

False Prophets are Masters of Disguise

You've seen them. They appear everywhere promoting the latest health solution, money-making plan, or the "newest scoop" on popular people, complete with anonymous sources. These flim flam artists fool multitudes of gullible folks every day.

Which one just caught you? The one on television with the hot air cooker? The one at the mall with the sharpest knives that cut the toughest foods like a hot knife through warm butter? Or the one that guaranteed retirement income that will last a lifetime, without any risk?

You have seen them and even succumbed to a promise too good to resist. These false prophets entice ordinary people like you and me to trust their messages. The risk-free return offer goes unused. Hardly a day passes that we do not hear the siren call of a false prophet.

False prophets even appear in the Bible, of all places. Throughout their Old Testament history, the Israelites encountered numerous false prophets.

Moses identified several of them in the Israelites' exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land.

King Saul met with the witch of Endor for advice in a time of difficulty.

Soon after the successful reign of King David, the nation split into 2 smaller nations because of the influence of false prophets. which resulted in disaster after disaster.

Most of the books of the Old Testament describe the trials and hardships that the Israelites experienced because of their following false prophets. In fact,

"The people who were honored in the Bible were the false prophets. It was the ones we call the prophets who were jailed and driven into the desert." (Noam Chomsky)

The Bible describes the harmful consequences upon God's people because they followed false prophets. Even as the Israelites followed false prophets to their loss God warned His people through His true prophets of the presence of evil leaders and how to identify them. His counsels went unheeded.

"What does that have to do with me?", you ask. Everything. Do false Christian prophets exist today? Yes! The technological advances of our day make it easy for evil men and women to broadcast their false messages.

You have seen religious preachers on television promote their enticing messages. These speakers always encourage you to order their books and literature with appealing promises of the favorable impact these materials will have upon your life. Sometimes they offer them free. How can you resist free, Huh? With few exceptions they deliver false messages.

The world-wide internet makes it even easier for imposters to distribute their damnable heresies. Email messages link to their web sites and book offers. How many of these emails do you receive? I know, their offers are hard to resist.

Why do we follow false prophets? What traits separate false prophets from a true prophet of God? How can we identify them? Jesus warned that they would come. Near the end of His famous Sermon On The Mount, He declared:

"Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so, every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them." (Matthew 7:13-20)

False Prophets: Their Occurrence

This warning from the Lord Jesus confirms their existence and cautions their potential harm to believers. The Lord cancels all doubt regarding their presence. They will and do exist, and He commands His disciples to

watch out for false prophets and to guard against them.

False Prophets: The Duty of Examination

Since the Lord Jesus said, *“Beware of false prophets,”* we dare not set aside that command. As followers of Christ, we have a responsibility to heed His caution for our own spiritual welfare.

According to popular error, no one has the right to examine another person, especially his/her religious beliefs. The advocates of this fallacy believe that the Bible forbids it. They mistakenly apply Christ’s teaching at the beginning of Matthew 7 to this issue, imagining that Scripture forbids judgment.

However, a careful reading of Matthew 7.1-5 shows that Jesus did not forbid judging but instead gave direction on the manner of judging. In fact, the Bible frequently gives guidance in Romans, 1 Corinthians, 1 Timothy and Revelation on how to examine others and ourselves. We must approach it carefully, knowing that He will judge us in the same manner that we judge others.

Believers have a duty to examine those who come to them as teachers and assume church leadership positions. We must scrutinize their fruits to ensure their authenticity, so that we do not follow false prophets.

The devil’s deceptions and the pressure of the world have blinded our eyes and pulled us away from that responsibility. We must examine our leaders thoroughly, because Jesus warned us that false prophets would come. If we ignore this duty, we open the door to deceitful leadership.

False Prophets: Their Deceit

Notice that in His warning, the Lord Jesus did not refer to a blatantly wicked, evil person. Jesus did not warn His disciples about diabolically evil men and women who blaspheme God. We recognize them.

Instead, He talked about those who purport to follow Christ. These false leaders say they follow Christ and come in His name. They claim to follow the truths of Scripture. They declare, *“I teach you what the Bible says.”* *They may even exhibit many characteristics of Christ followers.*

However, we must scrutinize our leaders because counterfeit teachers, false prophets, come disguised as sheep. They look like sheep but hide their inner wolf natures.

