

## *#Discern the Wolf*

Matthew 7:15-20

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We are getting closer to the end of the Sermon on the Mount. I want to say a brief word about the series before I get started this morning. We have sought to deal with very familiar passages and chapters in the Bible in a way that we hope it came to you in a fresh way. And in that, we've sought to go through the Sermon on the Mount not in the traditional way, meaning at the beginning and going all the way to the end, but we were doing different things looking at what it means to live out the kingdom on the outside which has to be rooted to Christ and the gospel on the inside. We hope it has not thrown you off. But in fact, we will have hit the whole sermon by the time we are done.

It is understood that the Sermon on the Mount, which we've said in different places throughout the series, was not preached at one point from beginning to end, but rather this was Matthew taking snippets of Jesus's teaching at different points that were put together which is why you'll note the difference between some of what Matthew reports and what Luke reports. And so, these are the greatest hits of Jesus's teaching that Matthew put together in this form to deal with the community that Jesus was addressing who were disciples of Christ who were largely Jewish and had now converted to Christ in a very difficult circumstance. What does it mean for them then to live out this faith among those who do not follow Jesus but still follow the Pharisees and Sadducees? What implications does it have? Jesus is calling them to live out the kingdom. What does it mean to follow Him as the way, the truth, and the life?

We seek to apply these things. And it requires us to not just hold them at a spiritual level but to understand that they have very daily applications of wisdom that require a level of complexity. What do I mean? The gospel as Jesus teaches here is not complicated, but it is complex. There are two different ideas. Complicated means I can't discern it. It's hard to put together. Complex means we have to keep the nuances. Not too long ago, we did a sermon on not judging others. And yet, the very passage we learn this morning is that we are to be careful to discern and judge those who seem to be sheep but in fact are simply wolves in false clothing.

So, we can't just take these snippets out of context and suddenly reach a conclusion. In fact, this passage this morning is one of those. One of the passages that we'll be seeing in the next couple weeks as we wrap up is this idea, "Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord,'" "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you.'" And the very first question I was ever asked for my ordination on the floor of Presbytery, that passage was read to me and they asked, how do you know that you will be counted among those whom the Lord says, "I belong to you, you belong to me"? Or said negatively, how do you know you will not be counted among those whom the Lord says, "I never knew you"?

Now, that's an appropriate question to ask someone who's being ordained. But that's not what this passage is about. It's about the church of Jesus Christ. And now, these many years later, it is a message to the church of how do we discern the wolf? Not whether you try to discern yourself and the fruit of your life. That's a different sermon for a different day from a different text. I'm not suggesting one cannot apply it that way. I'm saying, that's a distant application. Yes, we ought to consider, do I follow the Lord Jesus Christ? Am I on the narrow path or am I on the wide path? I don't know. It depends on what teachers you listen to which is why He says be careful about false prophets.

And so, to some degree, we need to discern where we are and who we follow and ask ourselves, do I trust in the Lord Jesus Christ? But the message this morning is as the church of Jesus Christ, those who have professed faith, how do we discern the wolf, the false teachers and the false prophets? And just by way of word, and I won't say any more on this today, Matthew is not an anti-charismatic. This is not about charismatic gifts or their ongoing nature. That's not from this text. But it is a sense in which we have to discern who is teaching, what are they teaching, and can we trust them? Not so easy, actually.

Let me begin with prayer. Heavenly Father, we ask that you would prepare our hearts and our minds and our lives through the truth of your word that you would give us wisdom and discernment of how it is we are to live out this life and those who we listen to and those who we give respect to and to their teaching. Lord, I ask that you would make us a discerning people, that we might be reminded that it is your word which has authority. And anyone who proports to teach anything other than your word is not to be listened to, but also, even those who teach your word whose lives are not in line with what they preach. Make us discerning, but to do it in humility while trusting in you. Help us, we pray. Help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

McArthur Wheeler. If you Google search him, you likely will not find a photograph of McArthur Wheeler which is ironic because of the following. 25 years ago, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, McArthur Wheeler was an adult male who had this thing about secret messages. That was one of his things. And so, he realized that one of the things you could do is you could use lemon juice and write secret messages, and you could only see what that message says if you heated it up. That was his thing.

