

## THREE SAFEGUARDS AGAINST SPIRITUAL CON MEN

*2 But there also were false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will subtly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them—bringing swift destruction upon themselves. 2Many will follow their licentious conduct, because of whom the way of truth will be maligned ... 14With eyes full of adultery and an insatiable appetite for sin, they seduce unstable souls. Having a heart that has been trained by greed, they are accursed children. 15Having abandoned the right way, they have gone astray, following the way of Balaam [the son] of Beor, who loved the wages [to be gained] by wrongdoing. 16But he was rebuked for his transgression: a dumb donkey, speaking with a man's voice, restrained the madness of the prophet. 17These men are wells without water and mists driven by a storm, for whom the black darkness has been reserved. 18Making great claims that are worthless, by the sensual passions of the flesh they seduce those who are just escaping from those who live in error. 19They promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity; for a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him. 20If those who are escaping the corruptions of the world (by the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ) are overcome by once again becoming involved [in those corruptions], this last condition has become worse for them than the previous one. 21It would have been better for them not to have become acquainted with the way of righteousness, rather than, having become acquainted [with it], to turn back from the holy commandment that was delivered to them. 22The true proverb applies to them: "A dog returns to its own vomit; and a sow, after bathing, [returns to] wallowing in the mud." (2 Pet. 2:1-2,14-22)*

### **Introduction**

Six-year-old Eric, together with his brother and sister, were traveling with their parents through the beautiful East European country of Romania.

In the late afternoon they stopped along the roadside for a bite to eat and a refreshing break. Suddenly, out of the woods came two dancing Gypsy boys; they twirled and pranced, with their colorful jackets flapping in the breeze. In wide-eyed wonder Eric and his brother and sister sat down on a log to watch.

"Kids," Eric's father called, "come away from there!"

But the three little children paid no attention; they were too captivated by the Gypsies' performance. Now the two Gypsy boys were playing tug of war with a rope one of them had been wearing as a belt; they both pretended to strain for advantage, then one released the rope unexpectedly and the other tumbled head over heels to the ground. The victor tossed his cap high into the air, and to the amazement of the watching children, it landed back on his head!

"Eric, Heidi, Shaun, come over here!" it was Dad. "Get over here right now!" he commanded.

The three children reluctantly left their seats on the log and returned to their father. “Why can’t we stay and watch them?” the children wanted to know.

Their father pointed toward the Gypsies who were now scurrying back into the forest. “How many boys do you see?” he asked.

“Three!” replied the children.

“That’s right,” said Dad. “While you were watching the two perform, the third one was sneaking up to our vehicle to steal our belongings.” (*POWER*, 6/11/89)

Just as Eric’s father warned his children not to be conned by those three little Gypsy boys, so the Apostle Peter warns us to be on guard against spiritual con men. Be on guard against deceptive teaching that seeks to lure you away from Christ, because it will eventually lead you to destruction.

Let us consider Three Safeguards Against Spiritual Con Men ...

### **I. Safeguard #1: Follow Christ**

In verse 18 Peter describes these spiritual con men with regard to their mode of operation and their objective. They make “*great claims that are worthless;*” or, they utter “*swollen [inflated] words of vanity [emptiness.]*” In other words, by employing an impressive vocabulary, they discourse on strange and mysterious subjects; they flaunt their alleged credentials and supposed knowledge. It all sounds very impressive, but in fact it’s all nothing but empty spiritual nonsense.

Their goal is to entice and entrap those who are just escaping from the old sinful lifestyle by promising them freedom. These spiritual con men intercept people who are just coming out of the ungodly lifestyle of the world—a lifestyle that features all kinds of wantonness, including fornication, promiscuity, homosexuality, drunkenness—and they lead them right back into the moral corruption and bondage they were just leaving behind. They do so by preaching “freedom.” They no doubt maintained that the Christian is free from the penalty of the law, (Christ died for our sins to satisfy the righteous demands of the divine law;) but they then proceeded to misinterpret the purpose of salvation by maintaining that the Christian is now free to indulge the old nature with its sinful desires. Such teaching is a deceitful and damnable perversion of true Christian freedom. In his first epistle, Peter had admonished the church, “*[Live] as free men, but not using this freedom as a pretext for evil; rather, using it as servants of God*” (1 Pet. 2:16.)