I do not know a lot about raising sheep. But I do know that no shepherd wants a wolf in his flock. As soon as a shepherd sees a wolf in his flock, he destroys it in order to protect his sheep.

That describes the warning of Jesus. Wolves do not march into a congregation identifying themselves as wolves. They come disguised as sheep, professing to follow Christ.

Paul identified these kinds of false prophets in his day. He warned his friends in Corinth in a fashion similar to Christ’s warning:

“For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light.” (2 Corinthians 11:13-14)

When Satan tempts you, he does not always come in a frightening fashion, like the picture of the red devil with the pitchfork in his hand. Sometimes he disguises himself as good, even as an angel of light, a wolf masquerading as a sheep.

We need to evaluate teachers, pastors, televangelists, and radio hosts. We have a duty to examine them lest we follow false prophets to our spiritual harm.

False Prophets: Their Discovery

Jesus taught us how to identify false prophets. Jesus’ picture of fruit provides the basis on how to recognize them. He said:

“Do men gather grapes of thorns or figs of thistles?” (Matthew 7.16)

This is obvious isn't it? Fig trees produce figs, and thorn bushes produce thorns. Then, Jesus went on to say:

“Even so, every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.”
(Matthew 7.17)

Jesus could not have made it plainer. Good trees bring forth good fruit, not bad. Bad trees bring forth bad fruit, not good fruit. With this simple picture Jesus gave His followers the method to discover false prophets:

“Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.” (Matthew 7.20)

The discovery of false prophets begins with the examination of their fruit. The presence of bad fruit from a leader identifies him/her as false and does not come from God, regardless of the extent of his/her skills and abilities. Good trees do not bring forth bad fruit. Bad trees bring forth bad fruit.

When He said that we would know false prophets, He did not say we might know them, or we could know them. He said we will know them; more literally, it means we shall fully know, without a doubt.

False Prophets: Their Teachings

A logical question follows: “What qualifies as good fruit? How can we discern the good fruit from the bad?” This shortened list identifies crucial criteria for spiritual leaders whether man or woman.

What does (s)he propose as doctrinal truth?

True Biblical doctrine includes:

- the sovereignty and transcendence of God;
- the deity of Christ and His substitutionary atonement for sinners; and
- the inspiration, inerrancy, and infallibility of the Bible and its final, fundamental authority.

This doctrinal teaching demonstrates good fruit. If the person under examination does not hold to these basic, primary doctrinal beliefs, you should suspect a false prophet.

What character and nature of life does the teacher or pastor you follow reveal?

Examine the character and nature of the life of the teacher or pastor you follow. What persistent pattern and character of his/her life do you perceive? Does (s)he exhibit a thirst for the lusts of the world, the flesh, and the devil? What prominent role do the lusts of the eyes and the pride of life play?

A check of these matters will help you to evaluate the character of this person. Remember,

“Bad company corrupts good character.” (1 Corinthians 15.33; *New International Version*)

How does this person view the world?

- Does (s)he love the world and its standards?
- Does (s)he want to conform to the world's behaviors?
- Does (s)he encourage you to live like the world, to conform to the world and its values to win the world?

Television and radio personalities and many authors proclaim messages that emphasize these elements. They teach that as a Christian you can have all of the world's goods, and they encourage you to pursue them,

because you are entitled to them. They imply that it is your right and privilege as a child of God to have all of the abundance of the world, because God loves you and wants you to have it all.

Please note these warnings from 1 John:

“Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.” (1 John 2:16-16)

The wrong attitude toward the world can provide a glaring signal of bad fruit.

What characterizes this person’s attitude toward the flesh?

Another character issue that signals bad fruit includes a person’s attitude toward the flesh.

- What does (s)he say about the flesh?
- Does this leader purport himself or herself in a fleshly manner of life?

The Bible describes the works of the flesh and someone who lives to satisfy the passions and lusts of life.

“Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envying’s, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like...” (Galatians 5.19-21)

Following that section, it says: *“But the fruit of the Spirit is ...”* The passage that follows then lists nine qualities of someone who lives under the influence and control of the Holy Spirit:

- love;
- joy;
- peace;
- longsuffering;
- gentleness;
- goodness;
- faith;
- meekness; and
- temperance.

The difference between the two lists is like night and day. At the end of that whole passage, Galatians 5.24 says:

“They that are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts.”