So, he decided on a particular day that he would put lemon juice all over his face believing it would make him invisible. He took a polaroid picture which came out showing nothing. Now, if you don't know what a polaroid picture is, that you can Google search. But the picture came up nothing, and so he thought he had it. And so, on that day, he robbed two banks. He was arrested and was very upset that he was indeed not invisible but very recognizable. And he went to jail.

Wouldn't it be nice if all wolves were that obvious? But they are not, which is why Jesus teaches us in this passage to be wise. Matthew 7:15.

"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits." [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

This is why I have historically always prayed prior to a sermon, Lord, help the teacher. It's because I recognize and remember the place of importance that I am taking in teaching the word and the responsibility of directing you to Jesus and faith in Him and not to lead you, although I may have many opinions, to trust me merely because I'm standing here. But rather, I must put myself not only under the authority of the word but also to call you to test that which I teach, to discern what I'm teaching. Is it consistent with the word of God and the gospel itself? We need to take this seriously. And we'll do so this morning by looking at this passage at imposters, patience, and wisdom.

First, we have imposters. And Jesus uses these metaphors that would have been understood by those whom he taught as they were common in their culture. This idea of being an imposter first is given in the metaphor of a wolf in sheep's clothing. This was not original to Jesus. In fact, it was first used some 500 years prior to Jesus in what's called Aesop's Fables. And the fable went something like this. A certain wolf could not get enough to eat because of the watchfulness of the shepherds. But one found a sheep skin that had been cast aside and forgotten. The next day dressed in the skin, the wolf strolled into the pasture with the sheep. Soon, a little lamb was following him about and was quickly led away to slaughter. That evening, the wolf entered the fold with the flock. But it happened that the shepherd took a fancy for mutton broth that very evening and picking up a knife went to the fold. And there, the first he laid hands on and killed was the wolf.

And so, the moral of Aesop's Fable has one of two endings. One, the evildoer comes to harm through his own deceit, or appearances are deceptive. Depending on which one was printed at which

times, you'll find a different ending. But we would say today, don't judge a book by its cover. But we still do.

So, this is why Jesus is using a very common story, a common metaphor which would've been widely known in the culture at the time because of the popularity of Aesop's Fables, and He's using it to teach something profoundly important to His followers and to the church that would follow. That is, beware of the imposter. To do so, we must understand imposters come in various forms.

Yes, the imposter is given to us through the metaphor of a wolf, but we must understand that a wolf sometimes comes in different forms. One, it could be someone who intends from the very beginning to be malicious, that they intend to get bad results, to use the position that they have with God's word and understanding it and will use it for their own ends or glory. There are those who intend malicious harm on the church but who look like they are a run of the mill teacher, pastor, or believer.

This requires us to wake up and to be astute and to be reminded that Satan hates the church. And there are those, and rightly so, who look at the church of Jesus Christ and say, this is going to be easy. And you know what? They're right. It hasn't gotten hard. It's gotten easier. We must be aware that because Satan hates the church and hates the gospel of Jesus Christ, that he does seek to use those who want to build up their own bank accounts, their own popularity, their own ends simply for the thrill of deceiving others. They will come into the church and seek to draw others away. This requires us to be astute. It happens every single day. There are those who are in the church of Jesus Christ who have malicious intent. It could be relationally, it could be financially, it could be spiritually. There are all kinds of forms.

Second are those who are accidental wolves. And here, being a child of Charlotte, North Carolina, I grew up right next to Praise the Lord ministries. In fact, Tammy Faye Bakker and her husband at the very beginning were simply evangelists. They didn't start off by having a morning show holding up handkerchiefs to the screen and asking you to touch it and send money to Praise the Lord ministries. That's not where it began. They began by simply preaching the gospel. But then accidentally, they began to see that there is an opportunity here. And so, the rest is history.

