

Matthew 7:15-20 (NKJV)

¹⁵ "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.

¹⁶ You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles?

¹⁷ Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.

¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor *can* a bad tree bear good fruit.

¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

²⁰ Therefore by their fruits you will know them.

I have a question for you this morning. Have you noticed that now, when you read the sermon on the mount, you can't jump to the conclusion that **how you have always understood it** is how it is **properly** understood?

In other words, it doesn't mean exactly what **we thought it did**?

I hope if you came into this study the way I did, that you now take a double take.

The passage we are in this morning is in Jesus' **concluding remarks** in the sermon on the mount. He is talking about the danger of not applying the sermon in the context that **we are all going to face the judgment of God**. That is the bigger context.

Last sermon we looked at the **narrow and limited and difficult gate and way**. We talked about the **implications** of it. We are **invited** to this way and we are **commanded** to take it. We have to leave the old man, the old self behind. That self has no rights in this new way.

Ok so beside our hesitancy to **give up our old self**, besides seeing the **cost is high** and **we might not want to pay it....** Besides our very resistance based on the nature of the **gate and way.. what else** might cause us to miss this way?

That is the topic Jesus hits this morning.

It is the danger of those who would **dissuade us** from the narrow way to God. **False Prophets.**

I have been attending church for 64 years now. You would think I would have a good idea what a **false prophet** is. But I was surprised that one of the **biggest indicators** of a false prophet I had completely missed. That is the beauty of going through a passage verse by verse. We are confronted with things we would ordinarily miss. So we will get to that **indicator** a little later. So Jesus does not want us to miss the **narrow gate** and the **narrow way**. So He warns us **sternly** about a great danger.

Jesus says **BEWARE**.

The word Beware means to turn the mind to, be attentive of, to give heed. Isn't it interesting how many of Jesus instructions have to do with the mind. He is essentially saying **think carefully about this** and keep your mind on it. Pay attention.

Now why would He use this word?

It is clear He gives this warning because we would naturally think that **we don't need it**. Jesus is warning us because a warning is required.

Why?

Because of the element of **deception**.

Now what are we to beware of?

False Prophets- The Greek word means a *pretended foreteller* or religious *impostor*

Strong's Talking Greek & Hebrew Dictionary.

one who, acting the part of a divinely inspired prophet, utters falsehoods under the name of divine prophecies, a false prophet

Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament.

A true prophet has a **calling by God** to speak the message **given to him by God** and to only speak that message **in the name of God**.

A false prophet **pretends** to have a calling from God and what he speaks for God contains **falsehood** in either what it says or what is left unsaid.

So there are two parts to this.

There is the **false** and there is the **prophet**. Even when Balaam prophesied for God and even when he told the truth of God, he was still a **FALSE** prophet. He was sold out to **self**, not God. So in his instance it would have been difficult at first to **prove** he was a false prophet. What he **said** was true. But who he **pretended to be** was false. Eventually the fruit of his life proved it.

But this next item was a factor I had not considered before studying this passage. I did not know that the scholars seem to have **two different slants** on this passage. Some focus on the false prophet being false because what he **says** is false. Others focus on the false prophet being false because **who he is** is false.

I liked Brother Jones' approach. One or the other will always be false in a false prophet so it is safe to consider **both instances**. We can look at it **both ways** and it does not harm anything.

Now there is something helpful to understand here.

Scripture has different criteria for different false influencers.

heretics, apostates, and deceivers.

Again I borrow from MacArthur's study.

Heretics are those who openly reject the word of God and teach that which is contrary to divine truth.

Apostate teachers are those who once followed the true faith but have turned away from it, rejected it, and are trying to lead others away.

Those two kinds of false teachers at least have the virtue of a certain honesty. They do not claim to represent orthodox, biblical Christianity.

