Dealing with Spiritual Deception in our Culture

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Date: 25 October 2026

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[0:00] It's probably fair to say that at some point each of us has been the victim of some sort of money scam. It seems, I don't know about you, but it seems like emails and phone scams are completely out of control.

Most of the calls that I get at the moment come from some unnamed call center. And I know if they open with, hello, is that Mr. Mariah's? Then I'm not beginning to talk with you.
It got so bad, I installed the Truecaller app on my phone that tells you that if a number is a scam number. There's one new scam that uses AI, so it's getting really tricky, these scams, if you think you've managed to hold them off until now.
And this AI scam takes a sound bite from a family member through their social media and clones it. And then calls you using their number and their voice.
They have an entire conversation with you and you don't know that it's not them. And then they hit you up for some money. Well, sadly, the Christian world today is also full of spiritual scam artists.
[1:19] What the Bible calls false prophets. People who will use Christianity to make a name for themselves and to get rich at Christians' expense. This is nothing new.

This is nothing new. It was the same in Paul's day. But especially on the island of Crete, where Paul had sent Titus. And it was famous in those days for being a hub of false information, misinformation, manipulation and lies.
And Paul wants to make sure that Titus is able to help the church recognize, oppose and correct false teaching so they're not taken in by these spiritual scam artists.
And so we need this even more today because there are so many voices claiming to be Christian. But like the AI clones, they can sound like the real thing. But instead of giving people God's life-changing truth, the actual intention is just to use gullible Christians to feed their own appetites.
And so we need to start by recognizing spiritual scammers. And we're going to look at verse 10 and 11 in just a bit. Now what we've seen in Titus so far is that Titus has been sent by Paul to establish sound church leaders that will establish healthy churches so that people can experience the promise of eternal life.
[2:50] There's a link between the message of eternal life, God's gift of eternal life, sound church leaders and sound churches. They're linked together. And so in Titus chapter 1 verse 9, church leaders must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also rebuke those who contradict it.

Then in verse 10 and 11, Paul explains why this is needed. Titus 10 and 11 from chapter 1.
There are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party. Titus 10 and 11 from chapter 1.
They must be silenced since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach. Okay, so first we see if we're going to recognize spiritual scammers, we see that they are insubordinate or rebellious depending on your translation.
They don't like authority. They don't like the authority structures that God has set up in his church. They are their own authority. That's why we have so many self-proclaimed prophets and apostles and pastors and teachers in the modern church.
[4:17] And it's also why there are so many pop-up stand-alone type churches. Here in Plumstead, there's a bunch of so-called independent churches dotted all over the place.

And the thing is, what they call independent, Paul calls insubordinate or rebellious. Secondly, these spiritual scammers are empty talkers or mere talkers.
They say things that don't carry any weight or truth or reality. They make empty promises. They make empty promises. And what's worse, they make it sound like God is making those promises.

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These are people who make it sound like God is always going to bless you with every spiritual blessing. All the time.
If only you give them your money. In fact, God doesn't make those promises. He does promise to give us every spiritual blessing we need to handle the ups and downs of this life.
[5:25] And he does promise that in the future we are going to get a whole bunch of physical blessings, more than we need. But he doesn't say you're going to get it all here, all now, all the time.

So by claiming to speak for God, in fact, they're not actually speaking for him. And then Paul goes on to say that they're nothing but liars and deceivers. Still in verse 10, there are many who are insubordinate.
There are many empty talkers. And in fact, they are just deceivers. Deceivers are master manipulators. So the image we've got here is of a slick, second-hand car salesman.
I hope none of you are second-hand car salesmen. And if you are, I hope you're a good one. But we've all come across them when you're trying to buy a second-hand car.
They pretend to like you. They smile. They're your best friend. They look well presented. But there's just that little, there's something where you know, I need to watch out for this guy.
[6:25] I can't quite trust him. But the whole time, he's selling you a dud car. So you can make money from your gullibility. The problem with deception is that it's deceptive.

It's tricky to work out where the lines are between what's 100% true and what's not quite true. And so you need to listen carefully and discerningly to those who claim to teach the Word of God.
By the way, that includes myself and Nick. The best approach when you're listening to Christians teaching you about the Bible is to do what the Bereans did in Acts 17.11.
If you remember, during our growth group series, we did Acts. So Acts 17.11 says this, The Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.
So you're very welcome to do that with myself and Nick and then say, OK, well, is what they're saying lining up with the Scriptures? We, of course, make sure that we do our best to do that, but we're human.
[7:40] And everything we say is based on what the Bible says. Or needs to. Needs to line up with this. In verse 11 in Titus, Paul ultimately shows what the spiritual scammers are actually all about.