This means we need to not only be astute that there are those who intend malicious ends because they seek to take hold of others relationally, financially, and spiritually, but we also must keep watch over our own hearts. If it can happen to the Bakkers, it can happen to me. I am embarrassed and saddened to say that there have been colleagues and brothers in the faith whom I have respected and loved who accidentally got caught up in false doctrines and false gospels, got swept away and took people with them, left the church, have hurt the church, and are still ministering today. Although I love them as human beings, I also see something before my eyes. Be careful.

And that is a wisdom to all of us. We can be susceptible to false teaching, false ways of thinking, and we lead others in our train. And we end up shipwrecking our own lives while shipwrecking others that we did not intend. This is why we must hear Jesus's teaching.

Yes, He points to those who are malicious. But not only do wolves come in sheep's clothing, but wolves happen through different means. The final way is not just malicious or accidental. It is in some sense those who were and are traitors. What do I mean by this?

One of the things about McArthur Wheeler, who found himself thinking he could simply cover himself with lemon juice, is that he was someone who obviously was confident in what he was doing. Think about that decision-making process. He goes from how to write false messages to thinking, you know what? If I put lemon juice on my face and my head and it's not heated up, nobody's going to see me. Psychological studies have been done, and this decision-making process has actually got a name. It's called the Dunning-Kruger effect.

I learned this week that this effect is a cognitive bias in which people mistakenly assess their cognitive ability as greater than it actually is. It is related to the cognitive bias of illusory superiority, and

it comes from the inability of people to recognize their lack of ability. You ready for the street-level definition? Here is what it is. The people who know the least can sometimes act like they know the most, and they become traitors. So, they get a taste of the teaching of the gospel, and they think they've got it. And then they've got it, they have influence, they have this inflated sense of understanding and knowledge, they get a group of people, and they end up at my doorstep. These are people just like me, not just people who are young but also people who are mature in the faith depending on how complex their ideas are.

When I was a new believer, I knew someone who I loved and who was a friend. But they convinced me that as a young Christian that if I really wanted to taste of the heavenly beauty of the gospel, I needed to learn how to speak in tongues. Now, don't laugh. I mean no dispersion to those who practice speaking in tongues. That's not the point. The point was that they were convinced and trying to convince me. We looked at scriptures together, and even as a young person, I was like, this is not making a whole lot of sense to me. I speak in English. God lets me speak in English. Why does He need me to learn something else?

But I took the invitation. I went to the Sunday school class at their church. I had only been a believer for about five months. And I go into this Sunday school class, and they were trying to teach me how to pray in a language that they couldn't tell me what language it was.

I remember leaving the class, and by the time I was done, they were also inviting me to bring all of my albums to next week's class and that if I brought them, I was to throw them into the fire. I was like, oh no, this is making no sense to me. That was the very kind of thing that kept me from the gospel because people said I couldn't listen to Stevie Wonder and still be a Christian. I rejected the gospel because I thought, who wants to be a part of that? And now that I was a Christian, I was being told that if I really want to learn how to have front of the bus Christianity, I needed to learn these things. Otherwise, I was going to be in the back of the bus. But that didn't work for me because I like the back of the bus. I thought that was a pretty fun ride. But it didn't make any sense to me, and I was not about to bring all of my albums to a bonfire the next weekend.

But you know what? Lots of people did. And a lot of people still do. And I want to say those who are peddling this kind of Christianity, no matter how sincere they are, no matter how right a little of their theology might be, if it ends up in false application of legalism, this doesn't lead us to greater trust in Jesus Christ. It actually leads us away from Him and puts the emphasis on our performance or what we bring to the table. They don't intend to be traitors, but that's what they're doing.

