

## **Beware Of False Prophets**

**Matthew 7:15-20**

### **Introduction**

Jesus has spoken of two treasures; two masters; and two gates. He has called his listener to chose carefully and understand the consequences of each choice. You can chose the wrong treasure, the wrong master even the wrong gate!

The theme of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount has been true righteousness contrasted with false righteousness. True righteousness involves forsaking the broad way and entering the narrow gate. Now Jesus administers the test of spiritual fruit (vv.15-23). False prophets are not restricted to false preachers with a false gospel—but false professors who claim Christ but retain the false righteousness—the outward—religious—externalities—with none of the inward—change and true righteousness found in Christ. They proclaim right words but retain a false heart. They honor God with their lips but their heart remains far from Him. Later Jesus will say these counterfeit citizens of God's Kingdom will be surprised at the judgment.

Has your relationship with Jesus cost you anything at all? Has your decision to embrace God's gospel and Christ's instructions changed your life? Not simply a change in external behavior but a real fundamental change in the heart? False prophets with a false gospel or a false message can only produce a false righteousness (right standing with God). Deception can come from within (self-deception) and from without (false prophets).

False prophets pretend to speak for God. False prophets promote themselves. False prophets pervert the Scripture. False prophets prey on the ignorant, and the gullible. Jesus is willing to expose the false teachers and false prophets in his day and in so doing gives us some principles on how to expose false prophets in our day. False prophets are sometimes crass—but the most effective false prophets are subtle and seductive. False prophets construct and promote a false Jesus and a false gospel that further their wicked plans. A fake Jesus. A fake gospel. A group of students at Harvard once tried to fool their very famous professor of Zoology; Louis Agassiz (b. 1807-1873). They took parts from a number of different bugs and with great skill attached them together to make a creation they were sure would baffle their teacher. On the chosen day they brought it to him and asked him to identify it. As he inspected it with great care, the students grew more and more convinced they would deceive their instructor. Finally Professor Agassiz straightened up and said, "I have identified it." Scarcely able to control their amusement, they asked its name. Agassiz replied; "It is a humbug." A person with genuine life in Christ and basic training in God's Word will grow more skillful in exposing Humbug religion.

### **Be Warned: There Are False Prophets (v.15)**

*Matthew 7:15 (NKJV) 15 "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.*

Two roads; one broad and leading to destruction (ruin—hell); one narrow leading to life (abundant life—heaven).

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Two animals—one pretending to be sheep (they seem harmless); one inward—ravenous wolves—harmful. One—a pretense—the other—willing to tear you apart.

We've all seen the sign: "Beware of Dog." In the classic Peter Seller's movie about a clumsy detective—Jacques Clouseau asks the question; "Does your dog bite?" The man says "no" and when Sellers attempts to pet the dog he is met with a vicious response. "I thought you said your dog doesn't bite!" "It's not my dog."

Beware means more than "be warned". It means be on your guard against something dangerous. "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" (John MacArthur p. 464). Peter and Jude refer to them as "spiritual beasts" "made to be caught and destroyed, speak evil of the things they do not understand" because they do more than just injure the body, they destroy the soul (2 Peter 2:12; cf. Jude 10).

In the ancient as well as the modern world people love stories. One of the most famous stories was Aesop's story of a wolf who wanted to steal some sheep. The wolf spotted a fat juicy lamb and put on sheep's clothing so he wouldn't be noticed. It just so happened that same night the shepherd had a craving for some Lamb shwarma (lamb tacos). So he went out to his sheepfold and plunged his knife into the biggest sheep he could find! It turned out to be the wolf! The wolf disguised as a sheep was slain by the shepherd. And so it will be when the true shepherd returns (see Jon Courson p.166). Don't think for a moment the false prophet will go unpunished. There is a God in Heaven. There is a King on His throne.

No shepherd is dumb enough to think "there is no such thing as wolves". No Christian should be so naive as to think that false prophets are harmless or do not exist or even mean well. Wolves would roam the hills and valleys hoping to find some unattended sheep or wayward goat. Wolves are merciless, ferocious "ravenous". The word in the Greek language *harpax* incorporates the thought of swindler—in the modern vernacular—fraud—rip—off—con man—con artist cheat—grifter. Jesus knows that false prophets are cons and cheats—after your resources—after you—for what they can get. Naturalists, zoologists, criticize the Bible and say wolves are magnificent creatures who are given a bum rap in the Bible. Can we blame wolves for eating sheep? False prophets are predators. I get that wolves are clever, hungry and believe food exists to satisfy them. False prophets are clever, hungry and believe you exist to satisfy them.

The Jewish people had a long history of false prophets sent to deceive the people of God. Moses warned about them in Deuteronomy 13:1-5: "If there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, and if 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,' "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. You shall walk after the Lord your God and fear Him, and keep His

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commandments and obey His voice, and you shall serve Him and hold fast to Him. “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.”

