

# How to spot a false teacher

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 03 August 2025

Preacher: Ben Traynor

[ 0 : 00 ] Anyone here has ever read a Where's Wally book? Where's Wally? Or if you're from the other side of the pond, it's Where's Waldo over there.

I don't know which one came first. Was it Waldo who became Wally or Wally who became Waldo? I'm not sure. But you know the book, or many of us will. There's an incredibly busy historical picture with loads going on.

And there are lots of people in white and red stripes. And you have to find Wally, the main character in his white and red stripes with his hat and everything else. But it's not just Wally, is it?

It's Woof's tail. That was always the hardest one I found to try and find. There's the wizard. There's Wenda. And there's someone else. There's a baddie, isn't there? Odlaw.

Odlaw is just Waldo backwards. And he's got it backwards, doesn't he? Everyone's in red and white stripes. He's in black and yellow. And in the TV show, he tries to steal from Wally, take from Wally, slow him down.

[ 1 : 02 ] He is the troublemaker. Well, this evening, as we come to Titus chapter 1, we're coming to look at the troublemakers on Crete.

And we're going to see there really are troublemakers on Crete. And those troublemakers, those wild beasts, as Paul calls them, they're there in the church, near the church, by the church.

They're people who are not teaching, not holding to the gospel that was handed from Jesus to Paul to the apostles. If we can put it this way, they've got the gospel, but back to front and upside down.

And so this evening, as we look at these verses, Paul is writing to Titus to tell him how to spot a false teacher, how to pick them out of the page, how to pick them out of the crowd, to know what they're wearing so we know what they're like and how to avoid them.

And that can be hard. Really, we think? Can that be difficult? Well, yes. It can be hard because they're in amongst the church. That's what we're going to see. They're of the circumcision party.

[ 2 : 14 ] They're speaking about Jewish myths. We read of that there. And so they're likely coming close to or in amongst the church, and that can make it hard. Oh, put Odldaw on a page by himself, and you'd spot him a mile off, but put him in a page of all the other characters, and even though he's dressed differently, he's still hard to see.

Put false teaching out there on its own. I don't know what you'd call the church, false teaching, church of the false teachers that meets every Sunday at 11 o'clock.

Well, it's going to be pretty clear, isn't it, if it's on the sign outside the church, if it's on the top of the bulletin. We're going to know what it's all about. But when false teachers can come into the church, near the church, when they can put on dog collars, climb into pool pits, read the Bible with people in small groups, how much harder it is to spot.

And so I think then that helps us see a little of why Paul is going to need to include these verses and underscore the need for healthy elders, for healthy elders that are being sent out and established there in the church.

So why then is Paul needing to do this? It helps us see that. Why does we need to do it? Because we could ask the question as we come to these verses, why not just go from the end of verse 9, this great description of what an elder should be, to chapter 2, verse 1, or chapter 2, verse 2.

[ 3 : 42 ] Keep it positive, Paul. Keep it positive. Keep about the need for instructing in healthy doctrine. You've just said that in verse 9. You're going to tell Titus to do that. Chapter 2, verse 1 and 2.

Keep it friendly. Keep it positive. Why are you needing to kind of look at the negative here? Why are you needing to call these people out with, let's be honest, very strong words?

Isn't Paul just being a little unkind, a little unfriendly? Maybe a little bit self-serving. Maybe you're visiting this evening. Maybe you're new to church, not being along to church very much, and you're thinking, wow, what we just read there, it seems quite strong.

Calling out people. Calling them liars, deceivers, evil beasts, and saying that is true. Maybe it just confirms everything I thought about Christianity.

These Christians are just Bible bashers, unkind to people who don't think like they do. Is that what Paul's doing here? Well, no, not at all. In order to see what health looks like, as we looked at last week, what sound doctrine, what healthy eldership looks like, sometimes you need to see what is unhealthy.

[ 4 : 52 ] I think doctors probably do this every day. Here's what healthy scar tissue looks like. But if it starts, I don't know, if it starts pussing or bleeding or turning gangrene or bursts apart, well, it probably isn't good.

