

Sermon Title: Beware of Wolves

Speaker: Jim Harris

Scripture Text: Matt. 7:15-20 (Sermon on the Mount #30)

Date: 3-28-21

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We are blessed this morning to be able to return to the Sermon on the Mount. If you haven't been with us, the Sermon on the Mount is one sermon; it's the longest consecutive teaching of Jesus recorded from His entire ministry. The inspired summary of it is recorded in Matthew Chapters 5, 6, and 7.

He delivered this sermon on a momentous day. He had spent "the whole night" before it "in prayer" (Lk. 6:12); then, He had announced that morning, to the massive crowds that were gathered, who the Twelve Apostles were; and then later that day, He delivered this sermon. And as I say, as we have it recorded for us, Matthew was inspired to give us this summary of it (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21). Portions of it are spread out in the other Gospels as well (e.g., Lk. 6:20-49).

We're going to spend a total of three visits to the final 16 verses of the Sermon on the Mount; this is Number 2 of the 3. By modern terminology, we would call these 16 verses the "altar call"—this is Jesus, at the conclusion of the sermon, saying, "Look, here's what I have been aiming at." It contains only two commands; and I'll point them out for you as we go this morning. And then, following the commands is a collection of very powerful word-pictures to illustrate what Jesus wants you to do.

Last time, we saw the beginning of the "altar call"; it was "Choose your way" and "Name your gate." In Verses 13 and 14, we saw that there are two gates: the wide and easy way, and the narrow, constricted way; and the two gates lead to the two ways: one wide and comfortable and easy, the other one narrow—it isn't as easy to walk, but it's the *only* way upon which God will help you.

The two ways lead to two destinations: "life," meaning "salvation"—eternal life, Heaven, glory, the Kingdom, blessings from God; or, "destruction," which is eternal torment—not annihilation, but "eternal destruction" (2 Thess. 1:9); it's most vividly described in Revelation Chapter 20, Verse 10, where it says: "And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever" (NASB-1995; and throughout, unless otherwise noted).

The reason for the "altar call" of this sermon—the reason for the "altar call" to any sermon, the reason for any time we preach the Gospel is that we want *no one* to be "tormented day and night, forever and ever." That's where Jesus is going here.

Out of that, you also see the two groups: the "few"—that is, the ones who come to God on His terms. There are "few" in number, not because the gate is too narrow, not because the way is too constricted to accommodate more—neither is limited by the narrowness or difficulty; but there are "few" only in contrast to the fact that "many"—the vast majority—choose the "broad" way. There is no limit to the number who could pass through the "narrow" gate, if they come in God's way—if they are turning from their sins and trusting in Jesus Christ to save them (Acts 26:18; Rom. 6:1-7). There is no space-shortage in Heaven that keeps the number of entrants down. The limit on their number has nothing to do with God taking joy in populating Hell with souls (Ezek. 33:11).

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---

The "many" describes the pagans—all other religions. It also includes nominal Christians—we'll see more about that in the next section, next time we come to the Sermon on the Mount. It includes atheists and theists and humanists, and every other "ist" group you can think of—every person of every type who does not come in humble saving faith to Jesus Christ.

Second Peter Chapter 3, Verse 9 famously says: "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance." (cf. 1 Tim. 2:3-4)

As we looked at the two gates, the two ways, the two destinations, did you notice that the implication is: Neither one of those gates has a sign up above it that says, "Hell This Way—Y'all Come"? It doesn't say that! The contrast is between God's way of salvation and *all the other ways*—they're all *purported* to be the way to the Kingdom of God, the way to Heaven, the way to eternal life, the way to forgiveness of sins. So, choose your way and name your gate—two gates, two ways, two destinations, and two groups.

The remainder of this passage is addressed mainly to those who have chosen the narrow gate and the narrow way. Not exclusively—it's still trying to warn everybody that there are these different voices out there, and make sure you listen to the right ones. But this contains warnings and instructions that apply equally well to you if you *are* already a believer in Christ; and it has to do, when it's applied to your life, with the progress and the dangers along the way to eternal life.