Do you see the works of the flesh in the life of this person? If you do, that signals bad fruit. On the other hand, if you see the fruit of the Spirit exhibited in this person, it shows good fruit.

Does this person indicate any influence of the devil in his/her life and ministry?

The Scriptures describe the devil in a variety of ways. One calls him the prince of darkness. Ephesians chapter six provides the hierarchy of the devil and all of the various powers under his power and authority.

One of them pinpoints the powers of darkness. Do the characteristics that you observe in this leader suggest to you that this person has a dark side?

John in his first epistle tells us:

“This then is the message which we have heard of him [the Lord Jesus], and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.” (1 John 1:5-7)

Jesus said in John’s gospel,

“I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life.” (John 8:12)

Does this person walk in the light or in darkness? Beware of one who walks in darkness, one of the fruits of false prophets.

What kind of fruit does this leader produce in others?

How would you describe the followers of this teacher?

- Do their lives differ in any way from the lives of unbelievers?
- Do they show an interest in leading holy lives?
- Do they demonstrate obedience to God?
- Do they show their love for Christ?
- Do they ever acknowledge or exhibit the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives?

Fruit reproduces itself. Peach trees replicate themselves in peach trees. Thorn bushes bring forth other thorn bushes. Examine the fruit of the followers of this leader. It will give you insight into the nature of the leader and help you avoid false prophets.

Does what the leader says or writes match up with scripture?

This suggestion comes from Isaiah.

“When they shall say unto you, Seek unto them that have familiar spirits, and unto wizards that peep, and that mutter: should not a people seek unto their God? for the living to the dead? To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.” (Isaiah 8:19)

Observe what this leader says and writes.

- Does it match up with the balance of Scripture, not just one or two verses taken out of context?
- Does it fit what the Bible teaches?

If it does not, it is because there is no light in them. These are bad trees, bad fruit, false prophets. Godly prophets speak and write truths that conform to scripture. You can trust them.

False Prophets: Their Destiny

Jesus concluded His teaching on false prophets with an awful warning.

“Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.” (Matthew 7:17-20)

False prophets face a certain future. Like the corrupt tree that does not bring forth good fruit and gets destroyed, so Christ at the judgment will destroy the false prophets. Jesus described their fate in this text and also in the verses that follow it.

“Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.” (Matthew 7.21-23)

At that day, many will appear before Him, stand there, and say, *“Lord, look at all the wonderful things we did in your name.”*

Jesus will say to them: *“Depart from me. I never knew you.”*

False Prophets: Summary

False prophets profess to follow Christ and portray themselves as His sheep, even saying some of the right things and doing wonderful works in the name of Jesus. They deceive many from their true identity, wolves in sheep’s clothing. Jesus said that we would know them by their fruit.

Faithful followers of Christ must examine their pastors, television and radio broadcasters, and authors of the books that they read. Do they reveal good fruit or bad fruit?

Upon examination we may find false prophets, whom we must reject no longer follow.

Questions For Reflection and Application

- 1) The Bible says we should examine false prophets. What criteria should we use to scrutinize them?
- 2) When you suspect a person who claims the role of a Prophet of God, but is in fact an unbeliever, how can you prove it in your mind and heart?
- 3) Describe “good fruit” in the life and ministry of a Godly prophet.
- 4) Describe “bad fruit” in the life and ministry of a professing believer or false prophet.
- 5) List examples of good doctrine.
- 6) Describe a false prophet’s world view.
- 7) What emotional reaction do you have when you hear God say to an admired leader or to you: “Depart from me, I never knew you?”

Dear Lord Jesus, thank You for this warning that You have left for us to beware of false prophets.

We see many of them in our day. You told us they would come. You told us we would know them, that we could spot them, that we could examine them and discern the true from the false.

Father, as we have examined this passage of the Lord Jesus teaching us, there is so much there that only the Spirit of God can open our eyes to see all of it, to understand any of it, and to apply it as we examine and follow the advice of the Lord Jesus.

I pray, Father, that You would pour out Your Spirit upon each one of us individually to teach us, to open our eyes to see the truth, and to discern light from darkness, good from evil, false from true, that we might know the truth, that we might follow after the Lord Jesus.

We will praise you Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for what You accomplish in our lives, Amen