**LESSON 18 - FALSE TEACHING**

**Intro:** Most of the false teaching encountered by the NT church sprang from dualism: assumption that spirit and matter are opposites

- matter is evil, spirit is good

- the two (like fire and water) can never mix.

Most of the false teaching that grew out of these assumptions is called Gnosticism.

(Now false teaching wouldn’t matter if it didn’t affect salvation. False teaching isn’t about details that don’t matter; it’s about whether people go to heaven or hell.

So we need to distinguish between differences of opinion about secondary issues, and false teaching which attack the foundations of the Gospel.)

Our lesson today covers Colossians, Jude, 2 Peter, 1 & 2 John and James. This is a very diverse group of teaching, but all are addressing the issue of a particular false teaching, known as Gnosticism.

1. **Gnosticism:** common elements would include the following:
2. God is spirit and good. Humanity is a small divine spark imprisoned in an evil physical body (because all matter is evil).
3. Creation of the physical universe was an accident, a mistake or even a cruel joke, or wicked act of a small ‘g’ god, anti-god or Satan.
4. Since God is spirit, he would have nothing to do with the world or man.
5. God ruled the world through a descending order of delegated subordinates or "elemental spirits."
6. The lowest of these tyrannical intermediaries was the Creator-God "Yahweh" of the OT.
7. To get out of this predicament we must learn a higher or secret knowledge: we are really imprisoned ‘divine sparks’ waiting to be released and re-absorbed into the Great Spirit, our Source (the essential idea of Hinduism, Buddhism, western versions of New Age teaching).

These are the basic beliefs of NT Gnosticism and from these beliefs, false teaching went in different directions. These six letters address some of them.

The issues resulting from this teaching:

1. The OT was rejected or ignored – b/c it related to Yahweh, taught that creation was good, was not an accident, that sin isn’t being imprisoned in an evil body etc.
2. The significance of the **historic** **facts** of the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus were diminished, because after all, they were only **physical**, and thus tainted, events.

So history, being physical is ignored as unimportant.

1. The incarnation was denied because a good spirit cannot by definition mix with the evil creation.
2. Therefore the dual nature of Christ as God and man in one person was denied: The good God and evil man could not, by definition, exist in the same person.
3. Christology then became something like this:

Cerinthus of Egypt suggested that Jesus (who was the physical, human person) and Christ (who was the spiritual, divine person) should be separated as follows:

* + Jesus the man was born of Mary and Joseph (no virgin birth)
  + The Christ descended on Jesus in the form of a dove after His baptism, empowering him to do great miracles and proclaim the "unknown Father".
  + Christ left Jesus before he died so that only Jesus, the man, suffered and died, while Christ remained immune from suffering as a perfect spiritual being. (This is essentially Islam also, teaching that God whisked Jesus out of his body into heaven leaving a body without a spirit to be crucified or

1. Other Christologies would have Jesus as the manifestation of God on earth, not in a real body (which would be evil), but in a phantom body, or "pretend" body; it only *seemed* to be a body (called "Docetism"), but he was entirely spiritual.
2. Belief always affects behaviour, so ethics went one of two ways:

* Asceticism: trying to control the evil body

- no sex

- no marriage

- restricted diet

Jewish legalism fit in well

* Lawlessness (licentiousness) - body can't contaminate the spirit so it doesn't matter what the body does.

- no moral guidelines

- adultery

- drunkenness

1. The Church was in danger of becoming a club of "illuminati" possessing secret knowledge, which was believed to free their souls to rise unrestricted, a knowledge hidden from the un-saveable ignorant masses, available perhaps (for a price) to the brightest intellectual elite.

This kind of teaching and thinking was a formidable challenge to the early Christian church. It continues to be a challenge if one tries to understand the gospel through one’s culture’s particular set of philosophical "glasses" - whatever a society's philosophy is. One of the reasons it is so important to be in fellowship with other Christians is that interacting with others about the issues in our particular culture helps keep us on track, and recognize the pitfalls.