The **false shepherd** (the deceiver), on the other hand, gives the appearance of orthodoxy, frequently with great declarations and fanfare. He is not a liberal or a cultist but one who speaks favorably of Christ, the cross, the Bible, the Holy Spirit, and so on, and who associates with true believers. He may go out of his way to **appear** orthodox, fundamental, and evangelical. From his looks, vocabulary, and associations he gives considerable evidence of genuine belief. But he is **not** genuine; he is a fake and a deceiver. He has the speech of orthodoxy, but is a living lie.

There is a great deal in scripture about **false prophets** and **false messages**. God has scathing rebukes and promises of punishment for those claiming to speak for God but coming up with their own messages. Listen to this one.

Deuteronomy 13:1-5 (NKJV)

¹ "If there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, and he gives you a sign or a wonder,

² and the sign or the wonder comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying, 'Let us go after other gods'--which you have not known--'and let us serve them,'

³ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, for the LORD your God is testing you to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

⁴ You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear Him, and keep His commandments and obey His voice, and you shall serve Him and hold fast to Him.

⁵ But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has spoken in order to turn *you* away from the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of bondage, to entice you from the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk. So you shall put away the evil from your midst.

Look at this. This dreamer is **successful** in his prophecy. He predicts that something will happen and it happens just like he said. Ok that is the proof he

can be followed, right? No. We need to listen to **the message**. And the message is completely **contrary** to the word of God. So even though he appears to have spiritual power, he is not to be followed. His **teaching** is false. His **person** is false. And we can tell by the fact he said "I am speaking to you for God. But what God actually said is completely contrary to what he said. Beware of this false teacher.

Look at what Jesus said.

Matthew 24:3-5 (NKJV)

³ **Now as He sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be? And what *will be* the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?"**

⁴ **And Jesus answered and said to them: "Take heed that no one deceives you.**

⁵ **For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many.**

Here Jesus warns us that this is a **real danger**. He does not say that it **might** happen. He is saying that it **absolutely will**. We are told to beware because we **NEED** to beware.

John MacArthurs study points out that these false influencers in scripture are called

"false brothers ([2 Cor. 11:26](#)), false apostles ([2 Cor. 11:13](#)), false teachers ([2 Pet. 2:1](#)), false speakers, that is, liars ([1 Tim. 4:2](#)), false witnesses ([Matt. 26:60](#)), and false Christs ([Matt. 24:24](#)). "

The apostle John tells us, therefore, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world" ([1 John 4:1](#)).

Jeremiah 5:30-31 (NKJV)

³⁰ **"An astonishing and horrible thing Has been committed in the land:**

³¹ **The prophets prophesy falsely, And the priests rule by their *own* power; And My people love *to have it* so. But what will you do in the end?**

I have in the notes of my Bible on this text, always consider something **by its end**. Look at what this is saying. The priest, who are to minister God's work, are doing their own thing with none of God's authority. They are implementing their new and improved ideas for ministry.

And what do the people think. Oh yes, this ministry is more convenient. I like it more. It fits into my schedule better. It makes me feel better. Who knows

what the evaluation was based on but they loved it that the **ministers** of God were refusing to go by the **Word of God**.

And that is all well and good until they need to face judgment. What will you do in the end? What will you do in the end?

There are so many people in false churches being taught by false teachers.

And they are fine for now. But **now** does not always last. What will you do in the end?

Jeremiah 23:16 (NKJV)

¹⁶ Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you. They make you worthless; They speak a vision of their own heart, Not from the mouth of the LORD.

Look at the effect of the false prophets. Those self help gurus who call themselves ministers. What effect do their efforts have? What about when they tell you that God just wants you to have a better self esteem? He wants you to have everything the world has to offer. And you deserve it. What does that make you when you believe it? It makes you worthless. You could take on the worth of the crucified Christ. You could take on that value by surrendering your life to Christ. You could have astounding value. But no. You follow worthless preachers who are tickling your ears and appealing to your fleshly motives and you end up being worthless yourself. And the sad thing is that the listeners who feel like they have the least value will become most addicted to that lie. Because it promises them **what** they want **the way** they want it. But if they would submit to Dr Jesus they would have what they really **crave**. But the words that lead to Christ don't come from a human's heart. Those words come from the mouth of God.