There are imposters. Some are on purpose, some are accidental, and others become traitors. Those who know the least can often act as though they know the most. Do not be drawn away by the cleverness of someone's delivery alone, which is why Jesus says it's not just the wolves, but you also need to pay attention to the fruit. In fact, that's how you discern the two.

How do we begin to discern the wolf? It requires patience because of the next metaphor that Jesus uses. He uses the metaphor of fruit. "You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles?" Of course, it's a rhetorical question. But He's calling us to then discern what is the fruit of their lives and the fruit of their work?

Now, to understand this metaphor in discerning the wolf, it requires patience because another obvious statement is that fruit doesn't grow overnight, does it? It requires time which means we are to look for growth. Is what they're teaching or what they're putting out there discernable in seeing their lives mature in their dependence on Jesus Christ? And if we are to go back simply to what Jesus has already taught in the Sermon on the Mount, do we see a humility? Do we see a willingness for them to be present with others? Do they mourn with others? Are they connected to others? Do they seek to lift up Christ or do they seek to lift up their own performance? Are they peacemakers, or do they revel in gossip and division? Do they love a good fight or are they grateful when there's reconciliation? These are just a

few questions that we can go back into the very same things that we've been teaching and say, is the fruit growing in the person that I'm listening to?

Guess what, y'all? I'm not your only pastor. And by that, I'm not talking about the other pastors on staff here. We know that in today's age, many of you listen to pastors who preach far better than I, PD, or John ever will. There are pastors that we listen to. So, I know that you probably read a lot of different people. That's fine. That's good. If you want to listen to some others, we could give recommendations. But that can't be the sum total of what we're doing in that engagement. I would actually strongly encourage you that if you listen to other preachers or other pastors for spiritual guidance and wisdom, what does their life look like? And if you can't discern that, then be careful. It requires patience because it looks for growth. Is it consistent with the character of Christ? Does their life reflect the glory and mercy of His grace? And is it based on His teaching?

Secondly, I want to say this as clearly as I can, although, I don't mean to be repetitious in what I'm saying here. But I want to emphasize the importance that growth requires time. Patience requires time. It was true in the 1970s. It's true in the 2000s.

Bob Dylan after becoming a Christian released a Christian album. And there were many at the time in the nascent era of growing evangelicalism who wanted to wrap their arms around Bob Dylan and try to put him before everybody to see him as a trophy of grace. The intent is right, but it ends up hurting and not helping, meaning we have to wait when someone of high authority, high visibility in the culture, professes faith. Instead of us trying to put them up on a pedestal, let's pray and say, Lord, are you doing a new thing? May the roots of faith show itself in the character of their life. And that requires time. It requires our prayer for them.

And that applies not only to Bob Dylan, but it also applies to Kanye West. I have listened to every single song on that album, and I am blown away by the complexity of the theology and the beauty of its artistry. You may not like rap. I do. I have an album that is one of the first and widely sold albums in the history of rap sitting in my office, and I will never throw it away. And I listen to all forms of music because I want to hear what story they're telling about humanity. And if you listen to the trajectory of Kanye West's life, you will note that *Jesus Is King* is no easy decision for him to produce. Thanks be to God. Because you know what? He's using a crooked stick right this moment to proclaim God's truth to you. He can use a crooked stick of Kanye West to draw others to Himself.

Here's the point. We just need to be patient. We need to allow time. We need to pray, Lord, are you doing a new thing? May you draw him to deep wells of dependence on you. And let's be careful neither to put him up on a pedestal nor to simply reject him outright because there are pastors who have been to these Sunday worship services who are saying that the gospel is being preached. Thanks be to God. May the Lord draw many, thousands to Himself. But let's be patient which requires wisdom and our being astute. God may be doing a new thing. Let's be careful not to throw revival around or renewal. Lord, if you're doing a new thing, make yourself known through it.