Dishonest gain. Dishonest gain. Let me read it for us. They must, so this says, The spiritual scammers must be silenced because they're disrupting our households by teaching things that they ought not to teach, and that for the sake of dishonest gain.
In the end, it all boils down to money. They're not people who serve the living God and his people, but who serve their own wallet and their own stomach.
Well, who are these people you might wonder, you very well could ask. So here's some of them. This is a list of the top 10 richest pastors in America. Some of them you might recognize.
At the first place is Kenneth Copeland. Do you know he's worth nearly $1 billion? He lives in a mansion that the presidents can only dream of.
[8:52] Down at the bottom right at number 9 and 10, my personal favorite is Creflo Dollar. Okay. And in 10th place is poor Joyce Myers.

Her personal wealth is only about $10 million. But her Joyce Myers Ministries is worth well over $100 million.
Now they do do some good. They give it away to charity. If you believe that they do that. But they keep a lot of it for themselves.
Anyway, it's good to know that there's a couple of African guys there as well. We're all catching up. Most of them are not from South Africa.
Let me just put it like that. But how are you to tell? How are you supposed to know?
[10:04] Who's telling you the truth and who's trying to scam you? Well, the first thing we need to do is be discerning who we listen to or who we admire, but especially who we give our money to.

When you listen to these guys for any length of time, they might have a good soundbite. You might get a little meme on your WhatsApp message with like a one, two, just one little message, one little line soundbite thing.
They might sound good there. But in the long run, when you listen to them again and again with their messages, you'll see that they offer nothing but candy floss Christianity.

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It looks sweet. It tastes sweet. But it'll make you spiritually very sick in the long run if you listen to them. Good Christian content is more like a Sunday roast, not Christian candy floss, with meat and potatoes.
And it's actually anyway yummy. It just takes a bit more time to consume and digest, but spiritually it's going to make you much healthier in the long run. So be discerning who you listen to.
[11:27] Watch out for people with bling and how they dress, what they dress like, what they spend their money on.

So take all of those things into account when you're listening to people. However, this passage in Titus says that these are people who are insubordinate, but I want to say for ourselves, we need to keep a watch over our own levels of insubordination when it comes to submitting to God's Word, but also to church leadership.
We live in a culture that doesn't like rules. A culture where individuality and freedom, personal freedom is king. And so too many Christians think they can believe what they like about God, or live like they want without any accountability.
But the Bible calls us to humbly submit our thoughts to what the Bible actually says. And we are to humbly submit to each other when it comes to correcting sin in our lives.
Yes, spiritual leadership can be abused. But in my experience, whenever Christians sit down to talk through an issue, and it is done in truth and love, it always leads to restored relationships.
[12:48] However, Paul doesn't allow false teaching to go unchallenged. In verse 11 he says they must be silenced. And in verse 13, they are to be rebuked sharply.

Now this doesn't mean it must be done in an unloving or rude way. The Bible tells us to speak the truth in love. But the aim is restoration to fellowships.
Have a look at verse 13. He is talking about the cretins. He says that they are liars, brutes, and gluttons. Then verse 13 he says, This saying is true, therefore rebuke them sharply, not that they will leave you and never come back, but so that they will be sound in the faith.
So the aim of when you are speaking with someone who is telling spiritual nonsense, talking spiritual nonsense, isn't to chase them away and make them feel bad.
It is to restore them to the soundness of faith. So you have to make sure that you know what the sound faith is that you are trying to get them towards. But we must not be so loving that we never say anything to anyone about their spiritual deception.
[14:02] We live in a culture where it is, you be you, I will be me, your opinion and my opinion. The Bible is not like that. Truth is not an opinion. Truth is real.

Truth is fact. It is not something that can be twisted by how I feel, how you feel. No. If you are saying something wrong that doesn't align with the truth, with the reality of who God is, of who Jesus is, of what God has promised, as Christians we need to be able to say, well that is actually not quite true.
But of course you need to be able to back that up from scripture. We must not be so loving that we never say anything to anyone about their spiritual deception.
In fact that would be most unloving. But those guys that we saw a bit earlier could be quite easy to spot. I don't think too many of us are running around after Benny Hinn and Creflo Dollar and those guys.
But there is another layer of spiritual discernment that is needed. We are not interested because not only are false teachers deceptive, but we find it difficult to distinguish true spiritual truth from what the culture around us says is true.
[15:22] That is because we are prone to believe what culture tells us is true rather than believing in what God says is true. So the problem is when we are trying to deal with spiritual deception is our own cultural blindness.

So culture is not neutral. But it can be a big blind spot for many Christians because like frogs in slow boiling water we don't even notice that there is a danger with the culture around us.
Or the danger that they are in. And that is why Paul makes this striking call in verse 12 and 13 for Christians to realize just how bad the culture in Crete was. So listen to verse 12 and 13.
One of the cretins, a prophet of their own, said, Well, cretins are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons. This testimony is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply that they may be sound in their faith.
You know, if I did that from this pulpit and I said, you know, white people are always, yeah, I'm straight in Nick's office on Monday morning.

