

Wolves in Sheep's Clothing #1

Matthew 7:15-20; 1 John 4:1

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We live in an age of the church (and of society at large) in which it is condemned by many Christians (or even most Christians) to classify anyone who claims to be a Christian as a false teacher. The ecumenical spirit and the toleration that is promoted within the "big tent" idea of the church where almost every doctrinal position or worship practice is invited to dwell within Christ's Church allows so many errors to be taught that are contrary to sound doctrine and pure worship. In the minds of those who promote putting aside their differences in doctrine, worship, and church government, there is not a greater sin committed by a Christian than to judge in matters related to doctrines that divide professing Christians. It seems that to do so one will suffer the risk of being labeled judgmental, divisive, narrow-minded, arrogant, or schismatic as was the godly and learned Samuel Rutherford:

We pray for the coming of his Kingdom, and praise him that the number of those that seek the Lord in Scotland are not diminished, but grow even under evil shepherds and lazy feeders; which is the lily among the thorns, though we go under the name of Protesters, separatists, hypocrites, unpeaceable, implacable spirits, are made as the filth of the world, and the off-scourings of all things: yea, troubled on every side (in the streets, pulpits, in divers Synods, Presbyteries, &c. more than under Prelacy) yet not distressed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed" (Samuel Rutherford, A Survey Of The Survey Of That Summe Of Church-Discipline, "Preface", no page number, SWRB).

On the one hand, we must be careful that every disagreement does not turn into a reason to bring a division and disruption into Christ's Church (that is why we have Creeds and a Confession of Faith that summarizes the teaching of Scripture—the "Bible is my creed" would allow Roman Catholics, Mormons, JW's, and any group that uses the Bible into such a church and it would in all consistency forbid preaching altogether)—1 Corinthians 1:10; Philippians 3:16.

On the other hand, we must be careful that not every disagreement in doctrine, worship, church government is permitted because as ministers we are only to preach that which Jesus commands (Matthew 28:19-20) and that which is sound, healthy (2 Timothy 1:13; 2 Timothy 4:3). Jesus in our text today commands us to use righteous judgment in identifying those who are false prophet/false teachers (righteous judgment—the right standard—Scripture, the right motive—love for God and our neighbor, the right goal—the glory of God). If Jesus commands it, we must carefully examine, believe, love, and practice what He teaches. We cannot glibly push this aside because it is uncomfortable or because it may bring against charges of being uncharitable. Jesus suffered for the truth (as did every prophet and apostle). We cannot suffer for Christ without suffering for His truth revealed in Scripture.

This is really a two-part sermon: (1) What Is a False Prophet? (2) How Is a False Prophet Identified? For today we will focus on the first question. The main points are: (1) A False Prophet Perverts the Truth of God; (2) A False Prophet Is Dangerous Because He Is Among the Sheep.

I. A False Prophet Perverts the Truth of God.

A. Jesus begins this section of His sermon with a command: "Beware of false prophets." Is there a connection between this command and what the Lord has already preached? Indeed there is.

1. Just as there is a strait (restricted gate) and a wide gate, and a narrow way and a broad

way, so there are a few true/faithful prophets and teachers that walk through the strait gate and on the narrow way, and there are many false/unfaithful prophets and teachers that walk through the wide gate and on the broad way that leads to destruction. Just as we must exercise righteous judgment in discerning who are false prophets/teachers and who are true prophets/teachers. It is not uncharitable to exercise righteous judgment in such important matters. Jesus says it is necessary (“Beware of false prophets”).

2. At the time of the Moses, God gave this warning (Deuteronomy 13:1-4). This was likewise true at the time of the prophets (Jeremiah 14:14). Jesus warned the people concerning the Jewish teachers like the Pharisees (the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 23—the woes). At the time of the apostles the same warning was given to believers (Acts 20:28-31; 1 John 4:1).

3. God’s prophets both foretold future events and gave forth the Word of God (the gospel, the commandments, God’s will and wisdom) for the glory of God and the good of the people. All the prophets in Scripture were the prophets of the Lord Jesus—who is the great Prophet of God who has revealed the will of God for our salvation (1 Peter 1:10-12).

