

We live in a world of substitutes from substitute teachers to sugar substitutes. We'd agree that as useful as they are substitutes have their limitations – there's no substitute for the real thing. For example, soybeans don't make very good hamburgers. Saccharin doesn't really taste like sugar. As much as we'd like to think so, there just aren't substitutes for certain things.

This is true of our salvation. As much as we'd like to think so, there just aren't substitutes for real teachers in the Word. When it comes to your spiritual growth, **DON'T ACCEPT ANY SUBSTITUTES: 1) Regardless the Packaging, and 2) Regardless the Promises.**

1) Regardless the Packaging

A while back we bought a couple of packages of frozen shrimp. They looked pretty good in the display case. The price was especially good. In fact, it was too good. You know the old saying: “you get what you pay for”? Well, we got what we paid for. Once they were thawed out, those shrimp looked like they needed a transfusion. We tried cooking them, but they transformed into these little pink clumps with the texture and taste of old shoe leather. They were awful! Needless to say the other package is still in the deep freeze and will probably be used for fish bait.

What happened? The package was labeled, “SHRIMP.” In fact, the words “quality guaranteed” were printed somewhere on it. Even the packaging itself looked attractive. It had an orange sunburst color to it. There was even the image of a shrimp boat fishing a bayou embossed on the front. Only after eating the shrimp did I realize they were bad.

Now, some would accuse me of using a substitute because, as I later discovered, those shrimps weren't local. At any rate, I was duped. I was expecting to eat something good, but I didn't. Jesus gives similar warning in our text. He doesn't tell us to be cautious of eating out-of-state shrimps, but he does tell us to be wary of the packaging when it comes to those who proclaim his Word: “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them.” We need to be careful of what we swallow spiritually, so that we don't end up being swallowed ourselves. Watch out for false prophets Jesus said. They may come to you in sheep's clothing - but what kind of fruit are they producing? Is it good fruit - that edifies your soul - or is it only fruit that has gone sour and full of worms? In other words, Jesus wants us to make

sure that the advice and the words that we receive are Biblical - that they are properly applied in accordance with God’s Word.

Be alert! A false teacher has a ferocious appetite. He’ll want to devour you, use you, and exploit you for his own greedy gain. Be careful of the packaging. One of these wolves may wear a clergy collar or a white gown and cross, but that means little. He will try to use God’s Word to deceive you. There are those who claim to teach the Bible, but don’t. You can recognize such wolves by what they teach. Is a church simply polishing up rotten apples in order to lure in people? You will know by a single bite. Don’t fall for fancy wrapping! Spit out the rotten fruit, understanding that even some who claim to be pastors and teachers will actually want you to eat their garbage. They will wrap their rotten man-made teachings in sweet, buttery caramel and try to pass it off as the fruit of salvation.

“Just say the right prayer the right way and the right amount of times, then forgiveness is yours!” That’s nothing more than rotten fruit in pretty wrapping! “Simply go to church on the right holidays and you’ll get to heaven.” A wolfish lie! “God will give you wealth beyond your wildest dreams, if you decide to accept him as your personal Savior.” Be careful what you swallow! “If you really love Jesus, you’ll send this e-mail to 7 others, and God will bless you in a miraculous way.” Beware!

Yet, it all seems so easy, so attractive. All you have to do is click your mouse button or rattle off some words and POOF! glory is yours. The packaging may seem attractive, but, in the end, it leads to destruction. You may end up being devoured and swallowed up in the process. Your faith in Christ may be snatched from you. That’s just what false teachers want. They want to rob you of your certainty in Christ, so that you will depend on them. A false teacher wants to substitute the truth of God’s Word for lies, so that he can be worshipped and coddled, praised and adored.

Don’t just look at the packaging. Test the contents. How does the fruit taste? Does your pastor proclaim God’s Word? Are you led to feed on the pure message of the Gospel? It is sinful to teach others that they can substitute their own pre-packaged deeds for the work of Christ. God does not accept or tolerate such shams. We need the message of our Savior who cared more for us than himself.