I told you that this whole "altar call"—or, "invitation"—is built upon two commands. We saw the first one last week; it's the command: "Enter—Enter by the narrow gate." The point is: you have to choose the right one. The second command is: "Beware." And the point there is that you need to beware of those who entice people toward the "wide" gate and the "broad" way.

From here on—from Verse 15 on—there are three parts to the remaining verses; we're going to look at just one of them today. Verses 15 through 20 deal with true and false prophets. Then, when we return for our final visit, we'll look at true and false professors—I don't mean college personnel, I mean those who "profess" to follow Christ, who "profess" to be on the "narrow" way (Titus 1:16)—and then, true and false hearers. So we're going to look at the first one today, and the other two next time.

And as I said last week—in this case, there is also no real value in trying to impose an outline on Verses 15 through 20. It's the *one* command—"Beware"—and then, a pithy description of why it is important to beware. The theme is simple; it's the title of our sermon: "Beware Of Wolves." Matthew 7, Verse 15—"Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves."

Once you enter the "narrow gate," you begin your journey down the "narrow way," leading ultimately to eternal life. That doesn't mean that you have no further need for wisdom and caution and discernment and care and being wary of dangers along the way.

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---

God preserves and protects His children, but He generally does it through their own God-given perseverance. But understand: there are numerous enemies, and they are shrewd. And here, He calls them "false prophets."

And would you notice, He says they come to you in "sheep's clothing." Now, that does not mean that they wear lamb costumes; that's not what He's saying—they don't "dress up" to look like sheep. They dress up *as if they belong with* the sheep, like the shepherds would be; they *purport to be* leaders among the sheep, protectors of the sheep—when, in fact, they are dangerous. So He calls them "false prophets."

God uses mouthpieces—true prophets. The word "prophet" comes from a combination of a Greek preposition: *pro*, before; and *phēmi*, to speak—it's "one who speaks forth," or, "speaks before people." In a limited sense, sometimes it can also mean speaking before an event, in the category of predictive prophecy. But mainly, it's those who speak for God, they "speak forth" to His people (Col. 4:3; cf. Phil. 1:14).

A *false prophet pretends* to speak for God, but he or she is actually a self-appointed mouthpiece for his or her own message (Jer. 23:25-32; Ezek. 13:1-23). "False" is the prefix "pseudo," which comes from the Greek word *pseudo*; *pseudo* has been carried over into English, and it simply means: "false" or "sham"—"not what it purports to be." False prophets are people who exert spiritual influence on people *contrary* to the Word of God. They *say* they're speaking for God, but it's a falsehood. The New Testament speaks of *pseudo*-prophets (Matt. 24:11), *pseudo*-brothers (Gal. 2:4), *pseudo*-apostles (2 Cor. 11:13), *pseudo*-teachers (2 Pet. 2:1), *pseudo*-speakers—or, liars (1 Tim. 4:2)—*pseudo*-witnesses (Matt. 26:60), and even *pseudo*-Christs (Matt. 24:24)—ones who claim to be the Messiah.

So here's a truth that you can be confident is going to be evident *all* your Christian life; wherever you go, *never* forget this: Satan counterfeits *everything* good from God, and he infiltrates every group where God is at work (2 Cor. 11:13-15). That's the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares (Matt. 13:24-30)—wherever the wheat grows, Satan sows weeds *that look just like wheat*, until the harvest. Everything Satan does is deceitful (Jn. 8:44).

So, if God has His spokespeople, Satan counters with false prophets. God saves us into a spiritual family; Satan deceives some into *thinking* that they're Christians when they're not. God called the original Apostles, then Satan came along and sent men to undermine their ministry by claiming to be *Super*-Apostles. Remember, they dogged Paul and followed him around and said, "Well, Paul was good, and that Gospel is okay, but now we're going to tell you the *real* stuff—you have to *add on* to that salvation-by-grace-through-faith stuff, and we're going to show you the *real* way!" Satan brings people as false teachers who are equally eloquent—maybe sometimes *more* eloquent—but they twist and confuse the Word of God (2 Pet. 3:16; cf. 1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Tim. 4:3-4). God "sent His only begotten Son" (1 Jn. 4:19)—Satan raises up any number of clever, smooth-talking deceivers, who claim sometimes even to *be* the Messiah, but always to be the spokesmen for the Savior. So, Jesus's warning is: "Beware"—literally: "Hold yourself away from them"; that's what the word "beware" means.

