

The Accidental Wolves

By Rev. Anthony Wade
December 1, 2014

But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some. - 2Timothy 2: 16-18 (ESV)

You don't know their heart! You can't judge their intent! Such are the cries from the sheep who enjoy having their ears tickled in these last days. Who have gathered around them teachers to tell them what they want to hear. That sin is irrelevant for believers. That God is never angry with them. That God always wants to heal them. That He wants them overflowing with the temporal riches of this world. That this is their best life now. That every day is a Friday. That unity is about agreement not obedience. All of this is but irreverent babble, which our key verses warn us about today. Before we get there however it is important to consider this defense so we know it is not viable. It seems we like to think the wolves in the church walk around with a big sign around their neck saying, "Warning! I am a wolf!" That they are easy to spot. That is not what the Bible teaches however:

"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits." - Matthew 7: 15-20 (ESV)

The false do not come to us exposed. They come dressed as fellow sheep. They know the drill. They know when to say amen and when to shout hallelujah. They know when to be rejoicing and when to lie in sackcloth and ashes. And they know the Bible beloved. Quite often they rely on their verbal gymnastics with the text and our ignorance to tell the subtle differences to spread their false gospels. The question before us today however is what is their intent? Does it matter if in their heart of hearts they intend to do right even though they do wrong? I think we all know there are

some wolves who know full well they are wolves. They preach to make merchandise of the Gospel and of the people of the Lord. They do so for shameful gain. They do not believe what they preach. They do not practice what they preach. I think we can look at someone like a Benny Hinn or Mike Murdoch and safely conclude that they are willful deceivers. Their track record bears this out. One might look at a Joel Osteen and firmly believe that he thinks he is doing the right thing that he sees the help he provides on a carnal level and simply confuses it with eternal help. There are a myriad in between the extremes. In between the purposeful and the accidental wolves. The Bible makes these delineations for us as well:

“Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.” - 2Timothy 3: 12-13 (ESV)

While we see things going from bad to worse we need to recognize that some are active deceivers and some themselves are deceived. The question however is - does it matter? Apparently according to these texts the answer is no. Regardless of being deceived themselves or actively deceiving others these verses still refer to both as evil people and imposters. A wolf is a wolf is a wolf. I understand that he is charismatic. I understand that he is a gifted speaker who captivates your attention. I understand that he may be a swell guy who has ministries that help the community. I do not need to know his heart beloved. I only need to evaluate his fruit. That means his teaching. Does his teaching depart from the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Let us turn to our key verses for today and an example I believe of accidental wolves.

In verse 16 we see the warning. We are to avoid irreverent babble. I do not want to gloss over the usage of these words. I think we have become so desensitized in the modern church that we can see a word like irreverent and skip past it as if it were not a big deal. Beloved it is a big deal to God. Here is the Bible Dictionary definition:

A complete absence of the proper sense of awe, respect and wonder that is inspired and demanded by the character and activity of the living God. Irreverence involves disrespect for the character, deeds, words, law and ministers of God. As such, it brings judgment upon those who behave in this way.

Wow. A complete absence of the proper sense of awe, respect and wonder that the character and activity of God should command! Do we grasp that today? The character and activity of God demands reverence! It demands respect! It demands awe! This is the living God! He created the universe by merely speaking! He breathed life into the dust and created us! He loved us so much that He was willing to sacrifice His only Son for our behalf. To reconcile Him back to us! People wonder sometimes why I might get so upset when I hear false teachings and this is why!

Do not tell me you have heard from the Lord while you are preaching things that are oppositional to His Word! Where is the awe and respect? Where is the reverence? Beloved, when you hear preachers selling you earthly prosperity it is nothing more than irreverent babble. When you hear snake oil salesmen teaching you that sin and the law are irrelevant to a holy God it is irreverent babble.

When you hear sugar coated, purpose driven, seeker friendly, watered down, self-help and motivational speeches instead of the blood and the cross - it is irreverent babble. A noted heretical prosperity preacher who recently died was quoted once as preaching that "*no one wants to hear about the blood. They want to hear about how to solve their problems.*" When you hear people claiming to be preachers who cannot see how the blood of Jesus solves the problems of sinful man; rest assured you are listening to irreverent babble. Rick Warren, the purpose driven master, recently taught pastors that they should not preach the Gospel on Easter because they "*want to give their visitors something to come back for next week.*" Wow - what irreverent babble.

When you hear the new wave of wannabe prophets and false apostles spewing out nonsense about breakthrough, abundance, dominion, or a "shifting"; you are listening to irreverent babble. When we hear babies try to speak we call it babble because it is silly speak. It is incomprehensible. The same goes for the false teachings we are discussing today. They are silly baby talk. They are incomprehensible when put up to the light of Scripture. It should make no sense to a discerning believer.

So what is the danger of this irreverent babbling? The key verses teach us that it leads people into more and more ungodliness. Note the usage of more and more. This indicates that it compounds. I often get asked what the big deal is? What is the big deal if someone is not quite aligned with Scripture?

After all, they are only trying to encourage people. Make people feel better about their lives. Maybe give them some hope. All noble causes from a human and carnal perspective. If we did not have a Savior I would applaud their efforts for these very reasons. But we do have a Savior. We do have a blessed hope. We do have a way back to the Father. We do have an eternal life to embrace. People do not need to feel better about their lives. They need to feel better about their God. The hope they need is found in Christ. Every other hope is just irreverent babble that cannot save them. It is not encouragement to hold someone's hand as they are heading to hell. It is cruel.

