalized people and embraced them. He was lauded for his ministry to the poor, and some influential politicians even endorsed him. But underneath his cloak of compassion, followers later revealed that he was arrogant and cruel. He used people to inflate his pride, and controlled every aspect of their lives, including all their money.

Ex-followers talked about how he would preach morality from the Bible at the same time that he was sleeping with multiple women from the church and was addicted to drugs. Yet he was able to deceive 909 people into moving to a jungle in South America and committing mass suicide by drinking arsenic-laced Kool-Aid.

If you look at any cult leader, you always find the same traits – a strong, charismatic leader who targets weak, vulnerable people, and controls them to feed their own selfish desires. The Bible says a true leader of the church is above reproach, he's not arrogant, he is faithful to one woman, he doesn't lord it over his congregation and try to control them, but leads by Christ-like example. He doesn't possess all the power but is accountable to other godly men. No teacher is perfect, but if they do not manifest these character qualities, don't listen to them.

The third sign of a false apostle is their **deceptive tactics**. Paul says they masquerade as apostles of Christ – just as Satan masquerades as an angel of light, as his servants they also masquerade as servants of righteousness. Whether they're aware of it or not, false teachers are secret agents of Satan – who Jesus called “the father of lies” – and they follow His game plan of deception. Satan doesn't come as the prince of darkness with horns on his head, wearing a red cape, with a pitchfork in his hand, and says, “I'm here to mess your life up” – he disguises himself as an angel of light – he wants you to think that he's good and truthful – that he's someone you can trust – someone who has your best interests in mind and wants to help.

He didn't slither up to Eve as scary-looking snake, he can as a beautiful looking creature. The Hebrew word for serpent means “the shining one,” a phrase associated with a divine being. The serpent was likely a beautiful, normal looking animal – and certainly no one to be afraid of – disguised as someone wise and good. He got Eve to question God's goodness and wisdom, and made sin look pleasing and attractive. What he didn't tell her were the enormous consequences of disobedience she and her offspring would suffer for the rest of human history.

It's no wonder, Paul says, that false teachers – as Satan's servants – would disguise their teaching and their character in order to get people to trust them. In their teaching they use biblical words and spiritual jargon, they talk about Jesus, but they don't talk about the gospel. They shy away from the difficult truths of scripture and tell people what they want to hear. They try to win people over with false character – pretending to be caring and compassionate, but underneath the façade they are wolves who use people for their own selfish ambitions and greed.

Paul ends by saying that “their end will be what their actions deserve.” God will hold them accountable on judgment day for the people they have led astray. James 3:1 says that not many should wish to be teachers because those who teach will be held to a more strict judgment – because what they teach can influence someone's eternal destiny – and false teachers will one day answer to God for their actions.

The question this passage forces us to ask is: Who are you letting influence you? Who has your ear? Who are you letting shape your thinking and beliefs? The warning is to be careful to only listen to teachers who have a true knowledge of the gospel, who are not in it for the money, who have a godly, consistent character, and a caring heart for people.

Stop listening to anyone who doesn't teach that Jesus is God and the only way to God – stop listening to anyone who doesn't teach right from the Bible and believes it is the Word of God – and be careful not to be taken in by someone's charisma or charm – but is a humble man of God who cares for people. Spiritual imposters are not always easy to detect, but the more you learn and know the truth the better equipped you will be to discern error and not be duped.