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---

This is one more direct slap at the system and the teaching and the spokesmen of the Pharisees; but it goes much broader than just them in this case, to include anyone else and any other system which fits the description of "false prophet." There are about 40 examples of false prophets referred to in the New Testament, and they have been plentiful for nearly 2,000 years, since the close of the New Testament.

So as I said, "sheep's clothing" refers to normal shepherd-dress—wearing woolen clothes and being familiar with the sheep, trying to blend in like a shepherd would. Many prophets in the Old Testament wore simple, often coarse clothing; so, those who wanted to impersonate a prophet would dress accordingly—and the Old Testament even refers to that (Zech. 13:4).

"Ravenous wolves" refers to the nature of these people (Acts 20:29-30). Now, I'm a city boy, I admit it; the closest I've ever been to a wolf was in a zoo—and fortunately, he was on the other side of the fence, so I couldn't get to him. I've lived in Idaho long enough to remember the controversy over eradicating wolves; and then that led to the next controversy about *reintroducing* wolves. And when that controversy was going on, one of the things that I heard is that people had misrepresented what wolves are actually like; and I actually heard people say that wolves only kill when they're hungry—it's just part of the food chain, that's the way it goes. And that argument *worked* on some poor city-folk, who didn't have sheep that lived out in a pasture. A neighbor of a friend of ours, though, once lost 52 sheep in one night to one small pack of wolves—and one little bit of a sheep was eaten. *They are "ravenous!"* False prophets—and those who *follow* false prophets (Jer. 5:31; Ezek. 13:19)—are as dangerous to God's people as "ravenous wolves" are to sheep! *Stay away!*

How do false prophets operate? In the course of this, I'm going to give you a couple of little lists; the first one has just three examples. But we can piece together some evidence to build a pretty good composite portrait from Scripture and from 2,000 years of experience with false teachers. Let me give you some generalities about false prophets:

One thing you will notice is that false prophets are almost always *independent*. False prophets require being "Number 1" in their own circle, in their own sphere of influence. If such people—as Jesus describes as "false prophets" here—have any kind of "governing board" or "advisory board" at all, it's a collection of "yes men," sycophants who will just do whatever the leader says to do. They don't want other strong leader-types around.

Another characteristic is that false prophets generally tell people what they want to hear. You know the case in the Old Testament: "Ah, we're going to go to war! What do the prophets say?" And Ahab had his 400 prophets saying, "Oh, yeah, go for it!" And then Jehoshaphat said: "Well, is there anybody who will tell us what God actually thinks here?" And there was the one guy—Micaiah—and it didn't go so well with him, for saying what God said (1 Kings 22:1-40). Most of the time, these people tell people what they want to hear. Another Biblical example is from the Book of Jeremiah: they cry, " 'Peace, peace,' but there is no peace" (Jer. 6:14; 8:11). In that case: "There's not really going to be a captivity." You can look that one up in Jeremiah, and see what we're talking about.

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---

Or, in modern days, they love to prey on the fears of paranoid people. They love to convince people that there is a "conspiracy" against them (Is. 8:12). Consider this description of one of the enemies of God: Psalm 55, Verse 21—"His speech was smoother than butter"—that's picturesque, isn't it?—"but his heart was war; his words were softer than oil, yet they were drawn swords"—that is, in the eyes of God.

Another characteristic of false prophets is that they are possessive and controlling toward people. Go back to that word "ravenous"—it means "greedy" and "cruel." It's related to a verb that means "to snatch" or "to seize." False leaders are *masterful* at keeping people in their grip, hanging on to them.

And in order to stay away from the false prophets, you need to know who they are; so, Jesus gives you a description in the form of a very powerful word-picture; it's Verses 16 through 20. So if I *was* going to outline this, I'd say Verse 15 is The Command, and Verses 16 through 20 is The Illustration. But here we go: Chapter 7, Verses 16 through 20—"You will know them by their fruits." Notice: He means *you can* discern false teachers. "You *will* know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits."

You don't need a whole bunch of word studies in there; you know the difference between a "fig" and a "thistle"; you know the difference between a "grape" and a "thorn". But there *is* one important detail in those five verses: The verbs there that describe fruit-bearing are present tenses. I've explained to you before, but it's never a problem to say it again and again, because sometimes you can't put an emphasis into one language that is implied in the Greek, and this is such a case. The "present tense" means that it is describing continuous or repeated or ongoing, long-range activity. He's saying: "Good trees, over the long haul, produce good fruit. Bad trees, over the long haul, produce bad fruit." (cf. Lk. 8:15)

So, what does it mean, spiritually? Well, a Christian *can do* a bad deed, can *say* a wicked thing; and an unsaved person *can do* a good deed—or be compassionate, or say something kind—but over time, the overall pattern of a person's life will *show* whether that person glorifies God, as His child, or lives for self-interest. And by the way: this warning is *at least* as important today as it was on the day that Jesus preached this sermon. As a matter of fact, I would suggest to you that it's *more important*, because there are *more* ways for *more* false prophets to speak *more* lies than there were back then.

How might you spot a false prophet today? Well, here comes another list: Some things you can look for that should set off spiritual warning signs in your mind immediately; some things to beware of. And again—these are general; it's not an exhaustive list of everything that a false prophet might do; and not every one of these characteristics applies to every ravenous wolf in sheep's clothing, but it isn't that hard to recognize some of these things.

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---

What are some of the signs of a false prophet? Well, above and beyond everything: *Aberrant teaching*. That's why it's *so important* to *know* what the Bible teaches! You know the standing illustration: If somebody is going to work in a bank and you need to teach them how to recognize counterfeit money, they train them to be *very familiar* with the real thing—so that when they feel a counterfeit, they say, "Oh, wait a second! Something's not right there!" That's why it's *so crucial* to *teach* "sound doctrine" (Titus 1:9; 2:1; cf. 1 Tim. 4:6; 2 Tim. 4:3)—because people veer from it (Prov. 19:27).

When somebody comes along and finds "the secret," or, "*the key to spiritual life*"—they come up with a new standard for spiritual vitality, or a new ritual to keep; some of them go so far as "the right diet to eat" in order to be spiritual. I remember, my first year of seminary I didn't know anything about it, so I decided I would write a paper to find out a little bit about "Christian Science"; and so I went to the "Christian Science Reading Room," I got some material, and I looked up what they had, and I found out that famous book, written by Mary Baker Eddy—it's called "Science and Health, With Key To The Scriptures"; and then when you look at it, it's a commentary on the *first* few chapters of the Bible and the *last* few chapters of the Bible—*completely* twisted, muddled, and turned into a bunch of mystical mumbo-jumbo, and *ignoring* everything in between...and that's "*The Key*"! "If you're going to understand the Scripture, here's '*the key*'—*nobody knew this*, until I came along! Those poor people—who, for the first 18 centuries of the Church, *couldn't possibly* find the *key*! How are they going to get in the door?" That's so *incredibly arrogant*, I can't believe anybody would follow it—but countless thousands have. There's aberrant teaching.

Another characteristic sometimes is not so much completely aberrant teaching as it is *favorite doctrines*. There are a lot of different categories of theology, but when somebody picks up *one* doctrine and rides off into the sunset to the exclusion of all others—that becomes a problem. People will ignore parts of the Bible; or they say, "This is something new that all the theologians and exegetes *all missed*, up until now—and, oh, I feel so bad for the people in Grandma and Grandpa's generation, who didn't have this!"

Another characteristic of false teachers is: *Sheep-stealing*—pulling people away from a local church to be part of an elite group. Here's a tip: If you're listening to somebody on YouTube, television, radio, or you're reading a book, and that person purports to be telling you the Word of God—if that person does not support and encourage your greater and greater commitment and involvement in your local church, *turn them off! Close the book!* Throw it away, don't re-gift it—because that's *sheep-stealing!* *True* shepherds of the flock encourage the sheep to participate with the flock (Heb. 10:25), and to hear the voice of the Shepherd through His Word (1 Tim. 4:13).

Another manifestation is often: *Separatism*, where they go beyond the *right kind* of separatism—you *are* to be separate from sin (2 Tim. 2:19b); that's holiness, that's sanctification—but they will promote separating people from other believers. "You should only read certain books that we publish and tell you about." Or, "You should only read a certain translation of the Bible." "You should not interact with or cooperate with other Christians in any other part of the flock of God." Something else to run away from.

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---

Here's another one, and this one is *most* popular today: *Saying whatever is popular*, trying to accommodate the spirit of the age instead of pleasing God. The Apostle Paul referred to it with a great metaphor: "Ear-tickling" (see 2 Tim. 4:3; Jer. 5:31)—and we'll circle around to that before we finish this morning.

Some of the others: *Compromise on sin*—they ignore certain sins, or they deemphasize guilt over sin (Jer. 7:8-10; 23:14). I used to hear a guy on the radio during my commute years ago...I don't know why I kept listening, but he was on the right time for me to be in the car. He just blatantly said: "If anybody ever tells you that, as a Christian, when you sin you should confess your sins and repent, *they're teaching you a false gospel!*" Really? That's not what the Bible says—*not even close!* (1 Jn. 1:9; cf. Ps. 32:5; Prov. 28:13) Or, some of them will excuse sins by blaming sins on parents or society or the devil—as if it's not *you* that is individually responsible (e.g., Gen. 3:12-13).

There is another category of false prophets that have a serious preoccupation with *prophecy*—as if *everything* that you should know, and everything you should deal with, ash to do with end-times stuff or setting dates or speculating about when prophecy is going to be fulfilled.

Or, a big emphasis on miracles; that's a great big one today—people claiming to do resurrections and all sorts of things.

Or, a big preoccupation with demons—we'll follow up a little bit with that when we get to Chapter 7, Verse 22, next time.

Those flashy, attention-getting ministries are the *home* of false doctrine—*always*, that's the case. As I say, more about that in our final visit to the Sermon on the Mount.

Do you get the point? The command is: "Beware"—and then, what does Jesus say, in Verse 16? "You will know them by their fruits." Then He talks about trees and thistles and thorns and all that. And then, He says: "So then, you will know them by their fruits." (vs. 20).

"Fruits" are the product of a person's conduct and teaching. "Fruit" is what the life produces. And remember: present tense—ongoing: what is the overall, long-term result here? Pay attention to how someone lives, not *just* what they say (1 Tim. 3:2-7; Titus 1:6-9). They might quote the Bible, they might say some nice-sounding things; but what is the outcome of the teaching? Does it lead people to the Cross? Does it focus on the sin problem that we have; and the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus—which is the "good news" that answers the bad news of this horrible sin problem? Or does it point them to...well, anything else?

False prophets have always been a problem. They were in the Old Testament. Peter warned: "But false prophets also arose among the people"—in the Old Testament—"just as there will also be false teachers among you" (2 Pet. 2:1). He was right. Listen to what Paul dealt with in the book of Acts, and in all of his writings.

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---

They've *always* been around, throughout Church history; but the influence of false teachers *skyrocketed* with the advent of the printing press. Now, that was *also* a good thing for the Gospel. Get the Bible into the language of the people and duplicate it—*that's a good thing!* That's a *very* good thing! (see Is. 8:20; 2 Tim. 3:15-16) But Satan—*he always counterfeits*. He *always* mimics, and introduces his poison (Gen. 3:1-5).

Eventually, radio *greatly* enhanced the ability of false prophets to spread their spiritual poison. Then, along came TV—goes farther, goes faster. And now that we have the Internet, the floodgates are wide open. I don't know how much more open it could be than people carrying around little things in their pockets and purses that can connect them to any false prophet in the world—anywhere, anytime! And you can also have your Bible on that little box, and you can also use it for a lot of other things. You know, you can even make a *phone call* on those things?

It's *very* relevant to us. Consider the ones who consistently undermine churches, and they advise their listeners and callers over and over again to "Get away from those stuffy old churches, and get the materials that we're offering to you!" Satan loves to hear things like that, because every time he can pull a person away from the Church, even temporarily, the Body of Christ is weakened. Why? Because we are "members of one another" (Eph. 4:25)—and as I said, there are a whole bunch of those "one another" commands in the New Testament. We *need* each other! We *belong* to each other! Now, you have to come *individually* through that "narrow gate," without any baggage—you must come by faith; but once you *do*, you're part of a *family!* And anybody trying to pull apart the family is doing the work of the Enemy.

Or, consider the embarrassing number of preachers with very broad reach who have been sexually immoral. Even more tragic than the shame that they bring on Christ, and to all Christians, is the fact that a lot of them—and this has happened several times, including in the last few months—a lot of them have already been exposed for multiple cases of adultery, and then: "Oh, yeah—I finally got caught. I'm sorry!" And then, six months later: "Here I am, starting a new church! Y'all come!"—while their life is a *screaming contradiction* to the qualifications for spiritual leadership (e.g., 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6).

Or, if you want to think of it being applicable today, consider the dozens of false prophets (and "dozens" is probably an understatement), especially these days in the circle of the "NAR." "NAR" is a "TLA." A "TLA" is a "three-letter acronym." "NAR" is the "TLA" for "New Apostolic Reformation." That's a movement where people are claiming that, "Hey! *We have Apostles now!* As a matter of fact, *we are Apostles now!* Click this link, pay your money, and *you* can be an Apostle, by golly! How exciting is that?" Never mind that the Apostles died in the era of the Apostles (see Acts 1:21-22; 1 Cor. 9:1; 2 Cor. 12:12; Rev. 21:14).

A whole bunch of people running around, and *hordes* of them prophesied that God *told them* specifically to let everybody know that Donald Trump would win the 2020 Presidential Election (see Deut. 18:22). Justin Peters has an hour-and-a-half video on his YouTube channel about the *awful year* for the "prophets" of 2020.

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---

Listen: That's *binary*, okay? It was either right or it was wrong, *and it was wrong!* And when they were found out to be wrong, they explained why it was okay for them to be wrong. If they were in the era of the Old Testament, *they should all be sentenced to immediate death by stoning* (Deut. 18:20). But they keep *right on going!*

Those modern prophets, by the way: they didn't only biff it on the Election. A lot of them started saying that in 2019. But looking forward to 2020, if you were getting message from God to help God's people understand what's coming, do you think there might have been *something* about...oh, I don't know—*COVID-19? They all missed it!*

There are one or two of them I heard about who made prophecies that were so general and squishy and nonspecific that then, about eight months *after* the shutdown and all of that, *then* they went back and claimed that that's what they *meant*, back then! But apparently, they can't *say it*, because that would've been putting themselves on the line.

And the fact that such people *continue*—that's just evidence of the existence of Satan. But the fact that they *maintain a following*—that's proof that not only do *false prophets* abound, but people on the "broad way"—and maybe some who are on the "narrow way"—are woefully unwilling to face what this passage actually teaches! One wrong prophecy or prediction in the name of God, one wrong setting of a date about prophetic events, and that person—like I say, in the Old Testament—should have been stoned. And the fact that Christians don't just rise up and scream, "Give me my money back! I should have never supported you!"—that's how it *should be*, but it's not.

Look: when you get "thorns," you're *not* in God's vineyard! When you get "thistles," you're not brushing against a fig tree! "You will know them by their fruits."

Now, Jesus said this in the middle of His "Great Galilean Ministry"—the height of His popularity. The Church wasn't even born yet; that's explained to us later (Matt. 16:18; cf. Jn. 14:16-17; 1 Cor. 12:13). But let's jump ahead in time to the final inspired chapter written by the Apostle Paul before he died. So we'll go forward about 35, 36, 37 years from after the Sermon on the Mount. And these words—I think you know where I'm headed—these words are the standard marching orders for *every* pastor, *every* elder, *every* teacher, *every* evangelist in the Church—at all times, in every location, until the Rapture. What am I referring to? Second Timothy Chapter 4, Verses 1 through 4.

When Paul wrote to Timothy, he had already been through a lot: He had been through his first imprisonment, released, and then he left Timothy in Ephesus—to deal with, by the way, some false prophets and false teachers (1 Tim. 1:3)—and Timothy knew that Paul knew that he was going to be martyred pretty soon; and he writes to his "understudy," if you will, and he says: "I solemnly charge you"—now, when a guy who is expecting the executioners to come for him any day says, "Brother, I *solemnly* charge you," you're going to *listen*, right? But listen to how he beefs it up: "I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom"—well, Timothy, do you think Brother Paul has something important to say to you here? I think so! And what does he say?

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Here's what you need to do: "Preach the word"—referring to the Word of God. Where has he mentioned that? Oh, I don't know—*two verses before this!* That's what he's talking about. "Preach the word"—which is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). "Preach the word." And then he says: "Be ready in season and out of season"—if it's popular or not—"reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction." Now, don't tell me you're not supposed to turn from your sin if you're a Christian! What does "reprove" mean? What does "rebuke" mean? What does "exhort" mean? When you get somebody who is going off the track, point out where they're going off the track, help them fix it, and get them back on track, and go along helping them with their walk with Christ!

But then, look at what else he says: "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine..." This is the *First Century!* This is the late '60s of the First Century! "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths."

That passage from the pen of Paul is saying, in different words, exactly what Jesus said at the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount—the summary of which we've just seen today.

Is this practical? Is this relevant? We're sure not in the First Century, but it *is* practical. The largest church in the United States is reputed to be Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas—and I say "reputed" because, among the megachurches, somebody might want to argue over which is the greatest. Its famous pastor...I will give him this: he does not delve into the idiocy of the prophetic claims, like the New Apostolic Reformation false prophets. But, he is a large and loud example of doing *exactly* what Second Timothy Chapter 4 describes.

The message is ear-tickling—telling people how good they are, not that they have a sin problem; and affirming them just as they are. Throw in a few words from Scripture—because, after all, this is supposed to be a "Christian" thing. The message of alienation from God due to sin (Is. 59:2), the message that Jesus bore the wrath of God on the Cross (Is. 53:5-6; 2 Cor. 5:21), the message that hell awaits if you don't turn to the Savior (Jn. 8:24; 2 Thess. 1:7-9)—that's missing. Jesus's death, burial, and resurrection is *far less prominent*; I won't say he *never* mentions it—he might even next Sunday, when it's Easter. But more prominent is humanistic self-affirmation.

I decided I would look it up, so I Googled it Friday of this week; and immediately, first thing that popped up on my screen was from that church's Twitter feed, Friday of this week; and here's what it said: "If you're not getting what you expect from others, let that be okay. You can affirm and approve yourself, knowing that God hand-picked you, He breathed life into you, and He put seeds of greatness inside." So, the meaning: You're just not watering your "seeds of greatness" enough! You need to affirm yourself *more!* Nothing about how you belong to a family—come alongside each other and nourish each other.

Sermon Title: Beware of Wolves

Speaker: Jim Harris

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I thought that was pretty silly, and then I was wrapping this up and I thought, "Maybe I ought to go back and copy and paste that for my sermon." So I wait back *two hours later*—there was *another* Tweet from the same church; this one is a prayer: "Father, thank You that I can find my value and worth and approval in You alone." Now, is there an element of truth in that? Yes—in *Christ*! But that's not what he's saying. "Father, thank You that I can find my value and worth and approval in You alone. Thank You for the people You've placed in my life, but help me not to become depended upon them. I declare that I have Your approval and love, and that's all I need. In Jesus' name. Amen."