Peter declares, “*many will follow*” the wanton practices of these spiritual con men (vs. 2.) Many people shall become disciples of such teachers, accepting their doctrine and imitating their morally and spiritually corrupt lifestyle, note Philippians 3:18-19, “*As I have often told you, and even now tell you with tears,*

*many walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. <sup>19</sup>Their destiny is perdition, their god is their own appetites” [literally, “their god is their belly,”] and they glory in their shameful conduct. They set their minds on earthly things.”* But in contrast to this, the Christian is called by God to follow Christ and to become His disciple:

*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup>Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls; <sup>30</sup>for my yoke is easy and my burden is light. (Matt. 11:28-30)*

*Then he called to himself the [whole] crowd [along] with his disciples, and said to them, If any man desires to be my disciple, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. (Mk. 8:34)*

Peter reveals the tragedy of following spiritual con men instead of following Christ (vs. 17.) Such teachers prove to be “*wells without water.*” They cannot fulfill their promises to provide spiritual fulfillment via the life of lawlessness and wantonness; they cannot lead you into a spiritual paradise, but only into a spiritual wasteland. In contrast to the empty promises made by all such false teachers, consider the promises of Christ, promises He is able to fulfill to the utmost:

*Now on the last day, the great [day] of the Feast, Jesus stood and cried out, If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. <sup>38</sup>Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, From within him shall flow rivers of living water. <sup>39</sup>Now he was referring to the [Holy] Spirit, whom they who believed in him were to receive. (Jn. 7:37-39a)*

Furthermore, such teachers prove to be “*mists driven by a storm.*” They have no true substance; there is nothing solid or substantial about their teaching; there is nothing to which you can anchor your soul. On the contrary, they and their teaching will be swept away by the judgment of God. Again, in contrast to all such teaching, consider the sure promises of the LORD: “*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble ... <sup>11</sup>Jehovah of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge”* (Psl. 46:1,11.) Speaking of the Christian’s hope that is in the Lord Jesus Christ and His finished work of redemption, the writer of Hebrews declares, “*We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure”* (Heb. 6:19a.)

What is reserved for such men (and for those who follow them) is “*the black darkness.*” Here is a reference to the judgment of being cast away from the blessing of God and given over to the righteous curse of God consisting in His divine rejection, as our Lord Jesus warned:

*Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. <sup>22</sup>Many will say to me on that day, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your*

*name drive out demons and perform many miracles?”<sup>23</sup>Then I will tell them plainly, “I never knew you. Depart from me, you evildoers!” (Matt. 7:21-23)*

The first safeguard against spiritual con men is this: Follow Christ, as opposed to heeding those false teachers whose doctrine denies Christ and His Word. Jesus declares, *“My sheep respond to my voice; I know them and they follow me. <sup>28</sup>I give them eternal life—they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand”* (Jn. 10:27-28.)

## II. Safeguard #2: Abide in Christ

Peter describes these spiritual con men as seducing *“those who are just escaping from those who live in error”* (vs. 18)—i.e.; those who are just escaping from the ungodly lifestyle of the world.

Turning his attention from the false teachers, Peter now focuses on these souls who have become their prey (vs. 20-22.) Through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ they *“are escaping the corruptions of the world.”* The people of whom Peter speaks have been introduced to Christ, they have been inclined to follow Christ, and they have experienced some measure of the saving power of God drawing them out of sin. But rather than continuing in Christ, they *“are overcome by once again becoming involved [in those corruptions]”* (vs. 20b.) Rather than becoming disciples, or, followers, of Christ, they revert back to their old sinful lifestyle—they abandon Christ and the Christian lifestyle in practice and in profession. By way of illustration: it is as though they are just coming to shore when the undertow carries them back out to sea.

