

**Message #68 of Scripture Beneath The Surface**  
***"They Shall Make Merchandise Of You"***

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Hello! Thanks for being with us. Today I'd like to take you to a verse in the Bible that presents a warning message to Christians. It's found in 2 Peter 2:1-3, and it deals with false teachers, and what to look for. 2 Peter 2:1-3; says, "But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who secretly will bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. 2 And many will follow their pernicious (ruinous or destructive) ways; and because of them the way of truth will be evilly spoken of. 3 And through covetousness will they with feigned words make merchandise of you: whose judgment will not linger for long, and their damnation will not slumber."

First of all, let's go back to verse one. This verse refers to prophets of the Old Testament which were sometimes false. Using this concept, Peter is plainly warning Christians that just as there were people in past times that were deceptive, even though they were claiming to be representative of God, the current and future day would also have people who were deceptive. It's no great hurdle to comprehend that in every day and age there are people who claim to be representatives of God, yet have less than sincere motives. In today's church society there are a multitude of deceptive tactics aimed at fleecing Christians of their money. Verse three has just stated this by saying that the intention of these false teachers is to make merchandise of those people who listen to them. This means that they want to use Christians as a means of getting money. That's what a merchant does. A merchant is a person who deals in trade for goods and services.

Now, we don't generally think of ministers as being merchants. Ministers are supposed to minister to the needs of the flock. The very term, minister, means to perform a service for someone. But, the term, minister, is used very loosely by many Christians, and if we take a close look at what a minister is supposed to be and what ministers really are, we may be able to see some significant discrepancies within the ranks of the shepherds of God's flock.

Notice that I referred to the flock as being God's flock. Sure, I guess you could refer to a flock being the shepherd's flock, but only in the sense of the shepherd being authorized to oversee the sheep, but at the same time remembering that the sheep actually belong to God. The sheep do not belong to the shepherd, and the work of the shepherd should only be accomplished within the framework that God has established. If you, as a pastor, think you are the owner of the sheep, than you are not truly a shepherd. All Christians belong to God. Therefore, a minister is only a shepherd of the sheep within the context of God's rules.

It's interesting to take a look at verse three of the verses we just read, and zero in on just what Peter is warning us about. 2 Peter 2, verse 3, tells us that these false teachers are motivated by covetousness. This means that the false teachers which inhabit the Christian church will be motivated by money. It is gain that the false teachers are aiming for, gain of money or other forms of worldly goods. In short, the false teachers are aiming to use you to line their pockets so that they can live luxuriously.

It is important to realize that Peter is giving a warning. And it is important to heed warning messages. God doesn't use scripture to give us warning for no reason at all. If the Bible is warning us to beware of false teachers, then we should beware of false teachers and we should try to focus on those things which the Bible clearly emphasizes when it talks about them. If the Bible says that the false teachers will be motivated by greed, then we Christians should not ignore evidence of covetousness. If there is evidence that a minister is covetous, and is living a life of fancy cars, expensive homes, and lavish expense accounts, then we have evidence that this minister is not a true shepherd at all, but rather a merchant which operates in the arena of acquiring financial gain through deceptive tactics. In short, they are false shepherds which are intent on fleecing the sheep rather than feeding the sheep. Even 2 Peter 2:3 refers to their words as being feigned. The actual Greek word for 'feigned' is, "plaster". It isn't the real thing, but just a plaster casting of an object, a look-a-like. The minister's words may roll off the tongue like oil, but in reality they are deceptive words intended to bring in the luxuries which appeal to their fleshly appetites.

Difficulties in recognizing a false teacher exist because of the fact that the false minister will be using Bible terminology. They will be speaking scripture. An example of this is found in the Bible when Jesus refers to the scribes and Pharisees who used the scriptures to convert people to their religion, and were looked upon by the majority of the Jews as spiritual leaders, but were, in Jesus' words, ravening wolves, who spoke great swelling prayers as a pretense, but who had a tendency to steal the livelihood of widows. Matthew 23 is a good example of these things, and in these verses Jesus makes it very clear that the priesthood was much more corrupt than most people seemed to realize. In fact, even though the current day priesthood at that time were

supposed to be the shepherds of the flock, they were so greedy of financial gain and of personal glory that they even plotted against the very God they were supposed to be serving.

And today, in our current church society, what might be even more mind boggling is that many Christians have no clue that they are being used as merchandise by various so-called ministers. No, I'm not talking about your average hard working pastor, but about those false teachers who Peter said, in 2 Peter 2, verse 1, would be in the church, and who could be recognized by their greed for money, power, and personal recognition. But Christians of today are not really that different from the people of Jesus' day who believed the scribes and Pharisees were truly led by God. Just as the people of Jesus' day were deceived by the scribes and Pharisees because they were the recognized church leaders, so are the Christians of today deceived by modern day scribes and Pharisees. No, not all ministers are in the false teacher category. And the point I am making is not that ministers are false, but that Peter has pointed out to us that we can get a good idea of where a minister is really coming from if we take a look at whether his ministry focuses on financial aspects, or focuses on the actual needs of the flock.