The following epistles were written, at least in part, to counter various aspects and consequences of Gnosticism.

The "smoke" of false teaching can blind the believer, as smoke blinds and distracts the eyes of those in a burning house. It's important that the church concern itself with sound doctrine – the Truth.

In the West today the threat comes in the form of secular humanism and New Age teaching, which can permeate our thinking at every level.

Sound doctrine leads to sound living: "No evil tree can bear good fruit; out of the heart the mouth speaks." (Matt. 7:18)

**COLOSSIANS**

Speaks to Greek thinking, and Paul warns Christians against the heretical influences of the Greek philosophical schools of thought.

Colossae was a small town 100 miles east of Ephesus in modern Turkey. The church there was probably started during the three years Paul spent in Ephesus, although Paul had never been there personally (2:1). Paul wrote this letter from prison (probably Rome, in 61 A.D.), when he also wrote Ephesians and Philemon. Probably all were carried at the same time by the hand of Tychicus and Onesimus (the slave Philemon was written concerning) (4:7-9).

1. Warning against "syncretism" - the tendency to try and mesh ideas from other philosophies with Christian truth.

Paul focuses on Christology, understanding fully who Jesus, the Christ, is

* Col. 1:15-20
* and the good living that comes out of sound doctrine - 1:21-23

1. More Christology: 2:8-15; vs. 9 – Jesus is fully God, fully man in a real body.

Some of the elements false teachers were trying to mix in were:

* Judaism:
  + 2:11, 3:11 - circumcision,
  + 2:16 - food and drink, festivals, new moon celebrations and sabbaths.

The reality of Christ was anticipated through the OT rituals, but they are of no use any more now that he has come.

* Gnosticism:
  + 2:17 - self-abasement (asceticism) bringing the body into submission
    - Worship of angels. A complex angelology had developed within Judaism in intertestamental times, including the belief that angels were a chain of intermediaries between us and God
    - Pride in those who thought they had “special knowledge”(interpretation of “the mystery of God, hidden through the ages, revealed to us in these days” Eph. 3:3-6), accessible to a privileged few
    - 2:20 – emphasis on spiritual beings (elemental spirits) rather than on Christ
    - 2:21 – legalism – “don’t handle, don’t taste, don’t touch”

1. Paul's answer: None of things have any power to save or bring us closer to God.

* 2:22-23 – Self-denial (asceticism) doesn't help with rooting out greed, lust, pride
* 3:1-4 – There is no intermediary between Christ and God. In Christ we *are in* God.
* 2:3;1:9 - All wisdom and knowledge is in Christ, and is available to all in Him.
* 2:10 - He is the head of *all* rule and authority, not just a lower link in the chain.

**JUDE and II PETER**

**Jude:** written by Jude, the younger brother of Jesus and James (Mk. 6), in 80 A.D.

Jude vs. 3-4 - admission to the fellowship had been secretly gained by non-Christian teachers. They were turning grace into lawlessness (licentiousness).

1. These false teachers were: (v. 16)

* arrogant and immoral
* claiming superior knowledge
* anti-authority
* self-indulgent
* out for all they could get

1. Jude lists OT examples of the same kinds of character traits as these teachers: Sodom and Gomorrah, Cain, Balaam, Korah. All were judged and punished.
2. These OT individuals had some of the same attitudes of rebelliousness, expediency, lawlessness, and hatred of authority as these false teachers.
3. Jude's intention is to strengthen their resistance to false teachers. Only follow Christ (v. 24-25)

Unique characteristics:

* Jude quotes two books from the Apocrypha (other Jewish sacred writings), the only author in the Bible to quote a non-biblical authority:
  + v.9: *Assumption of Moses* (Michael arguing with Satan over Moses’ body)
  + v. 14-15: *Enoch*: a prophetic warning of coming judgement

Jude simply takes illustrations from books both he and his readers knew and respected, as well as from Scripture itself.