B. What makes the false prophet false?

1. He perverts the truth that God has given in His Word. He claims to speak on behalf of God or in God’s name, but actually speaks what is contrary to God’s Word. The true prophet proclaims God’s Word (the whole counsel) in word and deed (“Thus saith the LORD”, Deuteronomy 18:18). Even if one prophesies about some event and it comes true (or performs some miraculous sign), God says that if he perverts the truth and misleads God’s people from what is written in His Word, he is not to be followed (remember the magicians of Pharaoh performed miraculous signs by the power of the devil—serpent, blood, frogs). God is testing His people to see whether they truly love Him and will follow Him (Deuteronomy 13:1-4). Signs and wonders may deceive, but not the truth (the papal antichrist misleads by lying signs, 2 Thessalonians 2:8-12; Matthew 7:21-23).

2. The false prophet in this context is one who passes through the wide gate and walks the broad way that leads to destruction. This is one who would seem to pervert the truth to such a degree that it leads one to hell—the gospel is perverted concerning sin, Christ, grace, faith. Not every error leads to destruction, though all error that perverts the truth of God’s Word should be condemned (1 Corinthians 3:11-15). The Galatian heresy (of faith in Christ + works) would fall into the broad way that leads to destruction (Galatians 1:8-9; Acts 15:1). We must stand for Christ’s truth even when it divides among those who are true brethren in the gospel. We may love them as brethren in affirming the truth of the gospel and many precious truths that were brought again into the light at the time of the Reformation (justification by faith alone, Scripture alone, God is alone Lord of the conscience, etc.), but they may yet depart from the right ways of the Lord in adding to or subtracting from other areas in doctrine/worship/church government (wood, hay, and stubble). That is why we have “the form of sound words” (2 Timothy 1:13) summarized in our subordinate standards (which do not replace the Scripture as supremely authoritative). All of our subordinate standards appeal to Scripture as the final and supreme authority in all matters of faith and practice. It is the will of Christ that His Church be one, but one in the truth—not in error.

II. A False Prophet Is Dangerous Because He Is Among the Sheep.

A. What makes a false prophet dangerous?

1. What makes the false prophet particularly dangerous is that he is a ravenous (hungry) wolf that destroys the church by his false teaching but is disguised as one of the sheep—he or she professes to be a Christian and to speak in the name of the Lord (Matthew 7:15; 2 Corinthians 11:13-15).

2. In the texts concerning false prophets in the Old Testament and New Testament given above, they were those who were particularly dangerous because they came among the flock claiming to speak in the name of the Lord. They did not identify themselves as ravenous wolves or as workers of iniquity

that lead souls to destruction, but claimed to speak on behalf of God (antichrist does not mean so much against Christ, but in place of Christ, like the Vicar of Christ). False prophets are deceptive, cunning, and mix just enough of the truth with their poisonous heresy to lead the ignorant to follow them on the broad path that leads to destruction.

3. Sadly, it is the ignorant that become their prey—who follow these false teachers because of their “signs and wonders”, their huge following (the majority), their promise of prosperity, their building programs, their hypnotic words and rhetoric. It is not those who are serious/faithful students of God’s truth that are deluded by them, for they do not hear the voice of the Good Shepherd in the words of these false shepherds/prophets/teachers. Though these false teachers heap God’s condemnation upon themselves, those who follow them are not without fault/blame (Isaiah 30:8-10; Jeremiah 5:31; 2 Timothy 4:1-4; 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12).

B. Dear ones, this is why it is so important to be diligent students in God’s Word (2 Timothy 2:15). Test what you hear even from this pulpit according to God’s Word like the Bereans (Acts 17:11). However, don’t just leave until you have come to me and to the Eldership of this church to present your concerns, doubts, or disagreements. Don’t form a secret dissenting group that will divide the church. For we must always seek to preserve the peace, purity, and unity of Christ’s Church. We must always speak the truth in love—not the truth without love and not love without the truth (1 Corinthians 1:10). Amen.

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