Some questions to ask ourselves concerning ministers, is, "Is this minister encouraging riches. Is he or she teaching a doctrine that a godly person should get gain?" 1 Timothy 6: 5 specifically refers to ministers who teach people that the successful Christian should be acquiring plenty of money. It says, "Perverse disputing of men with corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: withdraw yourself from them." This scripture is a clear admonition by the writer of Timothy to separate yourself from any minister who suggests that successful Christianity means that God wants you to be rich. In every Biblical verse concerning riches, it is quite clear that riches are not equated with godliness.

An interesting verse which is not usually looked at when considering this subject is Luke, chapter one, where Mary's prophetic statements concerning her motherhood of the Christ child indicate that God has not looked on the families of the elite of Israel, but on a woman of low estate. But notice especially verse 53 in which Mary says, "He has filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he has sent away empty." This verse clearly implies that the rich are not those whom the Lord approves of and blesses, but rather that the Lord looks upon and blesses the poor. Let's look at some other verses that refer to riches.

How about the verse of Matthew 13:22 which says, "Also, he that received seed among the thorns is he that hears the word; and the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he become unfruitful." This is directly referring to the destructiveness of riches toward the word of God. Matthew 19:23 says that it is extremely difficult for a rich man to enter into heaven. And, Luke 6:24 very plainly says, "But woe unto you that are rich! For you have received your consolation." Luke, chapter 16, tells us the story of the rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who lived sumptuously, but he ended up in Hades, while at the same time the poor man who was a beggar ended up in Paradise. Even Jesus Christ is described as having succeeded as our Lord and Savior because he was willing to give up everything to become poor that we might have eternal riches.

1 Timothy 6:9 tells us that those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. And 1 Timothy 6:17-18 tells us that we should not trust in uncertain riches, but that we should be rich in good works and in distributing to those who are in need. It is so sad to hear ministers in some churches, and especially on the radio and television, that are overly occupied with getting funds from their listeners. The business of ministry for the radio and television audience has become a well oiled machine which is geared to bringing in large amounts of money on a continual basis. I firmly believe that many ministries exist, not as a calling from God, but by the use of solicitation tools.

One well established minister even admitted that it was an established fact that the only thing keeping a ministry from success was a large enough database of addresses. He stated that there was statistical evidence that proved that a return of a specific percentage of dollars could be expected in direct proportion to the size of the mailing list which the ministry sent out. In other words, if the ministry sent out 100,000 letters, that ministry could expect a statistically guaranteed x amount of dollars in return. Therefore, the implication was that the most important thing for a ministry was addresses of Christians. No wonder that current Christian ministries use every technique imaginable to get people to write in.

If you have ever responded to a ministry with a prayer request or donation, have you ever noticed that you are on that ministries mailing list forever? Have you noticed that regular requests for money are the order of the day? As each address is entered into the database each person will then get a regular flow of mail from that ministry asking for donations, and quite probably presenting an opportunity to purchase religious merchandise of one form or another. Some ministries excel in the offering of religious goods. They offer every conceivable kind of religious book, religious trip, or religious trinket. They freely hawk everything from Bibles to prayer cloths to guided tours to the Holy Land or a cruise ship to Alaska in order to get more money, more addresses, and to get as many people to become familiar with them and their ministry as possible in order to keep the flow of money coming in

But God isn't about money. The Bible clearly tells us in 1 Timothy 6:10 that the love of money is the root of all evil. It tells us to flee the things of covetousness and to follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, and meekness. God isn't about getting money. In fact, the essence of the Gospel is just the opposite. But people who covet are not only found in the pulpit, but are also found in the congregation. And, as was stated in 2 Peter 2:2, it is the ignorant greedy hearted people of church pews who make the false teachers so successful. When a preacher starts telling people that the Holy Spirit of God is falling because there is gold dust falling from the ceiling, he isn't trying to get you closer to God, he is trying to get your wallet closer to him by appealing to your own sense of greed. Greediness of gain is rampant in the church of today because greediness of gain is rampant in the hearts of church goers. Jesus didn't tell us to get rich, he told us to pick up our cross and follow him to Calvary. It is in the dying that we come into eternal life, not in trying to live lives of luxury.

So, how come the TV and radio ministers, and other local ministers who follow these celebrity ministers, are not exposed for what they truly are? Is it so difficult for Christians to recognize a

minister for what he really is when they see or hear of him driving a BMW or living in a multimillion dollar house? Is it so difficult to recognize that this minister has forsaken the calling of the sacrificial cross? Is it so difficult for Christians to see the deception in a minister's words? Just because the minister says, "Jesus," does not mean he is really talking about the same doctrine of Christianity that Jesus talked about. But then, are you really interested in the Jesus of the Bible, or are you interested in the Jesus of today's modern prosperity doctrine? Are you interested in the real Jesus Christ who died for us and asked us to give up our own lives also for others, or are you more interested in living a sumptuous life of luxury? Are you susceptible to the deceptions of greedy ministers because you yourself are greedy too?