Final point is it's not just imposters and understanding that we discern the wolf by understanding the fruit, but it's that this also requires wisdom which I've said a hundred times already in this sermon. Jesus has already taught on how we're to interface with prophets throughout the gospel of Matthew. We hear it in Matthew 5, Matthew 10, Matthew 23. Each one is somewhat preparing His disciples to be sent out as those who are prophesying to the glory of Christ and the beauty of the gospel. It's not that we have a problem with prophets per say, it's understanding that it requires wisdom. And during this time, there was a Greek sage who said a nation's "state will perish once they prove incapable of discerning between the good and the bad."

So, it requires discernment and wisdom. But there are different kinds of discernment and wisdom. First, there is the biblical kind and then there's the kind that comes out of that wisdom. So, let me explain. First, the wisdom which is being spoken of here is based upon scripture. Now, I'll go into greater depth when we come to the next portion of the text where Jesus teaches, "Lord, did we not

prophecy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?" So, we need to have wisdom that is based upon scripture.

And so, you take the word of God and you say, is what I'm being taught consistent with the literal teaching of scripture or is it clearly implied by the truth and the gospel of scripture? It requires the kind of discernment to say it doesn't have to literally say trinity to believe in the Trinity. The scriptures clearly claim and declare that God the Father is God, Jesus is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, three persons yet one God. Yet, the Bible never uses the word "trinity." We have to understand that it's not a bare literalism or just a bare confession of a simple sentence, but to understand that scripture also strongly implies all kinds of truth by what it teaches which means we have to know it. Don't simply trust me to know the word. Put yourself in the word and put deep roots in it so that our life together as the church of Jesus Christ is enriched not just by those who teach, but as you are learning yourselves and we come together and we sharpen one another as iron sharpens iron.

My teaching is not enough for you to grow in your faith, thanks be to God. But the Holy Spirit working through the word as you give yourself to it will give you that discernment and that wisdom that is biblical in nature and based upon the authority of scripture. And at any point which you find me or anything which I teach and see it's out of accord with scripture, please call me and the rest of the pastoral staff to account. And if we do not hear you and are not willing to engage or acknowledge where we are wrong, we need to be called to account for that. It requires for all of us a life of wisdom with the foundation of scripture as our authority and the ground on which we walk.

Wisdom also requires not just the authority of scripture and the basis of scripture, it also, as I said before, requires us to keep it complex. Particularly in the day of Internet and anything else, we are still given to bumper sticker Christianity. Christianity is not complicated, but it is complex. A child can understand what Jesus Christ has done for them, profess faith, and trust in Him for salvation.

So, it is not complicated. But it is complex in understanding that Christianity requires us to say, yes, Jesus gives us His grace to walk with Him and He forgives me. Yes. But He also by that same grace calls us to walk in obedience. But it's not just about obedience and it's not about my obedience. It's about His. It's about justification and sanctification and glorification. Sometimes we try to narrow the gospel down, as some denominations have, to make the creation into God, so they only pay attention to the first chapter of the gospel which is creation. Other denominations only focus on the fact that we are fallen. Forget the creation. We're just fallen. Other denominations simply want to focus on the fall and redemption, that you're a sinner and you need Jesus. But the gospel is far more complex than all of that. It is creation, it is the fall, it is redemption, but it is also restoration. Restoration is about sanctification not only of us, but of what God is doing in the world. We need to keep it complex.

It is helpful to understand the gospel in more simplified ways, but we can't simply stay there. To grow and to mature in a faith that is based on the wisdom of scripture would require us to be humble and expectant that the gospel has far more layers than I do. But that gospel is going to go through all those layers. And it requires us to keep it complex.

So, be careful when people try to draw the gospel down simply to, come as you are. We're just broken, and that's where we're going to stay. That's not an unpopular gospel these days. And people are flocking to it. And it has enough truth in it to hook us. We are broken and we sin every day. And yet, because of the glory of the resurrection and the power of Christ that is at work within us, He does not mean to keep us there. But instead, He calls us to grow which requires time, patience, and trusting in the authority of scripture.