You probably need to come back in and see me. It would be very uncaring of a doctor, wouldn't it? Not to give you a health warning. Sometimes you need to say, this is what you don't want to see in order to know what's healthy.

If you see this unhealthy thing, you need to walk away from it. That's a kind thing. And that is what Paul is doing here. Perhaps another example might be something like this.

When we arrived in America, when we lived out there, one of the first questions I asked someone was about the snakes. Tell me how to identify the worst kind of snakes. I mean, I knew what a snake looked like.

Okay, I at least had that bit down. But which snakes do I stop at with a distance and try and take a photo of because it's sort of cool? And which snakes do I run for my life from? And when people give you that advice and say, you see that kind of snake with the hourglass pattern and the copperheads, you want to run.

[ 5 : 59 ] It is life-saving advice, life-saving advice. And that is what Paul is doing here, giving advice that might save their spiritual life from being very unhealthy and very unpleasant.

Finally, the Bible metaphor we can lean into really is shepherd and sheep. Sheep need to know what a wolf looks like and sounds like.

So when they hear it, they turn around and run to the shepherd for help and protection. It is no use a sheep, let alone a shepherd, seeing a wolf and walking towards it.

No, you want to hear its call, spot it in the shadows and run. And that is what Paul is giving us here. So how do we spot a false teacher? Or what are the characteristics of these false teachers that are in Crete that these healthy elders need to be established, that they might be rid of the false teachers?

Well, let me give you three characteristics here then of the false teachers. Their words, their motives, and their actions. And we'll look at some implications at the end. So firstly, their words.

[ 7 : 10 ] Verse 10, what does Paul say? They are insubordinate, they are empty talkers, and they deceive. And in verse 12 there, he calls them liars.

So perhaps the question arises, well, insubordinate in relation to what? Empty talkers, deceivers, liars, about what? Well, I think it's going to be in relation to the sound doctrine of verse 9, the sound doctrine of 2.1 that he's referring to.

Notice the bread around this very nasty sandwich filling. The bread around this very nasty sandwich filling is made up of sound doctrine. And so they are swerving, deviating, lying about what sound gospel doctrine is.

And they're insubordinate. So we could see them a little bit like soldiers, these false teachers, who enlist in the uniform, but when given a command by their commanding officer, well, they ignore it. They turn around and they walk away. And again, we want to get a little bit more specific. In what regard is there empty talk and deceit? In what way is there this empty speech?

[ 8 : 23 ] Well, we get two hints or we get a few hints. One in verse 10, they're of the circumcision party. And so likely then, there is some kind of Jesus plus theology going on.

Some kind of Jesus plus some kind of Jewish tradition and law keeping. But again, what specifically? Well, Paul doesn't say exactly, but he does say there, doesn't he, that they're teaching what they ought not to teach.

It is something clearly that butts heads that is against what sound doctrine is. And so I think the principle is this. At the very start, our first time round in Titus two weeks ago, we had a kind of

Twitter length form of sound doctrine or maybe it's called X now or whatever it is, but you used to only be able to put a few characters.

We had that kind of Twitter length form of healthy doctrine. And in the next few weeks, Joe and Donald in chapter two and three, we'll see Paul gloriously kind of give, I don't know, do you call it Facebook length or whatever, give a much longer description of what healthy doctrine looks like. Glorious. There are some beautiful, wonderful, wonderful explanations of the gospel here. Well, I think the principle is that this, it's anything that doesn't accord with that, anything which doesn't accord with how Paul has opened this letter or what he goes on to say.

[ 9 : 48 ] If people teach anything against that healthy sound doctrine, then that is empty words and deviating from the truth. In North Carolina, when we lived out there, our phones were connected to an early warning system for bad storms or for tornadoes.

Once we were sitting in church in an evening service a bit like this, the minister was preaching and the whole room from one side to the other went bing, bing, bing, bing, bing, all the way around, all the phones beeping up.

