

## When Preachers Turn out to be Wolves

In Acts 20, 17- 35 (pasted at bottom), we read that, as his life was nearing an end, Paul warned the elders from Ephesus that “grievous wolves” would find their way into churches causing destruction to God’s sheep. *“I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock”* (Acts 20:29). Then he went on to say that even from among the elders, wolves would arise and draw disciples away from the Lord to follow them. *“Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves”* (Acts 20:30).

If elders (pastors) can be deceived and needed to be warned, then all of God’s people should take heed to this warning. Every Christian must realize that it is possible that a favorite preacher or pastor might actually be a wolf in sheep’s clothing. To think that your favorite preacher could never turn out to be a dangerous wolf is naïve. If you think this way, you need to examine your Bible and take heed to its many warnings. You need to learn how to recognize the indicators that it provides that suggest a man might indeed be a wolf and not the good preacher you esteem him to be.

Now I admit that this same Paul, in other passages, instructs us to presume the best about all people and keep away from assuming a person is guilty. He went further to say that we are to be extra careful about accepting an accusation against an elder (pastor). (See I Timothy 5:19.) These are very important principles that Paul teaches. But while we should always be in the habit of presuming the best about all people, we must not ignore the many warnings and exhortations from the Bible to be discerning so that we and others are not led astray.

Jesus is The Great Shepherd and He cares for His sheep. He gave us His Spirit and His Word so that we might remain safe under the protection of His wings. Since He cares, He will guide each individual believer and keep them safe as long as we remain diligent to watch over our souls. He has given us plenty of instruction in His Word to make us wise and discerning rather than simple and naïve. But we must be diligent to learn about the warning signs taught in Scripture. We must not stick our head in the sand like an ostrich and ignore the warning signs that Jesus instructs us about in the Bible.

There is no excuse for turning a blind eye to God’s clear warning flags. If you wake up one day realizing you have been deceived, you have nobody to blame but yourself. So, if you desire to be wise and discerning, please consider some of the warning signs taught in the Bible concerning preachers who may actually be dangerous wolves.

### **RED FLAG # 1: Is the preacher living very comfortably with more material wealth than the typical church member in his congregation?**

It is interesting to note in the passage from Acts (provided above), that Paul concludes by instructing the elders of Ephesus to get jobs (work with their own hands) so they would be in a position to use that money to help the weak. This instruction is consistent with the way Paul himself lived and the way Jesus lived. They did not seek the comfort of worldly riches. On the contrary, both Jesus and Paul were often homeless. How does your favorite preacher handle money? Is he like Jesus and Paul or does he live very comfortably? A man’s relationship to money is often an indicator of whether he knows Jesus personally or just a wolf who pretends to be a good shepherd. Jesus and Paul are not the only positive examples preachers should follow. The Bible is filled with people like them. They all had one thing in common. They all considered themselves strangers and pilgrims on earth just passing through. They considered themselves citizens of a heavenly country and not of earth. They did not seek to be comfortable with the comfort this world offers.

The Bible also mentions many negative examples of men who were not like Jesus and Paul. They were men who loved money and proved to be ravenous wolves, not citizens of God’s Kingdom. The Bible mentions them as warnings to us so that we might be wise and discerning.<sup>1</sup> One of the most oft mentioned is a man named Balaam.

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<sup>1</sup> These negative examples can impart discernment to us, not just about other people, but also about our own hearts. These examples should produce a sober spirit that seeks to avoid the destruction seen in the lives of those negative examples. If we are believers, we should realize that except for God’s grace, we will end up destroyed ourselves. So, the outcome of our meditations should be a serious crying out to God to keep us near Him and to destroy any idolatry that remains in us.

## Is your favorite preacher like Balaam who loved riches?

The story of Balaam is found in Numbers chapter 22 – 24. It should be a very sobering story to any Christian. When you first start reading the story, Balaam seems like a godly man who fears the Lord.

