

Fraud Alert

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

Introduction

I am very excited this morning. This week I received an official email from a Nigerian Prince...

- Rest easy. I did not respond.

If you have ever had an email account, you hopefully are aware that emails from Nigerian Princes are one of the largest email scams in history.

- I learned this week that Nigerian Prince scams first surfaced in the late 1980s, with scammers sending out mass emails claiming to be a wealthy Nigerian prince who needed help moving a large sum of money out of the country.
- The scam promises a substantial reward for the victim's assistance, with the prince offering a share of the money once it had been transferred.
- And all they need is YOUR bank account information so they can make the transfer happen.
- If you have ever received one, you know that these emails are often poorly written and full of spelling and grammatical errors, so bad it should make them easy to spot as fraud.

"Fraud Alert" has become common terminology in our conversations these days. There are whole industries dedicated to generating it and preventing it. You live with it every day.

- Every account needs multi-factor verification.
- Each Wednesday when I send out my T-Mail, I have to request and receive a new and separate passcode to prove I am who I claim to be.
- When I tried to balance my checkbook this week, I had to verify my identity once again.
- Whenever I log onto my computer – my computer! – I need to know a secret code.

As annoying as all those safeguards are, we are grateful they exist. Right? If they were not there we would be at even greater risk for all kinds of fraud.

Fraud alerts are not new. In our reading from 2 Thessalonians, we see that Apostle Paul had to issue a fraud alert to the Christians in that city.

- The church in Thessalonica had been started by the Apostle Paul during his second missionary journey. You can read the story in the 17th chapter of Acts.
- The church had initially done well after Paul moved on to start another church, but over time a troublesome group of people had become a part of the church.
- These "false teachers" had also begun to spread false doctrine among the Thessalonian Christians.
- They were teaching that the second coming of Jesus had already happened.

- And worse yet, those false teachers were claiming that Paul was teaching the same thing. They even produced some bogus letters they claimed Paul had written.

We ask you, brothers and sisters, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by the teaching allegedly from us—whether by a prophecy or by word of mouth or by letter—asserting that the day of the Lord has already come. (2 Thessalonians 2:1b-2)

So, in essence, in our text for today, Paul issues a “fraud alert.” Jesus has NOT come back. There are several things that have to happen BEFORE He comes back which he outlines in the first half of the reading from 2 Thessalonians). And until all those things occur anyone who is spreading the false doctrine should be treated like a Nigerian Prince.

DELETE!

False teachers proclaiming false doctrine continue their work even today, just as they did in Paul's day. And like the Thessalonians, we are often caught trying to figure out what is true and what is not true.

- What those people are saying “sounds good” and a lot of people are buying into what they are saying ...

So how can we know?

Well, Paul says that in the grand design of God, there is a way. He calls it:

... the sanctifying work of the (Holy) Spirit ... (2 Thessalonians 2:13)

Paul takes his readers back to the teachings of Jesus as recorded in John chapters 14-16 to remind us that the Holy Spirit was given to keep us on track with regard to the Christian faith.

And if you will let me carry my “fraud alert,” just a bit further, Paul says the Holy Spirit uses three tools to help us discern good doctrine from bad. Call them multi-factor verifications.

VERIFICATION #1: WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Look at verse 5:

Don't you remember that when I was with you, I used to tell you these things? (2 Thessalonians 2:5)

Jesus said something similar in those chapters in John:

But the Comforter, who is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in My name, He shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you... (John 14:26)

Those things that Paul taught and that Jesus taught are Scripture now. So one of the ways the Holy Spirit keeps our faith on track is to constantly challenge us with this question:

What does the Bible say about that?

One wise soul once said:

As we fill our minds with the truth of God's Word, we will be better able to recognize the lies in our own thinking, as well as the lies that the world presses upon us. (Anonymous)

I read about how the United States government trains its Federal agents how to spot counterfeit money. It shows them only genuine money, on the theory that if they know what the real stuff looks like, they will quickly spot the fake stuff.

The Holy Spirit so fills us with the truth of Scripture that when we hear the fraudulent stuff, our hearts spot it. Wait! That's not what the Bible teaches!

VERIFICATION #2: WHAT DO OTHER CHRISTIANS THINK?

Three different times in our text, Paul makes reference to "the brother and sisters" in Christ.

- v. 1: "We ask you, brothers and sisters" ...
- v. 13: "We thank God for you, brothers and sisters" ...
- v. 15: "So then, brothers and sisters" ...

One of the biggest mistakes Christians make is to isolate themselves from the community of faith. Or to be consistent with the brother-sister language – from the family of God. We have been given each other for a reason ... and that reason has to do with the collective wisdom and faith within the larger group.

In late 2011 and early 2012 I was faced with a major decision. I had just joined the staff here at Grace as the "Discipleship Coordinator." That was my first job title. We were a new denomination at that time, trying to get ourselves established. I liked what I saw, but at that time I had a 30+ year history in my former denomination. Do I switch or not?

- The only way to make a decision like that was to talk to the brothers and sisters in Christ.
- So I did ... I talked to people in this denomination and in my former denomination. I asked them to pray for wisdom and to share what they heard from God.

Just last week I attended a luncheon where the speaker talked about a woman who wanted to be ordained but had been turned away by two different groups ... so she was looking for a third. She had told him "I am trying to find someone who will help me discern if I am called to the ministry."

- He told her "I think you have been given that answer twice."

When we try to live the faith alone, we expose ourselves to spiritual fraud. We may not go off the cliff with some heretic doctrine, but there are many other things we can come to believe about God, about ourselves, about other people and so on. We need what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called: Life Together.

VERIFICATION #3: WHAT IS THE HISTORICAL TRADITION OF THE CHURCH?

Verse 15 says:

So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings (traditions) we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter. (2 Thessalonians 2:15)

As Christians we are called to hold to the traditions which we have been taught.

- There is great power in being part of the tradition of faith.
- In the sports realm a football team like Ohio State or Notre Dame is inspired and motivated by the traditions of their respective universities. The "big games" between their rival schools produce surprising and remarkable plays and results because of the motivating power of those traditions.

In the struggle to endure incredible persecution by the Russians, Tevye, the father in "Fiddler on the Roof," gives powerful witness to the power of traditions.

And so it is with us in Christ. And if anything, tradition should be an even more powerful force for us than it could possibly have been for the Thessalonians because we have 2000 more years of it. The saints, the martyrs, and the millions of common folks just like us that shaped the tradition of faith by which we now live.

This does not mean all tradition is to be revered. Tradition is not a sacred cow, never to be challenged. In His dealings with the Pharisees, Jesus often had to make a sharp delineation between "the traditions of men" and "the commandments of God."

Rightly considered, good tradition is the historic accumulation of Biblical truth that has stood the test of time. As Lutheran Christians we are anchored to the creeds of the church, the teaching in the Augsburg Confession and the catechisms of Martin Luther. These articulate the faith tradition of the church.

They must always be measured against the Word of God, of course, but they should not be ignored.

APPLICATION

This series of sermons is titled "I AM CONVINCED." I want you all to understand that there are specific truths on which we can build our lives.

In a world where every belief is challenged and questioned ...

I AM CONVINCED that the Holy Spirit will continue to guide me forward in the true Christian faith if I remain in Him.

Amen