

The Sermon On The Mount

The Beautiful Tune We Love So Well And Play So Poorly

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”
(Matthew 5:3 ESV)

“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.”
(Matthew 7:24–25 ESV)

A Tree And Its Fruit

August 21st, 2022

Matthew 7:15-20

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to Matthew 7:15-20. As I mentioned last week, we are coming to the end of our long, slow walk through the Sermon on the Mount. Generally speaking, verses 13-28 are recognized as the conclusion to this magnificent discourse and we're right in the middle of that today. This whole section is APPLICATION, WARNING and APPEAL.

Last week we heard Jesus talking about the two roads. He said:

“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.¹⁴ For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.” (Matthew 7:13–14 ESV)

Now this week we learn that in this journey that we are on we are likely to meet two types of people. We will meet people who want to help us to walk the narrow way and people who want to deceive us into walking on the way that leads to destruction. So this is another WARNING passage. This is an APPEAL for us to WISE, WATCHFUL and ALERT. Hopefully you have your

bible open by now to Matthew 7. I'll be reading from verse 15 through to verse 20. Hear now the Word of the Lord.

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.¹⁶ You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?¹⁷ So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit.¹⁸ A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit.¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.²⁰ Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.”
(Matthew 7:15–20 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

In order to understand this passage and respond to it appropriately, the first question we need to answer, obviously, is this:

What is a false prophet?

What exactly are we talking about here? There are all kinds of prophets in the Old Testament – there are good prophets and bad prophets. There are prophets of Yahweh and prophets of Baal – we think of the famous confrontation between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. But then even among the prophets of Yahweh there are true and false. Jeremiah the prophet found himself battling with against all kinds of other prophets – who claimed to be speaking for God – who were lying to the people of Israel and telling them not to be worried about the potential for punishment and exile. They were saying:

‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace. (Jeremiah 6:14 ESV)

So exactly what kind of prophet are we being warned about here in the Sermon on the Mount?

D.A. Carson says helpfully:

“Within the context of the Sermon on the Mount, the false prophet can only be someone who does not advocate the narrow way presented by Jesus. He may not be wildly heretical in other

areas; indeed, he may set himself up as a staunch defender of orthodoxy. But the way which he commends is not narrow or disturbing, and therefore he can gain quite a hearing.”¹

So, to be clear, Richard Dawkins, the famous atheist, should not be considered a false prophet – or at least, not this kind of false prophet. Richard Dawkins is an outright, honestly declared opponent of all forms of Christianity. He’s representing a whole other team and he is very up front about that. He is not a wolf in sheep’s clothing, he is a wolf in wolf’s clothing.

What we are talking about here is a person who presents him or herself as a CHRISTIAN PASTOR or PREACHER. A person claiming to speak on behalf of Jesus but who in fact is not advocating for the NARROW WAY of Jesus. The false prophet in this sense, is the one who is saying that, actually, the WAY IS BROAD. He is saying that “there is far less for you to let go of and leave behind than perhaps you were taught. There are easier, smoother and less costly ways for you to follow Jesus.”

That is the sort of false prophet we are being warned about here. The preacher of EASY WAYS, BROAD ROADS and WIDE EMBRACES. Many such people have been sent out into the world to lure naïve and ignorant pilgrims onto the highways and byways that lead to destruction.

So – how can we spot these people?

That’s our second question:

How is a false prophet revealed?

Look again at verses 16-18:

“You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?¹⁷ So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit.¹⁸ A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit.” (Matthew 7:16–18 ESV)

¹ D.A. Carson, *The Sermon On The Mount: An Evangelical Exposition Of Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 127.