Jesus didn't come in a glamorous, attractive packaging. He came in humility and submission; born of a virgin, who came to live, suffer, and die for you and me. He offered his very body -- beaten and broken -- and his own soul -- pierced and condemned -- all for you. It isn't enough just to buy things because they are packaged nice. We needed the best and most brilliant - no matter the cost or packaging! Christ offered himself for us. That's what you need. You need the Gospel -- the pure Word of God -- untainted by human reason or ambition.

2) Regardless the Promises

I know what someone might be thinking, “How can I be sure I have the Gospel? After all, every church claims to teach about Jesus.” That's true. Even Jesus admits it. There are a lot of people who say, “Lord, Lord” but not everyone who says that will enter the kingdom of heaven. It's not just about packaging. It's also about substance and quality.

Remember my packages of frozen shrimps? The package clearly read, “Quality guaranteed.” Now, some would say that's false advertising. Really, it wasn't. A certain quality was guaranteed. The basic definition of the word “quality” is this: characteristic elements or features that make something what it is; basic nature or attributes. Those shrimps met a certain quality. They were small. They were pink. They were caught in the sea. They were shrimp. But they were bad shrimp.

The same is true of false teachers. Jesus says, “Every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.” There is a certain quality that a teacher in Christ is to possess, namely, faith in Christ Jesus for salvation. A good teacher is one who believes that truth as proclaimed in the Bible. A good teacher believes the entire Bible is God's Word, not just parts, and teaches it as such. A good teacher holds to, and proclaims, the promises of God for himself.

Now, there are those who possess the quality of a teacher. They teach and preach, but they do it with the wrong motivation. They hold on to different promises. They're more concerned about the packaging and give little regard to the content or quality. There are preachers who promise great things and can even do great things, but be careful! That doesn't mean they're good teachers. That doesn't mean they love Christ first and foremost. Jesus says, “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?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”

It’s hard for us to imagine someone being able to chase out demons and do miracles and yet being rejected by Christ. But Scripture is full of these examples. Take for example Judas. Judas chased out demons in his time. Jesus sent him out with the others to teach. The Bible also mentions Caiaphas, the high priest. He denied Jesus as the Savior; still he made a prediction concerning Jesus to be the Savior saying, “it is better for one to die for the whole nation.” Then there’s Balaam, a heathen soothsayer, who was given the words and ability to bless the Israelites, even though he wasn’t a believer! On the surface, these men appeared to be very godly with huge amounts of faith. But they were false teachers. They substituted faith in the Messiah for faith in themselves. They were basing their quality as teachers on their own promises and guarantees. They wanted to be worshipped, not God. And their teaching proved it. Their fruit was rotten.

So many people are duped into trusting the empty promises of false teachers. We’re very impressed by these individuals. We’re impressed with outward success and man-made results. We’re impressed with power and prestige and the great things they promise. False teachers make empty promises, and lead people to believe those empty promises. False teachers lead people to trust in them and not in Christ. False teachers contradict God’s Word and cloud its clarity. They offer rotten fruit and lead people to eat such things. In the process, they promote false, empty faith.

Now, faith in and of itself doesn’t save. It’s the content of one’s faith that saves. And saving faith doesn’t find its quality – its sense of being – in the mere promises of human beings. After all, what happens when such promises aren’t met? What happens if I don’t make millions of dollars, what happens if grandma isn’t healed, or I can’t speak in “heavenly tongues”, as promised? Empty promises promote empty faith.

Be sure that your faith is different. Place your faith on every promise God has clearly revealed in his Word. That means you need to gorge yourself on God’s Word. Study it. Learn it. Know what it says and what it doesn’t say. Be sure that your faith finds its quality – its content – in the promises of Jesus Christ. Possess a faith of such a quality that it clings to the sure promises of God as revealed in his Word. That kind of a faith is strengthened by the quality of

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teacher who boldly holds out those promises. Make sure you have a teacher who knows God’s Word and who boldly and unabashedly says, “This is God’s Word. Period. End of discussion.” So, don’t accept any substitutes! Don’t base your salvation on anyone but Christ Jesus! And don’t listen to anyone who promises anything different! Amen.