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[16:34] Or colored people, you know, colored people. Like even saying that, some of you are like, hey, you can't say that. And Paul is like, yeah, cretins. Yes. No, man.

Cis. The thing is, Paul isn't being rude here. In the ancient world, cretins were so notorious for deceit that the word in Greek for lying is kretizo.
That's where we get the word from, you're just a cretin. We still use it today. But what Paul is saying is that the problem with the false teachers is that their message and their lifestyle didn't differ from what people expected of cretins.
So, in verse 12, when Paul says one of the cretins, a prophet of their own, you know, says cretins are always lies, etc. And he says, rebuke them sharply.
He's talking about the false teachers. He's not talking about cretin culture that's outside the church. He's talking about Christians inside the church who look and sound pretty much like the cretins outside the church.
[17:42] Does that make sense? They looked and sounded too much like cretin culture. Well, this is still with us today.

In churches that look and sound very much like the worldly culture around them. Think of those spiritual scammers that we saw earlier. They all come from a very capitalist, very consumer culture. Well, it's easy to think if you've got a big house, a bunch of big cars and a big bank balance and expensive clothes that God is blessing you. And so their message, and therefore their churches and what the people in the churches are looking for, is all aimed towards that.
Other churches, like the ones in the UK, have become huge supporters of the LGBTQ movement. Where the Bible clearly condemns, which the Bible clearly condemns as falling outside of God's good purpose for the family.
And so in Titus, Paul calls for Christians to differ sharply from aspects of culture that are not honoring to God. In fact, the gospel calls us to a new culture that is based around Jesus.
[19:05] Not around what people say is right and wrong. But what Jesus says is right and wrong and good and bad. I'm going to read from Colossians 3, verse 9 to 11. It says this, If you're a Christian, you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its creator.

So there's a renewal, there's a change when you become a Christian from the old way of doing things, from the old culture, cultural practices, cultural thoughts, cultural norms.
And there's a new way of thinking, a new cultural norm, a new cultural practices, if you want to put it like that. And he says here, there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all and is in all.
So when you become a Christian, you get a new cultural identity that supersedes your old one, that challenges your old one, and that your old one often needs to change.
For us, that means we're not to be primarily identified by the culture around us, but by our Christianity. Our primary allegiance is to Jesus, not to cultural norms.
[20:34] There are things in culture which is in line with Christianity, but there are things that are not. And we're not to follow them blindly. When I was at university, quite a few years ago now, at Sennibos University, it was very Afrikaans back then, still is, kind of.

And, yeah, all Afrikaans, well, okay, everyone got so drunk Friday and Saturday. It was just the biggest party. But on Sunday, all the Afrikaans would march through the street of Stellenbosch, all the Korsaisa, the Rezes.
They would get together, and there they go to the Engheer church in the middle of Stellenbosch with their bikies. What is a bikie? Yeah, all dressed up like a blazer and smart pants.
The English couldn't be bothered. At least they were, like, I'm not even pretending to go to church. Broken drunk on a Friday, Saturday.
Messing around with girls. And going to church, all dressed smartly on a Sunday. And so we must be careful that we're not letting worldly culture determine what is acceptable and what is not acceptable.
[21:56] We need to look at culture through the lens of Christianity. If you don't do that, you may find yourself repeating the same cultural lines that everyone else believes.

Things like, whites are automatically racist. Men are automatically sexist. Authority is automatically abusive. Women are automatically oppressed.

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And enforcing boundaries is just another form of control. I'm just taking the various things that you hear coming around in culture. You might confuse the truth that God loves you as you are with the lie that it's good to stay as you are.
How many times have you heard the phrase, God made me this way? Or, that's just who I am. Or, that may be. But Jesus doesn't want you to be more like you.
He wants you to be more like him. And that is often going to look different to what the culture says you should look or sound like. And that's why the last point Paul makes is to show us how differently, or how different, Christians are to be from the lying, deceiving culture around them.
[23:14] We need to look at the purity that the gospel brings to this culture that's not quite working properly. The purity that the gospel brings. Culture doesn't just surround us, it also poisons us.

Christians that are not discerning in what cultural message they consume aren't just like frogs being boiled in clean water, as bad as that is, because you're going to end up dead.
But they are like frogs being boiled in stinky sewage water. Too much unchristianized culture in your life will make you so dirty and sick that you're unfit for purpose in God's kingdom.
Let me read verse 15 and 16. Back in Titus. To the pure, all things are pure. But to the defiled and unbelieving, those who don't trust in Jesus or God, nothing is pure.
But both their minds and their consciences are defiled. They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. In fact, they are detestable, disobedient, and unfit for any good work.
[24:32] You see how corrosive and yucky that the culture around us can be? It makes us dirty because it holds on to things that are just totally break down the good things that God says should be in place to make life enjoyable.