* Jude and 2 Peter are parallel at many points. It appears that one made use of the other, or that both drew on existing documents, which countered false teaching.

**2 Peter**

*Whether this letter was written by Peter, or pieced together by a disciple of Peter has been a matter of dispute since the writings of early church fathers (Origen, Eusebius, Jerome), as evidenced by the fact that some ancient manuscripts begin only with the name Simon. In either case, the letter mentions neither place of writing, nor destination.*

*The question of date is related to that of authorship and destination, so that cannot be determined with certainty either.*

1. Ch. 1 is concerned with true knowledge, a favorite Gnostic theme.

* Knowledge is not most important, but moral qualities, esp. love (1:5-7)
* Knowledge does not come from cleverly devised myths, but from history (eyewitness accounts), and from Scripture.

1. Chapter 2 is concerned with false teachers, and this is where the parallels (in thought, not in content) with Jude are found.

* 2:10-22. Peter is not fond of false teachers!

Modern day false teachers, as in the cults, or some of the liberals in the Christian church are worse than secular sinners because they are parallel counterfeits. People who come looking for God (bread) are fed stones instead.

1. Ch. 3 deals with the second coming, which is denied by those who have no use for the material world. Jesus is coming back!

* Call to righteousness, not lawlessness (v. 11)
* Affirms the value of the material world (v. 13)

**1 and 2 JOHN**

**1 John** deals with the question – Who is Jesus?

* The Word (God) has come in the flesh (Jesus) (1:1-3) – we know it because we have seen, heard touched him
* Reality of sin (1:8-10; 2:3-6) – we are not sinless “divine sparks”
* Good News – we know our sins are forgiven through Christ alone (2:12)
* Reject false teachers who teach anything but this (2:18-23)
* The identity of Jesus is strongly emphasized throughout the letter (4:1-3), particularly that Jesus is Christ come in the flesh, makes a very strong argument for Jesus’ dual nature

**2 John** warns against false teachers (7-11)

**JAMES**

Written by James the brother of Jesus

1. James argues against the false doctrine coming out of Gnosticism that only faith matters, works do not. What we do with our bodies matters very much (2:14-20).
   * what we do with wealth (Ch. 2:1-7)
   * helping others (2:15-17)
   * our tongue (Ch. 3)

and many other practical matters.

1. Our faith is evidenced in what we do (obedience)

**Question: How are the beliefs of Gnosticism still evident in our society?**

**Gnosticism today e**xpresses itself in the church in a number of subtle ways:

* Concern only with the "next world" because this world is only temporal, physical (social gospel vs. evangelism)
* Contempt for the things of this world: growing interest in meditation, yoga, meditation. To empty oneself of thought and emotion leads to disengagement with the world. Meditation on the Word of God brings deeper relationship with Him; our faith in Him results in hope, and the certainty that we can act to change the impact of evil on this world.
* Moral relativism: whatever feels good, do it, and rebellion that accepts no authority. If there is no God, or if we humanity resulted from evolution rather than creation, we are accountable to no one but ourselves, can do what we please.
* New Age philosophy: we are all part of the cosmic divine Spirit, and after death merge into oneness. Worship ourselves or nature, no motivation to transform this world.
* **Cults** like Jehovah's Witnesses deny the deity of Christ; Mormons teach we are all divine, all gods, like Jesus.

The church must continue to emphasize biblical truth expressed in doctrine - “the whole counsel of God.” Otherwise our understanding of relationship with God and its implications for our life’s purpose will be limited. We need to know scripture to understand ethics (what is ‘moral living’?), how to engage equally in transforming this world and preparing for the next.

What we believe impacts evangelism and social activism, and whether we will act to usher the Kingdom of God into our society or not.

However, doctrine alone is dead. We need a belief system that flows out of our relationship with God and His Holy Spirit, together with knowledge of His word: Truth filled with Life!