*Like Balaam, some preachers maintain an appearance of godliness but inwardly are wolves.*

The nation of Israel, after leaving Egypt, was nearing the nation of Moab as they traveled. Balak, its leader, sent for Balaam, who had a reputation of being able to successfully curse nations and cause destruction to come to them. The messengers came to him with riches to entice him to return with them. Based upon Balaam's response to them, he appears to be less concerned about the riches and more concerned about what God has to say. He said, "*Lodge here this night, and I will bring you word again, as the LORD shall speak unto me*" (Numbers 22:8). He appears to value what God says more than money. Later that night, God appeared to Balaam and told him that He did not want him to return with them. Balaam, appearing to respect God, did not go and told them to leave. So far in the story, Balaam appears to be someone who fears God and values what God wants more than riches.

Balak again sent messengers to Balaam with a promise of even greater riches if he would come and curse Israel. And again, Balaam responded with an appearance of someone who feared God. He told them, "*I cannot go beyond the word of the LORD my God, to do less or more.*" So far, we might conclude that this was a special prophet of God worthy of our respect. Surely this is a man that we should admire and someone from whom we should learn with open hearts. If he had a church, we might assume that those who attend are surely blessed to have such a godly pastor. But notice what Balaam says immediately after. "*Now therefore, I pray you, tarry ye also here this night, that I may know what the LORD will say unto me more.*" The naïve soul might still be under the impression that Balaam was a God-fearing man. But to the discerning heart, this response should raise some concern. God already had told him that He did not want him to go and curse Israel. If Balaam truly respected God, he would have merely told these men to leave. But as we find out later in the Bible, Balaam hated the idea of losing out on the riches being offered to him.

As the story continues, Balaam continues to maintain an appearance of godliness. God tells Balaam he can go with the men but on the way, God shows Balaam that He is angry about it. Balaam tells God he will return home suggesting that he respects God. But God again tells him he can go with the men. When Balak takes Balaam to curse Israel, Balaam refuses to curse Israel because God gave him only words of blessing to speak. To the naïve, Balaam continues to appear a God-fearing man. He seems to obey God and actually speak in behalf of God as one of His prophets. In fact, one of Balaam's prophecies is a prophecy about the Messiah who would come, namely Jesus. Surely, Balaam must be a man of God. If he was a pastor, we should not ever question his message or his motives. Right?

Wrong! Though it might appear that Balaam was a God-fearing man and a prophet who deserves our greatest respect, we learn from the rest of the Bible that Balaam was actually an enemy of God and the Bible identifies greed as the indicator that he was a wolf. Though he refused to curse Israel with his mouth, later, he taught God's enemies how they could cause destruction to Israel by luring the men of Israel to commit acts of sexual immorality. *And Moses said unto them, Have ye saved all the women alive? Behold, these caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to commit trespass against the LORD in the matter of Peor, and there was a plague among the congregation of the LORD*" (Numbers 31:15-16). If Balaam was the God-fearing man he appeared to be, he would not have even gone to curse Israel in the first place. And he would not have given God's enemies the strategy to lure the men of Israel into immorality. Why didn't Balaam just go home? It was because he wanted the money. He just couldn't let it go. How do I know this? Because the Bible says so later:

*Having eyes full of adultery, and that cannot cease from sin; beguiling unstable souls: an heart they have exercised with covetous practices; cursed children: Which have forsaken the right way, and are gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Bosor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness; (II Peter 2:14-15)*

The Bible points to Balaam as an example of immorality. He loved the wages of unrighteousness. This is greed and idolatry. When any man is inwardly greedy and seeks after riches, sexual immorality is often living within him as it was in Balaam.

The book of Revelation also mentions Balaam as a man of gross immorality. *“But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality”* (Revelation 2:14). Balaam’s true colors showed up. He wanted the money offered to curse Israel but God restrained him. So, Balaam saw no problem telling the enemies of God how they could damage Israel by getting them to commit fornication. When a man wants money bad enough, he will rationalize anything. **If** your favorite preacher loves money as Balaam loved money, he too will likely rationalize all sorts of decisions and behavior, including immorality. It is not a coincidence that many wealthy preachers have been caught living lives of gross immorality.