When you teach earthly prosperity you encourage the love for money and materialism. When you preach greasy grace you encourage sin. When you preach purpose driven you drive people away from the cross and it is only at the cross that they can be saved. Inviting Jesus into their hearts is not Biblical. Removing sin and repentance is irreverent babble that will simply lead to more and more ungodliness. People ask me all the time why sin is so rampant in the church and the reason is simple. It is what is being taught. Period.

Not only will it lead to progressive ungodliness, but it will spread like gangrene. The Bible Dictionary definition of gangrene is; *"The name was used by the old Greek physicians for an eating ulcer which corrodes the soft parts and, according to Galen, often ends in mortification."* There's a vivid word picture for what false teaching is to the body of Christ! It is an ulcer that eats away at the body. It attacks the soft tissue, where the body is most vulnerable. It corrodes those soft parts as it spreads throughout the body. In the end however there is only mortification and that means death. Some might be spared. Some may have fallen for the false teaching after having been truly saved by God. Many others however will not be spared. They will bear the gangrene as their faith. They will believe they are saved when in fact they never were:

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" - Matthew 7: 21-23 (ESV)

Take a good long look at the people described here. They are not the un-churched. These people thought they were serving God right up until the end. They prophesied! They saw miracles! All the while they were dying from religious gangrene. They listened to the irreverent babbling of false teachers and made that their doctrine. They made that their faith. Beloved this is serious business. Narrow is the way and few find it!

What you believe matters! Who you follow matters! What teaching you ascribe to matters! Just one honest look across Christendom today and anyone with an ounce of discernment can see the gangrene spreading. Hundreds of thousands following false grace hucksters like Joseph Prince. Hundreds of thousands of prosperity hunters following used car salesmen like Kenneth Copeland. Millions following the purpose driven model of church management. Where shepherds become CEO and sheep become consumers.

Where you grow the church be convincing goats they are sheep as the gangrene continues to fester and spread. More and more ungodliness until they stand before Christ and He says He never knew them. How someone can read these Scriptures and not strive to work out their salvation with fear and trembling is simply beyond me. It is not that I fear God is going to strike me dead with a lightning bolt. It is a fear of becoming so irreverent that I forget that He can if He wants to.

The key verses then offer up two examples for our consideration. Their names are Hymenaeus and Philetus. They are lumped into this group of irreverent babblers. These spreaders of gangrene.

From the text we know three additional things about them. First thing is they have swerved from the truth. This is foundational for dealing with false teaching. It cannot be that we are disagreeing for the sake of being disagreeable. We cannot be splitting doctrinal hairs over disputed matters. If my brother is pre-trib and I am not we are still brothers. No beloved there must be a departure from our core truths.

The second thing we know from the text is the nature of the false teaching they held. They were saying the resurrection had happened already. While this heresy is not spelled out, most theologians liken it to one of the earliest forms of Gnosticism. Here Hymenaeus and Philetus were more than likely teaching that the resurrection had already occurred when we awoke from sin

and that there would be no future resurrection from the dead. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia describes the damage to faith as such:

"The denial of the resurrection of the body, whether of mankind generally or of Christ, is the overthrow of the faith. It leaves nothing to cling to, no living Christ, who saves and leads and comforts His people."

That leads us to the third fact we can glean from the text about these two and that is their teaching were upsetting the faith of some. Upsetting might not be strong enough. Other versions say this was destroying or overthrowing the faith of some. The bottom line is the false teaching was eroding the faith of some believers and leading them astray.

Much in the same way today, we see many false teachers with varied false teachings, leading many astray and destroying their faith as well. For let us not lose sight of the fact that these three things are all the text tells us about these two individuals and that motive, intent, or sincerity are never actually addressed. So let us for a moment give Hymenaeus and Philetus the benefit of the doubt. We can believe that they genuinely believed in what they were teaching. We can believe that maybe they felt it confirmed for them in the Holy Spirit. After all, we can convince ourselves anything is from God. We can believe that they believed they were God's anointed vessels to bring this teaching forth. We can believe they were really nice guys too! That they helped out in their communities. That they cared about the sick and the elderly. We can believe that they were completely accidental wolves. It simply does not matter.

They were still filled with irreverent babble beloved. Being sincere does not erase irreverence. Being reverent starts with being in awe of God and respectful of His Word. Hymenaeus and Philetus were neither. The same can be said for Joseph Prince and Joel Osteen for example. But preacher, Joel is such a nice guy! I am sure he is but that is not relevant when judging teaching. Osteen is so irreverent he has bragged about not needing to apologize for not using Scripture until the very end of his messages and that doctrine is not one of his "giftings." Prince routinely mangles the Bible to prop up his false grace teachings. No awe. No respect. Anyone who shamelessly teaches that because Joseph gave Benjamin five times as much as his brothers that God wants to give you five times as much stuff too has simply no reverent fear of the Lord.

It did not matter how nice Hymenaeus and Philetus were, their irreverent babbling was spreading like gangrene. They had swerved from the truth and destroying the faith of many. There is nothing new under the sun beloved. As it was so it still goes today. There are no shortage of Hymenaeus' and Philetus' in the church today. The Bible makes it clear our job is not to judge their heart but rather their fruit. We are not called to evaluate their intent but rather their teaching.

It matters not if it is by accident or design. A wolf is a wolf is a wolf. We should not found coddling wolves. We should not be trying to find common ground with them.

Holding hands with them. Singing Kumbaya with them. We should not be defending them. Justifying their actions by their intentions. Excusing their false teachings by understanding some deeper sense of their wicked hearts. Protect the sheep beloved. Protect the sheep.