There was a storm coming or tornado had landed nearby. Do not go outside. And I think that's what Paul is saying here.

It's a storm warning or tornado warning. Here is your, do not go near this warning. Dear friends this evening, do not go near any kind of teaching that veils itself as Christian but says something like Jesus plus religious law keeping.

Jesus plus some kind of special diet. Jesus plus some kind of special knowledge or rights. That is damaged doctrine. We saw gloriously, wonderfully this morning, didn't we?

[ 10 : 59 ] From Hebrews chapter 10. Jesus is sufficient. He has done it all. Nothing need be added. And what's the result of this diet of damaged doctrine that these kind of false teachers have here?

Well, verse 11. Damaged doctrine leads to damaged households. Damaged doctrine leads to damaged household. This kind of legalistic teaching which it would have been.

It's throwing families, what did he say, into chaos. It's taking the ground from under their feet. It's causing chaos. It's upsetting, unsettling them because they're hearing a gospel where something is being added and bolted on to the end.

It does not belong there. I wonder if you've ever seen or experienced or had family members who have been in or seen or known of some form of church or Christianity which was very legalistic.

A religion all about external actions but didn't convey the grace of the gospel, the glory of the gospel to our hearts, that it is all of Christ.

[ 12 : 06 ] I wonder if you've ever seen that. This kind of Jesus plus law keeping, it's often cold, heartless, alienating.

It pushes people away from Jesus and often their churches and their families too. And so what's the elder's job when there is this kind of teaching which ought not to happen?

There is this kind of Jesus plus salvation by works thing going on. Verse 11, what's the elder's job? The healthy church elder's job? It is that this teaching is to be silenced.

It is to be silenced. There's no room for it. And so how are elders then to silence it? Are we to silence legalism, this kind of plus thing going on, this Jewish tradition stuff going on which we'll see a little bit later with kind of anti-law stuff?

Well, kind of do as much as you like. Anti-nomianism. Is that the answer? Well, no, that's not the answer. What's the answer? The answer is verse 9. The answer is 2-1.

[ 13 : 10 ] The elders are to teach sound doctrine. Teach sound doctrine. They teach the gospel of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

The only medicine that is to be administered to that of legalism is the gospel of grace. There was a great moment in Pilgrim's Progress, John Bunyan's great book, Pilgrim's Progress, where Christian is in search of being rid of his burden, his sin.

And he takes the advice of Mr. Worldly Wise Man and he goes looking for Mr. Legality. And going near his house on this mountain, Bunyan writes that he sweats and breaks out with fear.

That Christian, on his road to be rid of his sin, gets near Mr. Legality and sweats and breaks out with fear. And that is the kind of upsettedness, I think, that we read of here.

But thankfully, in that moment, Bunyan goes on, evangelist finds him and sets him on the right gospel road again. And so, elders here this evening, ruling elders, teaching elders, that is your role when you uncover legalism.

[ 14 : 23 ] Find legalism and the medicine you apply is that of the gospel. So how do we spot a false teacher? Words, words that are empty, words that deceive, people that are insubordinate and offer a kind of Jesus plus way of salvation.

Second, let's look at their motives. Let's look at their motives. There's kind of overlap here with words, motives and actions. But let's look at the middle bit of this, their motives. Well, what are some of their motives? Verse 11, we read that they teach out of shameful gain, these people. And verse 14, they are devoted to Jewish myths and the commands of people who turn away from the truth. So it's shameful gain and it's kind of horizontal looking to other people for their kind of being commended.

In some ways, we could put it this way, shameful gain, they're in ministry for themselves. They want their name in lights, their brand to be known.

But they're asking, what can the church do for me? Not how do I serve the church? Was it JFK in his inaugural address? Did he not say something like this? Ask not, what can the nation do for me?

[ 15 : 40 ] But what can I do for the nation? Well, these people are wanting the church to be the ones to serve them, not them serving the church. That's their motive, gain, shameful gain.