The Lord says “you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams”; the false prophet wants to turn us away from the true and living God. The punishment for false prophesy was severe. The reason; souls hang in the balance.

“...*who come to you in sheep’s clothing*” meaning they adopt the garb and look of men and women of God. This does not mean they disguise themselves as sheep, but disguise themselves as real shepherds! Later in Matthew’s gospel we read (24:24); “For false christ and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to deceive, if possible even the elect. (25) “See, I have told you beforehand.” Jesus knew they would come. Jesus knew they would come in His name. The first five centuries of the church almost every doctrinal deviation you could imagine!

False prophets do not introduce themselves as false prophets. They will sometimes make the claim to be a restoration movement bring the original gospel (Joseph Smith). They claim to promote the true meaning of the Bible message (Charles Taze Russell). False prophets employ deception which makes them more dangerous. They claim to care about you and your relationship with God. They will claim to have a burden for you and ask you to tuck in the most generous love gift you can spare. It is difficult to guard ourselves against those who claim to love us and care for us. The dogs and swine (v.5) at least do not pretend to be what they are not. False prophets love to call themselves “christian” and are offended when you point out all their teachings place themselves outside of historical biblical christianity (think Mormon).

In OT times prophets wore distinctive clothing (Zech. 13:4). Their clothing was rough—uncomfortable. Prophets normally wore plain course clothing. Today certain religious people wear distinctive clothing (black or white collars) to identify themselves as clergy (with everything that goes with it). Some wear a cross large enough to be seen from far away but not quite big enough to die on. The most dangerous false prophets are the ones who look like the people of God. The people you trust. They appear to be genuine believers. they claim to be true shepherds. They claim to teach the truth; but they deceive, mislead and ultimately destroy the people they claim to love.

The false teachers and false prophets are wolves—vicious unbelievers—who prey on the immature, the unstable—the gullible ( see William MacDonald; *Believers’s Bible Commentary*; p.1229).

**Be Watching: They Will Produce Fruit (vv.16-20)**

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

Pause for a moment. Think about where you are in Christ's Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has spoken of the narrow way. Jesus knows that the stern demands of true discipleship will be rejected by most. Jesus knows there will be those who will find a way to make the broad way look narrow—and the narrow way broad. Now Jesus deals with the detection of the false prophets.

The passage is one of the most misunderstood passages in the Bible. The cult leader or the false spiritual leader believe their good deeds constitute good fruit. Mormons may have great family time. Christian Scientists may enjoy great health. But good fruit is not simply good deeds.

What is the fruit we are looking for? We are looking for the fruit of the Spirit which describes both the character of Christ and the character of the Holy Spirit imparted to the believer (see Gal. 5:22-23). Jesus has described this character and conduct in the Beatitudes. Here fruit means the fruit of a person's lips—their testimony and praise of God (Hebrews 13:15); Holy living (6:22) and good works (Col. 1:10) and concern for souls and their salvation (Rom. 1:13).

Remember the counterfeit Christians surprise at the judgment! Satan blinds the mind (2 Cor. 4:3-4) and deceives people into thinking they are just fine. When Christ returns millions of self-professing Christians will discover they were never saved at all!

Jesus warns there are false prophets. The false prophet does not always look like a false prophet. The false prophet can look and act like a real prophet. A prophet in the broadest sense of the word claims to speak for God. The prophet is judged by what he or she says and does. A false prophet will soon be exposed at some point by either word or deed. Some false prophets are obvious; and others less obvious and more difficult to discern. Careful observation, careful commitment to the true gospel of Jesus Christ will allow the saint of God to make the determination. "You will know them" (the false teacher; false prophet) is a promise.

When I was a boy my grandparents lived by an apricot orchard. You don't have to have an advanced degree in horticultural to know if a tree is discolored or diseased or dead. It will either produce rotten fruit or no fruit at all. The trees that look healthy and robust usually produce fruit that is healthy and tasty. What do you do when the tree looks healthy but the fruit is nasty, diseased, perhaps even toxic?

*"...do men gather grapes from thorn bushes?"* In the first example the obvious answer is "no"! Orange trees do not produce lemons. And a false prophet with a false gospel cannot produce a true disciple! **Fruit in this context refers to both spiritual health and personal conduct.**

False teachers are not simply dangerous because of their destructive teachings; but because of their dishonoring lives.

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

The principle is true in both the natural and the supernatural world.

Neither the good tree or the bad tree can produce wax fruit. Wax fruit is mass produced to look like fruit but has none of the advantages of real fruit.

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

The life and the teaching of those who claim to speak for God are filtered through the character of Christ and tested by the Word of God. “If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is not light in them” (Isaiah 8:20).