Wisdom based on scripture, keeping it complex, and finally, here is what grows out of it. The sermon is what I call when the church talks about biblical wisdom. But that wisdom also needs to be applied at the street level which requires shrewdness. And frankly, many Christians today are not shrewd. What do I mean? I mean paying attention to what we're hearing and seeing by those who purport to be those speaking on behalf of the church, on behalf of Jesus Christ.

Number one, let's borrow from Scarface, "Don't get high on your own supply." Are those that you listen to, those who are wanting followers, those who are teaching and writing books, are they getting high on their own supply or are they directing people to Jesus? There's a big difference, but it requires shrewdness to pay attention.

Another thing. It's not just what teachers and preachers and others say around us. Pay attention to what they're not saying because therein lies the inroad to getting sheep and drawing them away to slaughter. Rarely is it because of a naked profession of a truth which is so false. That's like the guy who walked into the bank covered in lemon juice thinking he was invisible. You see, the best wolves dressed in sheep's clothing are the shrewdest of the shrewd. So, it requires us to be wise.

I'm not going to name names here, but one of my friends who I knew in college, it wasn't what he said. It was all the stuff he didn't say. And if you were paying attention when you would listen to what he taught, you began to see that what he was teaching and what I was getting was not because he was saying it, it was because I was bringing it to the conversation. And so, I added what he was saying to the content of my own faith, and I began to see that he's actually not talking about that. This brother is no longer in the church. But many were led away.

It requires shrewdness to say – and I do need to name a couple of names – Joel Osteen is not preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, no matter how many times he mentions the word "gospel" or "grace" or "Jesus." He's not leading to greater dependence on the gospel, but instead on expecting God to grow his wealth. And it's very subtle. And it is well executed.

But there is another. And this might press in. Paula White had recently been hired to serve in the present administration of the United States as a public liaison. Paula White is a false prophet. You can simply Google search and see the fruit and the lack thereof in her life. It is a health and wealth gospel conflated with some kind of notion of Americanism that is drawing others away. And she's purporting to speak for those who are Christians. No, she's not. And we need to be shrewd and wise and discerning not just about what they say but what they don't say. And are they getting high on their own supply? And that's what I see. Don't believe me? Fine. Test it out as you would test me out.

So, it is required for us to go back again to Jesus who said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes under the Father except through me," which requires that the church of Jesus Christ put their trust in the word which has been spoken and written. And that is our foundation and authority. And those who we listen to horizontally or whom we look up to as teachers and preachers, what are they basing their teaching on?

Jesus gave Himself as a sacrifice for sinners. And sinners we are. And we, too, can be given over to becoming like wolves in sheep's clothing. So, we must be careful about our own hearts, myself included, and to walk in a humility trusting that it is Jesus who sustains us. It is Jesus who receives all the glory. And it is His Holy Spirit which will bring out the fruit. And whether the fruit of the Spirit is evident requires discernment and wisdom. Discern the wolf. And by God's grace, walk in humility trusting in Christ alone to build up His church and to build us up.

Now, this may be an ongoing conversation. And so, I invite you to do that. I would love to discuss. But may the Lord work in us the gospel of Jesus Christ and equip us for following Him in this world even where wolves are present. May He give us discernment. Let's pray.

Father, now we ask you to enable us to trust in you alone in your word, making us wise and discerning that we might see the imposters. Lord, we ask that you by your Spirit would expose those who seek to lead your sheep to slaughter. Those who are either clearly malicious or those who have become accidentally so and have become traitors, Lord, I ask that you would expose them for the frauds that they are. You know them. We don't always know them. But Lord, we would ask that in humility recognizing that as sinners, we, too, are susceptible to sin and temptation and to leading others astray. Lord, we ask that by your Holy Spirit you would keep us and enable us to endure to the end, walking in humble

reliance upon the gospel of Jesus Christ and the word which you have given. And in so doing, make your people discerning and shrewd. Do this, we ask. And by God's grace, help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.