Now, of course, that doesn't mean that a church shouldn't care for pastors or elders in any kinds of way, not at all. But it means that an elder or a pastor, those that have just, Paul's just been writing to Titus about, they're not going into ministry, into serving in that way, saying, this is all here for me, about me, for me, for my shameful gain, whether financial or with reputation.

I know that by teaching this or not teaching this, I know by living this way or not living this way, somehow I can get ahead in the world or in the church. So again, how do we actually spot this?

What does this look like in the church? Well, I think the answer is, and what we're going to go on and see, we spot this, that these ministers actually look like the world.

They look like the world. If you look down to verse 12, Paul ties their appearance and attitude to the worst kind of Cretan behavior.

[ 16 : 57 ] And so in Paul's mind, what's the best way to describe false teachers? He says, look at the prophets. That is the kind of the poets, the poets of the day.

See what they say about the people, about non-Christians, and apply it to these teachers. What does he say there in verse 12? One of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said, Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.

This testimony is true. Liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons. He says, that's what we say about the Cretans, and that's exactly what these false teachers are.

So want to see what these false teachers look like? Well, they look exactly like those people living around you, the people you're meeting in Sainsbury's, or Tesco's, or sit next to on the bus, or at work, or the people that you're reading about in the newspapers, or on the television.

Oh, they're dressed up in religious clothes. Verse 16, they profess to know God, but essentially, I think Paul there, by quoting from that poet, is saying they've taken on the spirit of the age.

[ 18 : 06 ] They've taken on the spirit of the age. So want to know what a false teacher looks like, and sounds like? Look at the world, and watch them embrace it.

Look at what's popular out there in media, and the world today, and watch them take it on. Friends, I wonder if you've ever seen that before.

I wonder if you've ever seen that before. Have you ever seen a church, or denomination, or an individual minister, or elder, change their mind, change their tune, alter their beliefs, to line up with what's going on in the world, media, TV, politicians, whatever they're saying.

Now, the thing that is, is that we commonly think, that is a spirit of anti-law, of anti-nomianism, if you like. But actually, there's a very definite legalistic base to it.

Oh, I know I used to think that. Oh, I know Jesus says that. But actually, you must have to believe, or say, or think, or be doing X, Y, or Z, to be really accepted by God.

[ 19 : 12 ] These false teachers fit in right with the world, right with the Cretans, around them. So, want to spot a false teacher?

See what issues? See what issues, so clearly contradict Scripture, and sound doctrine. Look for something that the church hasn't taught, or has taught, perhaps, for 2,000 years, and watch some teachers, begin to embrace it, and teach it, and live it.

It might be these things. It might be laziness, being gluttons, it might be evil beasts. But in our day and age, perhaps, it's those things, or other things. And that embrace, comes from shameful gain.

Best seats, at the table, invited to speak, to the right politicians, easier life, media around us, applauding us. Oh, look how courageous, and brave, they are.

I heard recently, one very well-known church leader, refer to himself as thick, for once holding a biblical, Christian ethic.

[ 20 : 19 ] And by calling himself thick, he was really labeling all, who hold to a biblical, orthodox, Christian, sexual ethic, thick. And to do that, in a very, very well-known place, in front of cameras, with all the right kind of people watching, is shameful gain.

He did it for the applause of the world. But it is a sure sign of a defiled mind, and conscience.

Friends, I'm not sure that many ministers, or elders set out looking for shameful gain.

At least not today, or the last number of years in Scotland. But oh, how easily it is that it can come.

The gain of wanting to be accepted, so not teaching a certain truth of Scripture.

The gain of wanting to be liked, so living a certain way that is lazy, or gluttonous, or whatever it is, in order to get the right people listening, and liking me. And so, dear elders, be on guard.

Or those who would head into gospel ministry, in some way, shape, or form, be on guard. How easy it is for our hearts to slip into this. We're not immune to these temptations.

[ 21 : 39 ] Our hearts are always prone to our own glory. We are glory thieves, are we not? We want to be liked, needed, applauded, and we must be on guard.

And so, again, what are elders to do if they ever see this? Well, verse 13, Paul has strong words, doesn't he? That is, this kind of thing is to be rebuked.