The consequence of their departure from Christ is stated as follows: *“this last condition has become worse for them than the previous one”* (vs. 20c.) It is worse to experience a taste of the saving power of Christ and then revert back to the old life of sin, than not to have had a personal experience of that divine saving power. Why is this the case? While a present lack of acquaintance with the saving power of Christ may leave open the possibility of future genuine conversion, the result of tasting the power of God and then reverting back from it often times results in a spiritual hardening and deadness, note Hebrews 6:4-6,

*It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, <sup>5</sup>who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, <sup>6</sup>if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. (Heb. 6:4-6)*

There are some very important things to observe about Peter’s teaching in these verses. First, it is said of these people that their acquaintance with Christ introduced them to *“the way of righteousness”* (vs. 21.) The true Christian life is

presented as a journey traveled along the road of righteousness. The initial reception of Christ as Savior is the beginning of an active, dynamic Christian life—that initial reception of Christ is not the culmination of a spiritual experience that atrophies into a static, lifeless religious formalism devoid of life-transforming power, or that degenerates into a life devoid of godliness, filled rather with devotion to the old sinful nature. Second, it is significant that in describing the case of these people Peter refers to Proverbs 26:11, *“The true proverb applies to them: ‘A dog returns to its own vomit; and a sow, after bathing, [returns to] wallowing in the mud.’”* It is the disgusting habit of the dog to return to its own vomit—because it is his natural inclination to do so, that is his nature; the same is true with regard to the sow. Likewise, the fact that these people revert back to their old sinful lifestyle indicates that they are still controlled by the old sinful nature—they have not experienced a radical change of heart, they have not been converted unto God. They have not come to *“share in the divine nature”* (2 Pet. 1:4;) on the contrary, the old nature, though it may have been contained for a time, is still alive and eventually reasserts itself, leading the person back to the old lifestyle. Note: There is a distinct difference between a godly struggle against the remnant of the old nature and the complete return to the life of the old nature.

Here is the second safeguard against spiritual con men: Abide in Christ, as opposed to forsaking Him and reverting back to the former life of sin. Our Jesus declares,

*Remain in me, and I [will remain] in you. The branch cannot bear fruit by itself, it must remain in the vine; so neither can you [bear fruit], unless you remain in me. <sup>5</sup>I am the vine, you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him, he is the one who bears much fruit; for apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup>If anyone does not remain in me, he is thrown out like a branch, and withers. They gather up [those branches] and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. (Jn. 15:4-6)*

### III. Safeguard #3: Grow in Christ

Peter informs us that the primary victims of these spiritual con men are *“unstable souls”* (vs. 14.) He is referring to those who are spiritually gullible—believing and accepting any teaching without exercising discernment. Note the admonition given by the Apostle John: *“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world”* (1 Jn. 4:1.)

Peter is referring to those who lack a standard to serve as a spiritual compass and anchor, a spiritual “touchstone” (a touchstone was a black stone used to test the purity and authenticity of gold.) Jesus’ prayer for His church is that the Father would *“sanctify them by the truth.”* He immediately goes on to say, *“your word is truth”* (Jn. 17:17.) As Christians, we must take advantage of our

possession of the Scriptures, thoroughly acquainting ourselves with them and submitting our lives unto them.

In speaking of “*unstable souls*” Peter is referring to those who allow themselves to be allured by spiritually novelties. In a similar fashion, the Apostle Paul warns the Colossian church not to be lured away from Christ by those who bring new and novel teachings:

*Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. <sup>19</sup>He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow. (Col. 2:18-19)*

Peter tells us at the conclusion of this epistle that a sure way of guarding against the dangers of spiritual con men is to grow in Christ:

*You therefore, beloved, knowing this in advance, be on guard so that you will not be led astray by the error of lawless men and fall from your own secure position. <sup>18</sup>But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (2 Pet. 3:17-18a)*

Here then is the third safeguard against spiritual con men: Grow in Christ, as opposed to being content with a static, stagnant pseudo-Christian life, as the Apostle Paul exhorts the Colossian Christians:

*So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, <sup>7</sup>rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. (Col. 2:6-7)*

## **Conclusion**

Just as little Eric and his family encountered con men (in the form of the little Gypsy boys) in their travels through Romania; the Bible warns us that we, too, may encounter spiritual con men along our spiritual journey. The counsel of Scripture is this: Resist those deceptive teachings that lure us away from Christ and His righteousness, because such teachings will eventually lead to destruction.