If a preacher lives a more luxurious life than the typical church member in his church, it should be a red flag that indicates a possibility that the man is a dangerous wolf and not a God-fearing man. While we must be careful not to presume guilt, we should at least wonder why the man appears to love riches. Shouldn’t he strive to live as Jesus and Paul lived? The positive examples like Jesus and Paul taught that it is better to give than to receive. They used their resources to help others rather than carve out a comfortable existence for themselves.

Lastly, it is not a man’s riches that prove a man is a wolf. It is his attitude toward them that matters. It is the love of money that is at the root of all sorts of evil. This is why a man’s relationship with money is very important. Even a poor man can have a love for money that indicates he is a ravenous wolf. But when preachers and pastors possess more wealth than the typical church member in their congregation, it raises questions about their relationship to money.

Paul instructed Timothy, *“Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life. (I Timothy 6:17-19)*. If your favorite preacher has more wealth than the typical church member in his congregation, hopefully he lives according to Paul’s instructions and generously uses his wealth to help the weak and spends very little of it on himself. If not, a red flag is being waved and we should take notice rather than turn a blind eye.

## **RED FLAG # 2: Does the world hold your favorite preacher in high esteem?**

Often, preachers that are wealthy are also people that the world does not impugn. There are some very successful preachers who have very large followings. Many of these hold a certain degree of respect from the world, provided they have not been caught living immoral lives. They might be interviewed on television shows. They might be considered as religious authorities since so many people attend their churches.

The naïve will assume that if a preacher has twenty thousand people following him, then he must be a godly man. But the discerning Christian will have some concern about any preacher who is not despised by the world. Why do I say this? Because Jesus taught us this. He taught His disciples as follows:

*If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you”* (John 15:18-19)

Jesus said to His father:

*I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world”* (John 17:14).

According to Jesus, if a man is part of THIS world (as opposed to the Kingdom of God), the world will not hate him because he is part of them. But those who are sheep and not wolves will be hated by the world because

the world perceives they are not part of them. The true citizens of Jesus' Kingdom say and teach things that the world hates and does not want to hear. The world responds by calling them haters and judgers. It has always been this way. Any preacher that loves the approval of men more than the approval of God will purposely teach things that do not cause people of the world to be offended. They will steer clear of telling people that they are headed for hell and that they need to repent of their wicked ways.

Paul instructed Timothy to remain faithful in preaching the truth regardless of how it might offend.

*“Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables” (II Timothy 4:2-4).*

Paul warned that there would be a time when people will flock to preachers and teachers whose message does not offend. These days, there are many such preachers and teachers.

If you have been blindly following men who love riches, preach watered down messages or command some respect from the world, please take heed to God's warnings and use the discernment God desires to give to you. Examine your favorite preacher under the magnifying glass of God's Word and if the warning flags are present, I suggest you begin asking God whether He wants you to stop listening to him.

*Acts 20:17-35: <sup>17</sup>From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church. <sup>18</sup>And when they had come to him, he said to them: “You know, from the first day that I came to Asia, in what manner I always lived among you, <sup>19</sup>servicing the Lord with all humility, with many tears and trials which happened to me by the plotting of the Jews; <sup>20</sup>how I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, <sup>21</sup>testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>22</sup>And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, <sup>23</sup>except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me. <sup>24</sup>But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.*

*<sup>25</sup>“And indeed, now I know that you all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, will see my face no more. <sup>26</sup>Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. <sup>27</sup>For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. <sup>28</sup>Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church <sup>£</sup>of God which He purchased with His own blood. <sup>29</sup>For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. <sup>30</sup>Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. <sup>31</sup>Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.*

*<sup>32</sup>“So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. <sup>33</sup>I have coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. <sup>34</sup>Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me. <sup>35</sup>I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” (Acts 20:17-35)*