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

We have been told how to detect the false prophet (v.15). We have been warned about their destructive teaching and dangerous life-style (vv.16-18). Now we are given a glimpse into the false teachers destiny—“cut down and thrown into the fire”. The doom of false teachers and prophets is “swift destruction”. 2 Peter 2:1; “But there were false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction” (Peter’s words not mine).

*20 Therefore by their fruits you will know them.*

The Lord Jesus says you can know them. You can spot them. You can identify them.

### **Can Real Christians Be Deceived By False Prophets?**

Can a real Christian be taken in by a false prophet? I think the answer is yes. Research by apologetic ministries show many people involved in cults were once attenders of historical Biblical churches. Cults about with ex-mainline church goers. Other false teachers are much more subtle. Sometimes Christians grow lazy and refuse to heed warnings or exercise discernment. Sometimes in the interest of unity or fear of hurting someone’s feelings or wholesale adoption of political correctness we seek to gather grapes from thorn bushes.

### **Profile Of A False Prophet**

Before we define “false prophet” we must know what constitutes a true prophet. A true prophet is sent by God with a God given message. The true prophet of God has God’s message and no other message. One of the most dangerous things about false prophets is the claim they come in God’s name.

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### **Preach A False Christ**

The false teacher will point to a different Savior—a different Jesus. They may call him by the name Jesus, but you will soon discover that their Savior is not your Savior. They may try to convince you the real Savior is the archangel Michael (Jehovah's Witness) or the spirit brother of Lucifer (the Mormons). In the last two centuries more than 2,000 people have claimed to be either Jesus or the reincarnation of Jesus. Paul warned (Acts 20:29) "For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. "Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves."

"All false prophets will have an incomplete, distorted or perverted view of Christ" (John MacArthur p. 471).

### **Pretend A Righteous Character**

Zechariah 11:16; "For indeed I will raise up a shepherd in the land who will not care for those who are cut off, nor seek the young, nor heal those that are broken, nor feed those that still stand. But he will eat the flesh of the fat and tear their hooves in pieces."

### **Pervert The Word Of God**

2 Peter 3:16; "as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which those who are untaught and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures."

### **Promote A False System Of Salvation**

Human beings are lost apart from Christ and the gospel of grace. We are sinners by nature and choice. We are enslaved to sin—not good. We are dead spiritually deserving of God's wrath and punishment for our rebellion. The spectrum of holiness does not begin with the worst of us—and then lead to the best of us. We judge ourselves by the only standard that consists of true holiness God's righteous character and God's revelation of our condition.

We can be saved by grace through faith in Christ. The false teacher need only add one more thing!

### **Conclusion**

Good fruit is not simply good deeds. We must reject for ourselves false prophets, false christ, false gospels. The Bible is explicit on this point (see Rom.16:17; Galatians 1:6-9; 2 Tim. 3:16-4:4; Titus 3:10-11). In his book *Orthodoxy and Heresy* Robert M. Bowman Jr. writes;

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“False teachers are to be identified, by name if necessary (2 Tim.2:17), and the church warned not to support their teaching” (p.31).

We are called to love those who are trapped in the Kingdom of the Cults. We are to expose and refute the false teachers and false prophets who offer a false hope!

Some of may recall the tragedy and disaster at Jonestown in Guayana. Jim Jones was the pastor of a church in the San Francisco Bay area called the People’s Temple. Most the people who went to his church were from mainstream Christian churches. Most the people who joined his church believed they would find greater fellowship and service to Jesus Christ. The church came to an abrupt end in the jungles of South America when over a thousand members committed suicide or were forced to participate in one the larges group suicides in the 20th century. Mel White explains how so many could be fatally mislead: “He (Jim Jones) knew how to inspire hope. He was committed to people in need; he counseled prisoners and juvenile delinquents. He started a job placement center; he opened rest homes and homes for the retarded; he had a health clinic; he organized a vocational training center, he provided free legal aid; he founded a community center; he preached about God. He even claimed to cast out demons, do miracles and heal. But on the other hand we find all the marks of a false prophet. He promoted himself through the use of celebrities, a very common vehicle for false prophets to gain credibility. He manipulated the press; he wanted certain favorable stories; he was big on playing the press. . .and he used the language and forms of faith to gain power” (quoted from John MacArthur p. 462).

Remember the twin tests of truth and life. False prophets can hid and disguise their fruit, but not forever. Corrupt theology will take its toll and manifest itself in a corrupt life. False prophets may talk much of God’s love; but will speak little of God’s holiness and righteousness and perfections. The false prophet will speak much of people’s deprivation but little of their depravity. The false prophet has much to say about everything; but little to say about the most important thing; how can I be saved.