Jeremiah 23:21 (NKJV)

²¹ "I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran. I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied.

Here is the essence of the false prophets.

They **go** where God **has not sent them to speak** what **God has not spoken**.

And they run to do it. It is not that they are mistaken. It is that they have very fleshly motives.

Alright, so we are warned of false prophets and we have a pretty good idea of what they are. But what is the big deal? What makes us think they will be hard to spot?

Matthew 7:15 (NKJV)

¹⁵ "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.

Here is the big problem. These are not the Heretics and Apostates. These are not the people who are proud of their errant doctrine and proclaim it clearly. No they come in sheep's clothing.

MacArthur points out something here that could be true. He seems to be in the great minority.

He says-

Similarly, shepherds invariably wore woolen clothing, made from the wool of the sheep they tended. That is the sheep's clothing of which Jesus here speaks. False prophets do not deceive the flock by impersonating sheep but by impersonating the shepherd, who wears sheep's clothing in the form of his wool garments

So MacArthur believes the false teachers are not trying to look like sheep. They are impersonating the shepherd.

Most everyone else applied this as if the wolves were trying to look like sheep. Either interpretation could easily be true. The big point is these false prophets wear camouflage. They spend a great deal of effort looking like the real thing. And the problem here is that they are good at it.

This one phrase should really make us stop in our tracks. **False Christian leaders will look like genuine Christian leaders.** The greatest danger to a flock is not the wolf that is **outside** the pen. It is the wolf that is **inside** the pen. And nothing is more dangerous to a flock than when the **wolf** is given the authority to **take care of** the flock.

Could anything be worse to the safety of the flock?

That is exactly what Christ is telling us to beware of. And no wonder.

Now is this in anyway normal in spiritual things?

2 Corinthians 11:13-15 (NKJV)

¹³ For such *are* false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ.

¹⁴ And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light.

¹⁵ Therefore *it is* no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works.

Woah

Isn't that scary?

Paul is telling us that we can expect preachers to not only **look like other preachers** but to look like **outstanding** preachers and ministers. The devil in the pulpit. That is the warning.

And it is real.

Now, won't we **who know good doctrine** be onto them in a heartbeat? When they lay out their doctrine and it denies the Lordship of Christ, or the deity of Christ, or the virgin birth, or the crucifixion?

Of course we would. But no self respecting false teacher who is dressed up like a sheep or a shepherd is going to do something so stupid.

They are not likely to deny them. What they are far more likely to do is **ignore** them.

This is the point that I spoke about early on in this sermon. This is the thing I had not considered about the false teachers. I thought they would be easy to spot if we knew what they said about their **doctrine**.

I did not give enough credit to the trickiness of the devil and his messengers. MacArther says it this way.

In other words, they are identified not so much by what they say as by what they do not say. They usually do not openly deny Jesus' divinity, His substitutionary atonement, the depravity and lostness of man, the reality and penalty of sin, the destiny of hell for unbelievers, the need for repentance, humility, and submission to God, and other such "negative" and uncomfortable truths. They simply ignore them.

Brother Jones says this. I could have reworded it but could not do it justice. **The picture we need to have in our minds, therefore, should rather be this. The false prophet is a man who comes to us, and who at first has the appearance of being everything that could be desired. He is nice and pleasing and pleasant; he appears to be thoroughly Christian, and seems to say the right things. His teaching in general is quite all right and he uses many terms that should be used and employed by a true Christian teacher. He talks about God, he talks about Jesus Christ, he talks about the cross, he emphasizes the love of God, he seems to be saying everything that a Christian should say. He is obviously in sheep's clothing, and his way of living seems to correspond. So you do not suspect that there is anything wrong at all; there is nothing that at once attracts your attention or arouses your suspicion, nothing glaringly wrong. What then can be wrong, or may be wrong, with such a person?**