Any Christian who takes a little time can easily see past examples of ministers which have fleeced the flock. There's no reason to name names, but certain names do come to mind. But the people who support these ministers are either greedy for gain just as are the ministers, or they are ignorant of the scriptures. Yet, God has given us the Holy Spirit who will guide us into all truth. And yes, he also gives other ministers who will warn the people, but the warning of the people will do no good if the people do not acknowledge the warning and then go to God for answers.

So, when you listen to a ministry, and they dwell for a considerable portion of the program or church service on financial matters, take a hint. Are they looking to meet your needs, or have they convinced you that you are now the financial ministers who will support the work, and it is now your responsibility to support them so that they can save the souls? Yes, to support those who minister the word and doctrine to you is a good thing, and to support the work of ministries is a good thing. But I'm not talking about ministers who take up an offering. I'm talking about the ministers who do two specific things. The first thing is that they make a significant emphasis in every service concerning donations and/or the sale of religious items. And secondly, they live sumptuous lives. They live delicately. They live expensively in every way.

These are the simple basic tools that Christians can use as a warning. No, it doesn't mean that just because a ministry asks for donations that they are corrupt. But, notice that there were two specific things I mentioned which point to false teachers. One, they dwell on the subject of donations or religious merchandise in every service, and two, they live lives of luxury, while at the same time many of those who donate to their ministry might be supplying those donations from fixed incomes which are at or below the poverty level. In Matthew 12:38-44, Jesus refers to the church scribes who loved to go in long clothing and who loved the greetings in public places, and how they liked to devour the houses of widows. Then the scripture immediately refers to a certain poor widow who came to the treasury collection box and cast in two mites, which were the smallest of coins. It is interesting to note that this poor widow was in need, but that the scribes and Pharisees of the day were quite happy to take her money, but were not overly concerned with meeting the poor woman's needs.

It is not really significantly different in the church ministry world today. But, it probably won't change, either, for the Bible clearly indicates that things will get worse and worse as we get closer and closer to the return of Jesus Christ. But just because things will get worse, doesn't mean that Christians are supposed to swallow every ministry sales pitch hook, line, and sinker. If

so, then the Bible would not have given us warning. No, maybe not every prosperity teacher is a Jim Jones, but if it's important to discern between the righteous teachers and the false teachers in order to protect your lives, isn't it also important to discern between the righteous teachers and the false teachers in order that you can properly support the true work of God and not be giving to a ministry which is going to use the word of God as a tool for financial gain rather than as an assist in meeting the needs of people? If the ministry is spending the greater portion of their donations on a lifestyle which is in accordance with the rich and famous, than what are you really contributing to?

I would suppose that most of our present day ministries are sincere, and that most of our present day church pastors are also sincere, but there are many who are not. There are many who do a good work for the Lord, and their fruits can easily be recognized. These are the ministries and churches you should support, not those who emphasize financial prosperity, nor those who live sumptuously. The real message of the cross is to be a living sacrifice for Jesus Christ in order that others might believe and receive the promises of God. If you're hooked on financial prosperity, than so be it. But don't be surprised if you wake up one day and realize that these false shepherds have stolen you blind. However, if they do steal you blind, there's a good possibility that you were blind in the first place, at least blind to the word of God.

In 2 Peter 2:1, we read that these false teachers would introduce damnable heresies into the church. This is already blatant in today's Christian church. In addition to this, verse one also indicates that some of them would even deny Jesus Christ, the Lord who purchased them. To deny Jesus Christ is certainly a damnable heresy, but just think about the minister who freely uses the name of Jesus Christ with his lips, but very clearly speaks of a false doctrine of Jesus with his lifestyle. And it is when we actually witness the lifestyles of these wicked false teachers that we can recognize the false presentation of the word of God. Remember, Satan's lies are not 100% contrary to scripture. Satan uses a lot of truth and just enough untruth to deceive people. If you're being used by the merchandising ministers who live lives of luxury, then you are being deceived with a lot a truth and some untruths. They may profess to live great lives of faith, and they may also lay claim to many wonderful works. But although they may look very good at face value, they may not measure up when you look beneath the surface.

If you're a follower of someone who is promoting financial prosperity and encouraging riches, and if you support a minister who is blatantly living contrary to the true doctrine of the cross, I encourage you to go to the scriptures and compare that minister's life with the word of God. And then, when you see someone who is only speaking the word of God, but not living it, I encourage you to do what the Bible tells you to do. In referring once again to 1 Timothy 6:5-6, when you find someone who is equating the gospel with financial gain, you should do what verse six tells you to do. You should separate yourself from that person, and have nothing to do with them. This, IS true scripture.