It is to be rebuked. And actually, I don't think it's only elders rebuking other elders if they see it. The them there in verse 13 is kind of ambiguous.

It's speaking of elders teaching it, but also those who have come to kind of fall into this kind of false teaching. And so, really, I think it means that elders are to come around anyone within a church family who have fallen into unhealthy teaching, unhealthy living, and rebuke them that they would regain health.

But again, notice the goal here. Notice the goal. Yes, they are to be rebuked, but they are to be rebuked. Why? What does Paul say there at the end of the verse?

[ 22 : 44 ] That they may be sound in faith. That they may be sound in faith. That the loving purpose of any doctrinal correction is people being healthy and being fruitful lives.

It is to be loving. It's never to humiliate people for being gullible and maybe falling for this, but it is to love people, to win them back, that they might be restored to health.

So, do you see their motives? Do you see who they truly are? Shameful gain. All for them. Finally then, their actions, their words, their motives, and their actions.

Verse 16, they profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. And then look at Paul's conclusion for these people. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work.

Want to spot a false teacher? Look at how they live out their lives. Look at the fruit of their lives. Are they obeying? Or actually, as Paul is hinting at here, are they disobeying God's word?

[ 23 : 55 ] Are they openly, unrepentantly teaching one thing and doing another? Oh, they profess to know God, but deny him with their works.

We had an example of this recently, didn't we, in Matthew 23, as we were working through Matthew on a Sunday morning, the woes to the scribes and Pharisees. The scribes and Pharisees who tithe dill, but neglect weightier matters of the law.

They're clean on the outside. They clean the outside of the cup, but inside are full of greed. They're like whitewashed tombs, Jesus says, beautiful on the outside, but full of dead people's bones and uncleanness inside.

That is really, they're full of hypocrisy, mask wearing, doing one thing publicly, but with something else underneath. And that's exactly what Paul says here, doesn't he, in verse 15.

To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled, and unbelieving, nothing is pure. Both, but both their minds, their consciences, are defiled. That's these people here, defiled minds, unclean, unclean.

[ 25 : 08 ] Now we know hypocrisy, mask wearing, is very ugly, is it not? That the politician who tells people never to take the car, but has a personal driver and drives everywhere.

That the actor who says, we need to save the planet by never taking planes, but will fly private 45 minutes away to go to some restaurant to pick up food for themselves.

The pastor who teaches that we are saved by grace alone, all the while running a very legalistic household, where his wife and children have to earn their way from his naughty list to his nice one. It's very ugly, is it not? Hypocrisy. And note then, what this kind of thing does in the church. What does Paul say there? It denies God.

That is, I think that's really just saying, it puts people off. People don't look at any of those scenarios and think, wow, look how appealing all that is. It just puts people off.

[ 26 : 12 ] It denies God and turns people away. Now, we want to be clear. Hypocrisy, or this kind of teaching one thing, professing one thing and living another way, denying by their works, hypocrisy is that, but there's some things it isn't.

Hypocrisy isn't struggling with a sin. It's not someone battling through an issue and wanting to be corrected and seeking help for that. No, we all are.

No, hypocrisy is the person who knowingly hides behind good to do evil. One person puts it this way, that the hypocrite is the Christian who uses the veneer of public virtue to cover the rot of private vice.

That the man living a double life, the woman fooling her friends because she has church clothes, the student who proudly answers questions in Sunday school and just as proudly romps through immorality the rest of the week.

That's these false teachers here. False teachers married to false lives and actions, those which deny God and openly turn away from his word.

[ 27 : 23 ] And Paul is clear in his condemnation of such things, is he not? Right there at the end, these people are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work.

Not only are they to then be nowhere near your eldership, they're to be nowhere near your Sunday school, your creche, your youth group, any kind of teaching or role in the church.

No, they have turned away from the Lord and his teaching. All right, let me just give you four implications from that then. That's how we spot a false teacher. Words, motives, actions, that's some of the ways here.