The false prophet is always a very comforting preacher. As you listen to him he always gives you the impression that there is not very much wrong. He admits, of course, that there is a little; he is not fool enough to say that there is nothing wrong. But he says that all is well and will be well

Peace, peace.' Very comforting, very reassuring always is the false prophet in his sheep's clothing; always harmless and nice, always, invariably, attractive

We have somehow got hold of the idea that error is only that which is outrageously wrong; and we do not seem to understand that the most dangerous person of all is the one who does not emphasize the right things

The Expositors Bible Commentary puts it this way.

the gospel's enemies usually conceal their hostility and try to pass themselves off as fellow believers. At first glance they use orthodox language, show biblical piety, and are indistinguishable from true prophets

I think at the heart of it, it comes down to one thing. What is the **real focus** of the **gospel** being presented?

Is the focus on calling people into a relationship to Christ in such a way that they will be continually confronted with the Glory of God and the beauty of Christ and grace to where they will be **compelled by the Holiness of God to live a life worthy of the Savior?**

Or is the focus **man centered**? Does Christ become a way to improve the day to day lives of the people attending that church? Does Christ become the servant there to **hat in hand** meet the needs of the church as each need arrives.

The church devoted to the **glory of God** is going to preach certain things. They will preach about the **lostness** of man. And it won't be a cursory mention of that we are broken and we have made isolated mistakes. It will center in on the reality of the **sinful state** of mankind at birth. It will point out that the **best that is in us**, apart from Christ, is cesspool worthy.

It will talk about the righteousness of God. It will point out that what we deserve for merely existing in a sinful state is eternal damnation. It will warn

of that because of the **justice** of God, because of the **worthiness** of God, because of the **holiness** of God. They will talk about wrath. They will talk about a final judgment and the hell to follow. In that framework they will discuss the grace of God. They will talk about how wonderful it is that we are given the chance to believe in Christ and to absolutely surrender **who we are to Him** as servants of Him forever without reservation. They will talk about justification and sanctification. They will talk about the need to renew our minds to the glory of God. They will talk about the freedom we have in Christ to live a life glorifying to Him.

The false prophet, on the other hand will have a very different message. It will be exceedingly heavy in the concepts of **grace and love**. It will be filled with language about how **God stands ready to help you with your problems**. It will couch the gospel in terms that God is just so happy if you will come to Him with any kind of willingness to make a decision that admits that maybe you need Him in some way.

And we immediately see the trickiness. Because it is a partial truth. It subtly presents God as a **viable option to the problems of our lives** as opposed to an **absolute necessity because of our obligation toward an almighty God** who deserves absolute devotion. It offers us to choose between God and the world like we are choosing between Tylenol and Advil for pain relief. Repentance is not postured or called for. It does not even fit in the context. It is like the military recruiting by saying "Be all you can be". It is false advertising, false recruitment.

So the problem is not so much what the false teachers **say**. It is more about what they **leave out**, what they **ignore**.

I fear that there are a lot of churches that would not get a second glance by us and we just assume they are legit because they are not openly defying the true doctrine of the Bible. But if we sat in the congregation for a year we would never hear a single reason that we must **repent** before an angry and powerful God. No **fear of God** would be generated, which scripture says is the beginning of wisdom.

Now we do not need to be on a Heretic hunt. That is not our calling. But we need to keep this truth in mind. **False teachers will not look false**. You can count on it. It will take great discernment, subtle discernment, if we are to know a **true** teacher from a **false** one.

I forget where I got this quote. I think it is an excellent summary of what we have covered:

'False prophets' are to be defined negatively as those who, while claiming for themselves the capacity to define for others the will of God, represent in their practice (and probably also in their teaching, but not necessarily so obviously) a false understanding of the will of God, specifically an understanding that is not in accord with the OT (Law and the) Prophets as now illuminated by Jesus. What primarily defines them is the falseness of their relationship to the prophetic stand of Jesus

And to close I would like to read what Christ said.

Matthew 7:22-23 (NKJV)

²² Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?'

²³ And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'