On our family farm, we have to filter the water coming in from the dam before it's fit for human use. The dam collects everything that can make you really sick, like dead baboons and animal feces and fly lava. If you drink that water before it goes to the filter system, you're going to get very, very, very sick.
What the gospel does in the life of the Christian is strain out all the impurities that stinks up your thinking and stinks up your lifestyle.
The gospel brings purity of thought, clarity, and impurity of life, cleanness. It's interesting that purity is not exactly something that culture enjoys or upholds as something to be followed.
[25:42] It's got a really bad rap in modern culture. In fact, you'll be teased at school if you say that you're keeping yourself sexually pure. And so we need to hold on to purity as Christians because the culture is not going to do that.

But God wants us to be pure. In fact, he makes us pure. Pure here is clean, without impurities. The thought behind purity and impurity here is of silver and gold that only has worth when it's cleaned out of all the stuff that makes it worthless.
The lesser metals and junk and dirt and gunk. And that's when it's worth something. And that's what Christians need to hold on to. Purity of mind and a pure culture based on Jesus.
So how is the battle in your mind going? Because culture works on this level of, or lies work on the level of our minds and our consciences before it comes out in our actions.
How is the battle in your mind going? How is the battle in your mind going for purity? Or are you immersed in online culture that glorifies the breakdown of the family?
[26:55] That belittles sexual purity? By immersed, I mean just feeding yourself on cultural lies. And most of it is coming through online social media, through streaming services, through YouTube.

That's basically where the cultural voices, the cultural prophets of our day are speaking. All the online stuff. Is what you're consuming making you happier or making you angrier?
Does it give you peace or does it make you agitated? Does it bring you closer to your fellow Christians or drive you apart from other Christians based on presupposition and stereotypes?
Maybe you need to be careful of thinking that purity is about being so prim and proper that you wouldn't dream of getting your hands dirty to help those drowning in their impurities.
So be careful of that as well. Lastly, if you think of yourself as impure and still struggling with the cultural sewage you're trying to escape, then we need to listen to the good news that Jesus brings.
[28:11] So this is in Titus. I'm going to read from Titus chapter 3 from verse 3. Paul says, You know, at one time, we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived, and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures.

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We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. That's every Christian before you become a Christian. But, when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, He saved us from all of that.
Not because of the righteous things we had done, because we haven't done righteous things, but because of His mercy. We know from other places like Philippians chapter 2, where Jesus leaves the glory of heaven and comes down to the muck and the mire and the grossness of a human being, taking the form of a slave, and then dying.
So He came all the way down into the gunk of this world to make us pure. Back in Titus, reading from verse 5, halfway through verse 5, He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by His grace, we might become heirs, having the hope of eternal life.
Ah! I don't know what you feel like when you are dirty and gritty and grotty and haven't washed for a couple of days. Maybe you've gone on camps.
[30:12] Maybe you've spent a day mowing the lawn. Maybe you had to clear the sewage out. Had to do a bit of plumbing at home. Oh my goodness.

And all that yucky stuff is on you. And you go and have a shower. Oh! And you just go nice and clean and everything is washed away. That's what Jesus does for us internally.
We've all drunk too deeply at the sewage of the lies of modern culture. But God doesn't leave us in a sewage tank. It is the love and kindness in the sacrifice of Jesus that washes us and cleans us. Jesus' blood totally removes all the impurities of our past and continues to make us cleaner and purer day by day.
So that our spirits and minds and emotions and reactions to the culture around us get healthier and more wholesome and more good. So if you need Jesus to do that for you, continue to believe in him.
[31:20] Pray to him. Ask him to do that for you. If you haven't done that yet, if you have done that as a Christian, keep on having your mind renewed. Keep on having those impurities cleaned and taken out.

You do that by coming to church and listening to sermons, by meeting together as Christians, by spending time in the Word and praying, by speaking to other Christians, saying, you know, I've got to help me with this. And then help them by telling them what Jesus has done for them.
Let me pray for us. Lord Jesus, we are so thankful for your salvation that you came to clean us and give us new birth and new life and renewal by the Holy Spirit.
And you've poured him out on us generously, Lord. We've got an overabundance of what we need to be clean and pure and radiant.
But Lord, we want that for ourselves, but we long, Lord. We see, we long to help others. We long to change the culture. We see people stuck in the sewage of their lives, Lord.
[32:36] Help us to be to them what you have been to us, a helping hand and someone that can clean them or show them the way to be cleaned. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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