And that kind of thing is to be run from, fled from, rebuked, by those who are leading healthy churches. But let me give you four implications for all of us. Firstly, let me encourage all of us to encourage our elders, to encourage our elders.

Standing up for truth, teaching truth, correcting people is not always easy. So dear brothers and sisters, encourage them. Thank them for a well-led life group study.

[ 28 : 27 ] Thank them for the time they put in to attend session meetings, for meeting you for coffee and all these different things. Encourage your elders. Secondly, though, as relating to your elders or within that first one, please bring questions to your elders.

With the massive amount of books and online teaching that there is today, we're going to come across doctrine or teaching perhaps we don't know or maybe just don't understand.

We're going to have questions. So please go to your elders and bring those questions to them. And if they don't know, I don't, likely I wouldn't know, not that I'm one of your elders, but I'll go and find out.

We will find out. We want those kind of questions. Maybe we're listening to something and it's a bit like that where's Wally picture. Yeah, where is Wally here? Where is the true teaching?

Or is this someone dressed up pretending to be Wally? Or maybe this is odd law and we want to run away. I have been really encouraged to hear about one or two folks that have come to elders or to Joe or Donald and been asking questions over these months and please keep doing that.

[ 29 : 32 ] We always want your questions as we always seek to point you to the Lord Jesus. So encourage and talk to your elders. Secondly, make a point of praying for the work of Edinburgh Theological Seminary.

Make a point of praying for the work of ETS because do you see what Paul's strategy is here. John Stott kind of puts it this way. He says, when false teachers are on the increase, when this kind of thing is going on, when there are those that are detestable and disobedient, unfit for any good work, what is Paul's strategy?

Chapter 1, verse 5. It is to flood the island with what? Healthy elders. To flood the island with pastors, with true teachers, with sound doctrine. And so pray for the work of ETS.

So many, really all of the ministers in this denomination or most of them will come through ETS. So pray for them. Pray for the staff as they seek to live out the gospel, to teach healthy doctrine, that

those people who come through would be equipped with sound doctrine as they go on to serve in churches around our nation.

And likewise, within that, pray for the work of MTA. Pray for that Bible handling and equipping work that goes on, that people would be taught sound doctrine as they go out into churches to serve across the Northeast and beyond.

[ 30 : 49 ] So encourage, talk to your elders, pray for ETS, MTA. Thirdly, as we come to a passage like this, I think we should be praying that we would receive sound doctrine and teaching.

We want to receive sound doctrine and teaching. There is only two postures to the Word of God. There is the bended knee or there is the turned back.

So let's pray that our hearts are soft enough that we would bend the knee, that we would receive Christ in His Word, especially when it corrects and sharpens us as we grow in health as Christians following the Lord Jesus.

Fourth, and finally, our final point, our implication. Let's give thanks and praise God for the Lord Jesus. I don't mean this as some kind of Jesus or gospel bolt on at the end.

It really is where I want us to finish. because after looking about and thinking about those who are in ministry or being elders for selfish gain, then rightly, we want to look and praise God for the Lord Jesus who came not to be served but to serve.

[ 32 : 00 ] As we look at those here who have lied, we want to finish by looking at and praising God for the Lord Jesus who is the way, the truth, and the life.

As we think about people here who are lazy or gluttonous, we want to praise God for the Lord Jesus who was never lazy, who was never gluttonous, that gave all that he could for our life and our salvation.

We want to look at one who wasn't an evil beast but is the Lamb of God who came to take away the sin of the world and lay down his life for his sheep. One who is always good, always kind, always pure, whose word can always be trusted.

He is the good shepherd and we have a true and good shepherd and he is the one we look to, he is the one we listen to and he is the one that we worship. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for the Lord Jesus who is our true prophet, our true priest, and our true king. may we always worship him.

[ 33 : 11 ] May we always listen to him. We thank you that there is not one word that ever came from his mouth that was deceitful or a lie or a half-truth. No, he is true. And so we may we listen to him and look to him and worship him until we see him face to face and we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen.