

Introduction

As I pointed out last time, we are entering the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is wrapping things up with four clear warnings. The first concerns a false entrance to the kingdom. The second, which is our matter of study today, concerns false prophets.

[Read Text; Pray]

I still have trouble believing that a restaurant needs to print the following words on a coffee cup: "Caution: contents hot". Doesn't it seem to you that if you are not ordering a frappuccino or iced coffee that coffee generally comes hot? But when McDonalds was taken to court years ago, it was found that McDonald's consumers were not adequately informed of the burn risk that came with their coffee. So now we find a warning on the cup, on the lid, and even on the sleeves that are wrapped around our cups of joe. There are some things, though, that you just think people ought to know.

On the other hand there are matters in which the need for a warning seems acute, like warnings regarding possible side effects of medicine. These are warnings for things that are not so obvious and that may have severe consequences. If there is anyone who knows when people ought to be warned, it is Jesus. And therefore where he issues a warning, we ought to listen carefully. So let us consider carefully Jesus's strong caution about false prophets in our text this morning.

I. The Definition of a False Prophet.

A. In short a false prophet is one who claims to speak for God who in fact does not. He or she may speak some things that are true, but they mix in what is not true. Thereby they override or avoid the most important and most fundamental truths. As a result they do not speak God's message. Instead they misrepresent him.

A warning against false prophets goes all the way back to the early days of the nation of Israel. The Lord through Moses declared that he would raise

up for his people a prophet. The Lord would put his words into the mouth of said prophet. And that prophet would speak all that the Lord would command him. God raised up a number of prophets through the years, but the fulfillment of this word is THE prophet Jesus. In the midst of the High Priestly prayer recorded in John 17, Jesus said to the Father, "to those whom you have given me out of the world, . . . I have given . . . the words that you gave me." Jesus spoke only what the Father commanded him to speak. Now Jesus was more than a prophet. He is prophet, priest, and king. He not only speaks the truth. He is the truth. He is the one who speaks for God but also gives his life as a priest before God to offer the only blood which satisfies the holy requirements for acceptance with God. Jesus is the perfect provision and the only hope for sinners to be reconciled with God. More than a prophet, indeed he is, but still he is a prophet. He speaks for God.

And in contrast to the true prophet, back in Deuteronomy 18 the Lord God warned of false prophets. He indicated that there would be prophets who would PRESUME to speak a word in the name of the Lord but who were NOT COMMANDED by the Lord. Jeremiah cried out to the Lord about false prophets in his day. He said: "Ah, Lord God, behold the prophets say to them, 'You shall not see the sword, nor shall you have famine, but I will give you assured peace in this place.'" And the Lord replied to Jeremiah: "The prophets are prophesying lies in my name. I did not send them, nor did I command them or speak to them. They are prophesying to you a lying vision, worthless divination, and the deceit of their own minds."

So this is the essence of what it means to be a false prophet. One claims to speak for God but in fact does not. One claims to speak truthfully but actually propagates lies and deception.

B. Jesus calls them false prophets. And then he proceeds to unmask the strategy and purpose of the false prophet. "They come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves." Here are three strategic elements.

1. They come. These do not sit back and wait for you to come to them. They are like those unsolicited robo-calls that come to your cell phone. I

have a personal rule not to answer my phone when I do not recognize the number, and usually when I break that rule I regret it. It is a robo-call. This week I have had a scammer use someone else's number to call mine and then I was called to be informed that I had won some trip somewhere. You know the strategy of those who engineer the robo-calls is to take advantage of people who are caught unawares. They know most people are not going to answer and of those who do most are not going to listen. But it only takes one out of a thousand to listen and bite to make this marketing approach successful. So they call. In the same way, false prophets come. They approach and you are going to have to deal with them. You need to know who they are.

2. That then brings us to the clothing of the false prophet. They wear a harmless, in fact, an endearing disguise. They come in sheep's clothing. Not a few commentators see this disguise as an attempt to look like a sheep. Meanwhile John MacArthur points out that the shepherds of Jesus' day generally wore woolen clothing made from the very wool of the sheep they tended. How cool is that! The shepherd came to the sheep in their own wool. They identify with the shepherd because the shepherd wears their wool. In this way the false prophets appear to the sheep not simply as just another sheep but in fact as their very own shepherd. The false prophet comes to the sheep appearing to be one who ought to be followed. False prophets do not come to the sheep looking like the threat they are. They come looking like a friend to be followed.

3. But the disguise is not a funny trick. Their disguise reveals the sinister motive to deceive. The deception is for the purpose of taking advantage and eating the sheep up. They come in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. The wolf was the most common threat to sheep. It would attack, kill, and destroy. And when you add the adjective ravenous in front of wolf, you get a monster whose appetite for destroying sheep cannot be satisfied. The strategy of the ravenous wolf is to lull the sheep to sleep by its harmless appearance in order to eat them up.

Now false prophets attack and eat their victims up not with their teeth but with their lies. Last week we studied the broad way that leads to destruction. I had this thought this week, I know of a number of churches

called Broadway Church. I have decided that is a name I would not want to have in light of Matthew 7:13-14. But on to my point. The broad way does not destroy its travelers with hard truths; it attracts them with the ease of the way and destroys them for the lack of truth. The false prophets are the pastors and preachers of the broad way. They are ravenous wolves who wreak destruction upon the souls of people by bringing to the people a message they want to hear rather than the true message from God they need to hear.

The cry of the Lord in Jeremiah indicts the prophets and priests because they deal falsely. He says, "they have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace' when there is no peace."

Jesus describes the last days as a time when "MANY false prophets will arise and lead many astray." (Matthew 24:12) That is what false prophets do. That is how they bring their ravenous appetite to bear upon sheep. They destroy them through deception. They say "peace, peace" when there is no peace.

False prophets had crept in to Corinth after Paul had planted a church there. They preached a different Jesus and a different gospel. It wasn't that they didn't present Jesus. It wasn't that they didn't say "gospel." The problem was they preached a different Jesus and a different gospel than the true one. Paul said of them, they are "deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness." (2 Corinthians 11:13-15) False prophets serve the devil. The devil is a liar and a deceiver and so are false prophets. They preach a word they claim is from God but it is from the devil. It is the teaching of demons.

II. The Recognition of a False Prophet.

So false prophets are dangerous. They are dangerous because they direct people away from the narrow road. They direct people away from God. They say they speak for God, but they speak in opposition to what he has actually said. And they are deceivers even in appearance. They come in sheep's clothing. They seem harmless. They seem endearing. They seem

trustworthy. So how are they to be recognized? That is what Jesus explains in verses 16-18.

A. He says we will recognize false prophets by their fruits. Ultimately, you know a tree or a vine by the fruit it produces. You know the nature of a tree as well as the health of a tree by the fruit that it produces. If I had an apple up here this morning and asked you what kind of tree do you think I got this off of, no one would say "off of a peach tree," because peach trees produce peaches and only apple trees produce apples. If I held up a sick apple before you, no one would say I got it off of a healthy apple tree because healthy trees produce healthy fruit. A tree is known by its fruit.

In the same way false prophets are known by their fruit. A false gospel does not produce true converts and a diseased gospel does not produce healthy converts.

B. Fruit is not immediate but eventual. Fruit is the culmination not the initiation of the growing season. You do not come to a tree or a vine at the beginning of the season and see the fruit first. No first you see buds and then blooms and leaves and then only after a significant period of development comes the fruit. It comes in the course of time. The fruit is not immediately evident. But it will come, and when it does the nature of the false prophet and the true prophet will be clearly recognizable.

C. Now let's consider what Jesus is and is not saying here. I do not believe Jesus is saying that we need to see the fruit to know the prophet is false. You do not decide whether to believe them on the basis of the fruit they produce. When you know the truth, you know what is false. Be sure you know the truth. Do what the Bereans did in the early days of the church when Paul came preaching the gospel. Acts 17:11 says "they received the word with all eagerness, examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so." They didn't examine the fruit to see if what Paul was saying was true; they examined the Scriptures. Fruit checks do not set you free. The truth sets you free. When you know the truth, you recognize what is false. Fruit checks confirm and make clearly recognizable what we already know if we know the truth.

We can know a false prophet by the error that he preaches. That he is a false prophet can be outwardly cloaked for some time, but not forever. He cannot produce good fruit, healthy fruit. He can come in sheep's clothing. He can be very appealing. He will come as Satan came to Eve in the garden in an endearing and enticing way. But Eve did not have to do a fruit check to be able to know that Satan was a false prophet. His words gave him away. "Did God say?" "You surely shall not die!" And the fruit of his preaching, the results of following his message, make his lies abundantly clear.

D. What Jesus is doing is warning that his followers do not judge a prophet to be false or true on the basis of the appearance. You will recognize them by their fruit, but fruit is eventual. Until that time do not be deceived by the manner in which they come. So how do false prophets come? And by what standards of judgment must we take care not to be persuaded?

For one, we must not be persuaded by popularity. The way that leads to eternal destruction is a popular one. It is attractive to MANY. Do not be drawn by the popularity of a speaker. If the masses clamor after a person, beware. One cannot appeal to the masses without compromising truth. When you do not compromise the truth, the masses turn away. Jesus himself was followed by multitudes, but when he preached the truth many turned away. Do not be moved by popularity. The two fastest-growing religious movements in our day are Islam and Mormonism. Popular following does not indicate they are true.

Second, do not be persuaded by charisma. This characteristic is often associated with popularity. Not many who lack charisma can draw a large following. A winsome personality does not necessarily mean what one is preaching is false, but neither does it assure that one is speaking truthfully. Think of how the apostle Paul describes his coming to the Corinthians. "I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling."

Third, do not be persuaded by eloquence. Speaking well does not guarantee truth. It may be impressive and even enjoyable to listen to, but the gospel does not need eloquence to commend itself. Paul said to the

Corinthians, "I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech."

Fourth, do not be persuaded by their jargon. False prophets talk about God, Jesus, salvation, and the gospel. Again Mormonism and Islam talk about Jesus. But they present another Jesus and another gospel.

Fifth, do not be persuaded by their signs or their testimonies to experience. When Moses came to Pharaoh to appeal for the release of the Israelites, the Egyptian wise men and sorcerers were able to imitate some of the same signs he performed. The testimony of a trip to heaven does not prove truthfulness.

Sixth, do not be persuaded by how they make you feel. Here is a great problem. Human beings have itching ears. We love to believe the things that make us feel good. We yearn for precepts that make us comfortable with who we are and what we want to be true. These things appeal to our flesh. So often this is precisely how false prophets come. I was devastated a number of years back in a conversation with one of my dear relatives. She said she loved to listen to Robert Schuller because he made her feel so good. The whole depiction of wolves in sheep's clothing is this: they make you feel good. That is the way false prophets come.

Well, this list could go on: enthusiasm, education, intellect, prosperity, worldly success, and ability to be friendly with the world.

III. The Destination of a False Prophet.

Here is the ultimate fruit, the ultimate outcome by which we can recognize false prophets. Their final destination is the fire. They will be judged. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. This is their destination and the destination of those who follow their teaching.

This final outcome will make it plain that they are false. Their fruit will evidence the error they proclaimed as truth. God has reserved the hottest and darkest of his wrath for false prophets. What Jesus describes as trees being thrown in the fire, Peter says this way. "There will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the

Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. . . . their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep. . . . For them the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved.” (2 Peter 2:1, 3, 17)

In this way we are warned of the hostility with which they treat God and the wrath to which they will be eternally exposed. You can't get any more sobering than this. Heaven is more glorious than we can imagine and hell is far worse. Be sure you are on the narrow path not the broad one and be sure that you are not an advocate for the broad path either. Know the truth. Hear what Jesus is saying in this sermon. Do not be enticed by the world and worldliness and popularity of the broad way. Do not be enticed by doctrines of demons and the false gospels of the broad way. Do not go there and do not call others to join! The final destination is destruction of a magnitude that should make your stomach drop to the floor. Flee before it is too late.

IV. The Reaction to a False Prophet.

A. Jesus is clear how we should posture ourselves even to the thought that we might encounter a false prophet. His order is “BEWARE.”

I am just going to quote MacArthur in regard to this imperative. “**Beware** always warns of danger. It is not a call simply to notice or sense something, but to be on guard against it because it is so harmful. The word has the idea of holding the mind away. False prophets are more than wrong; they are dangerous, and we should not expose our minds to them. They pervert thinking and poison the soul. They are more dangerous than a cobra or a tiger, because those animals can only harm the body. False prophets are spiritual beasts and are immeasurably more deadly than the physical ones.” (464) These are as great a threat to the people of Christ as woolly wolves are to sheep.

B. Part of the danger here is the proneness of God's people to fall for lies. We must saturate ourselves with truth in order to stay above the danger. I made reference earlier to the false prophets of Jeremiah's day. Here is the Lord's further assessment of the situation. Jeremiah 5:30-31 says, “An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land; the prophets

prophecy falsely, and the priests rule at their direction; my people love to have it so, but what will you do when the end comes?" As Paul writes to Timothy, "a time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth."

I am convinced we live in such a day. People go after what they want to hear and there are plenty of false prophets ready to give them exactly that—whatever will sell, whatever will draw and keep the followers. We have the gospel of self, and the gospel of wealth and health. We have the gospel of tolerance and affirmation of sin. We have lights and smoke and charisma and enthusiasm. Men have developed church growth strategies that cater to the fleshly desires of human beings and treads lightly on personal sin and the exclusivity of Jesus Christ and the centrality of the cross. With that God is NOT pleased. And unto this we must not be let astray.

Conclusion

The nice warm weather we have had lately has found me and Melissa out walking through the neighborhood. And I have noticed a couple of the houses in the neighborhood have signs that say, "Beware of the Dog." Whenever I see one of those signs, my alertness level goes up. My eyes are wider; I move to the other side of the road if possible; and I am listening for any audible indication the dog might be out. I don't want any part of an encounter with a dog that might threaten my well-being. I doubt you do either. But Jesus warns us this morning of a far more dangerous threat in that it threatens our souls. Beware of false prophets. The Apostle Paul gives a positive example of what we should look for to identify true prophets of the Lord.

1 Corinthians 2

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit

and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

To the world, the true gospel looks like silliness and powerlessness. And they try to reinvent it. Some substitute their works. And others make a way for sensuality. Those who do are false prophets. And we will recognize them by their fruits. We must not allow the appeal with which they come to take us away from the clear truth of Christ Jesus crucified and holiness to be pursued in his name and by his power.