Now, is there an *element* of truth in that? Well...yeah. But is it drawing you to the Cross? Certainly, it isn't. And by the way: "Thank you for the people You've placed in my life"—well, that could actually refer to your church family—"But I don't want to be *dependent* on them!" Oh, no? You're *commanded* to be dependent upon them! (Gal. 6:2; Heb. 10:24-25; Jas. 5:16) *We need each other*! "If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it" (1 Cor. 12:26). *That's how this works!*

That famous preacher of that famous church—who I need not name—he now has a son who preaches form time to time. The son's name is Jonathan Osteen, who recently said this; this is a direct quote: "God is proud of you. I imagine He's sitting on the front row of Heaven, with His phone pointed *right at you*. He's cheering you on, celebrating every step! You're so important to Him that He doesn't want to miss a moment!"

My friends, I don't say anything to pretend I'm a judge, *but that's blasphemy!* God, sitting on the front row of Heaven with His phone pointed at you, to videotape you because He's so proud of *you*? He *died* because He *couldn't* be proud of you! (Rom. 5:6) He died because *you needed a Redeemer!* (Acts 20:28) He sent His Son to take on humanity to bear the "wrath of God" (Rom. 5:9) for all who would accept "the free gift" of "eternal life in Christ" (Rom. 6:23).

If you're having a funny sensation hearing stuff like that [the Osteen quotes above], what you're feeling is: somebody trying to tickle your years, spiritually speaking.

Let's get *serious* about this. Jesus is calling people to a *radical* commitment: *one* right gate, *one* right way, *one* right destination—"few" who "find it." When you hear a message of self-affirmation, *you're listening to a wolf* (Rom. 16:18). When you hear a message about the Cross, you're listening to the voice of God (1 Cor. 2:2; Gal. 6:14; Phil. 3:3).

My friends, I've said this often—and Jesus has said it here in the first two verses of this invitation: You must come individually; you can't get through that gate on anybody's coattails. *You* must come, emptyhanded—stripped of all the baggage—through that gate. And once you become part of that, you become part of a family! And from the moment you give your life to Christ, *you cannot practice Christianity apart from a local church!* That's crucial. You cannot obey those "one another" commands by listening to the radio, watching TV, watching something on the Internet, reading a book; you have to be involved with other people.

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First Command: "Enter through the narrow gate" (Matt. 7:13). Second Command: "Beware"—there will be *many* who will try to deceive you and bump you, at least over to the *side* of the road, if they can't get you off of it.

I was thinking one time—I wrote this down, I found it and tweaked it a little bit; it's so true: Wouldn't it be great to see some people devote themselves to the Lord Jesus Christ and to His people, to the same extent that they devote themselves to their *hobbies*? When you look at our culture, you see people willing to take on payments for years for the vacation home or the boat or the motorcycle or the RV, or to save up for the newest equipment. How does that compare to their commitment to Christ? If you just bought a boat, I don't mean you have to slink out—that's alright! But what's the *priority*? What's most important?

Or you see people willing for their families to arrange most of their discretionary time around the hobby—or, is it around the Body of Christ? You see people willing to spend days at a time—or at least, as many non-working hours as possible—devoted to the hobby. You watch them willing to study and read and spend time with people who are more experienced in the hobby. How does the Lord fit into that?

That doesn't mean it's wrong to have a hobby! If you love gardening, garden. If you love boating, boat. If you like hiking, hike. But Jesus is your *Lord*! What's the priority system? One writer put it this way, about Americans; he said: "We worship our work, we work at our play, and we play at our worship." That's pretty pithy. There are *boundless* distractions along the "narrow way." Beware!

Jesus isn't done yet with His "altar call," but are you *listening*?

Let's pray:

*Father, thank You again for this warning. Thank You for this invitation. Thank You most of all for the Lord Jesus Christ, in whom we can stand today—washed clean, sanctified, complete in Him—and we can stand in Your grace, which we need just as desperately today as we did the day we first came to faith. And Father, You know every heart here, and we pray that we will all be open before You, and allow Your Spirit to apply Your Word to us, and to make us useful for Your glory. Please don't let a person go from this place today without totally embracing the fact that they need a Savior, and You sent one, and He is the only way—He is the truth, He is the life. Do whatever You need to do in our hearts, even if it's that first moment of igniting faith, or if it's a matter of something that needs to be put into its right place in the priority system of things. Have Your way with us for Your glory, in Jesus' name. Amen.*