So obviously we are going to recognize them by their FRUIT – but what exactly does Jesus mean by that? What sort of fruit are we supposed to be looking for? Once again it will be helpful to look at another occasion on which Jesus used this same kind of imagery. Flip forward in your Bible just a couple of pages to Matthew 12:33-37. Here Jesus is having a confrontation with some of the leaders of the Jewish community – people that he considers hypocrites. Remember, a hypocrite is someone who is playing a role. They are pretending to be holy; they are pretending to be religious when in fact they don't actually believe the things that they are saying. That's what Jesus is rebuking here. He says:

“Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit.³⁴ You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.³⁵ The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil.³⁶ I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak,³⁷ for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.” (Matthew 12:33–37 ESV)

Jesus is rebuking these people for trying to sound good when in fact their hearts were evil. They were trying to FAKE FRUITS and Jesus says that is a fool's errand. Eventually the root will determine the fruit. Evil hearts will produce twisted teaching – so in this instance, anyway, it appears that FRUIT equals TEACHING. What you believe in your heart eventually comes out of your mouth:

“For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” (Matthew 12:34 ESV)

So bad teaching ought to be our first clue. If a false prophet is singing a song that doesn't sound like the Beautiful Tune of the Sermon on the Mount then your spidey senses ought to be tingling.

But I think there is more to it than just that.

Elsewhere in the Bible “fruit” stands for character – we think most famously of the “fruit of the Spirit” passage in Galatians 5. Paul says:

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.” (Galatians 5:22–23 ESV)

So it seems we want to look at content AND character. D.A. Carson again is helpful here, he says:

“False prophets can look like real prophets, and even their fruit may appear to be genuine. But the nature of the false prophet cannot be hidden forever: sooner or later he will be seen for what he is. Just as he does not advocate Jesus’ narrow way, so also does he fail to live it; this fact must one day be exposed to all who cherish the narrow way.”²²

Character will eventually OUT the false prophet. Which is why “heresy hunter” is generally a waste of time. Friends, beware of people who spend all day on the internet trying to locate, identify and expose pastors and preachers they believe to be false prophets. There is no warrant for that kind of obsession in the Bible – in fact, earlier in this chapter Jesus warned people about being judgmental. Do you remember that? He said:

“Judge not, that you be not judged.” (Matthew 7:1 ESV)

Now, as Scott explained to us, Jesus is not outlawing all discernment here, but he IS outlawing a judgmental, condemnatory spirit. Jesus never told his disciples to become heresy hunters. He says: understand that they are coming, know how to spend them so that you can avoid them. That was the advice he consistently gave to this Apostles. Later on in Matthew’s Gospel the disciples were worried about the influence of the Pharisees and Jesus says:

“Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up.¹⁴ Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.” (Matthew 15:13–14 ESV)

And that leads us to our third type of fruit. We’ve talked about CONTENT, we’ve talked about CHARACTER – and here we see that we should also take a look at COMMUNITY – in terms of

² D.A. Carson, *The Sermon On The Mount: An Evangelical Exposition Of Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 128.

the influence they have on the people who gather around them. Charles Spurgeon advocated for that kind of a test as well, he said:

“Their teaching, their living and their effect upon our minds will be a sure test to us.”³

So we ought to be asking: what is the nature of the community or what is the character of the church that is produced by prolonged exposure to this person’s teaching? Listen, friends, there is a sense in which a pastor’s only resume IS his congregation, particularly if he has been preaching there for an extended period of time. The Apostle Paul said that; in his letter to the Corinthians; he said:

“You yourselves are our letter of recommendation” (2 Corinthians 3:2 ESV)

So if a CHURCH is angry and quarrelsome and divisive within the wider Body of Christ – then I think you have to conclude that they are being led by a false prophet. Or likewise, if a church becomes progressive to the point of departing from the historical teaching of the Christian church – then I think you have to conclude that they are being led by a false prophet.

Fruit tells the truth!

Sometimes you can spot a false prophet right away just by listening to the words coming out of his mouth – but sometimes, if he is particularly subtle and deceitful – you will have to wait until you can observe the rot in his own life or even more tragically, the rot in his own church. But one way or another – the truth will out. You will know them by their fruits.

And that leads us to our final question:

How can we protect ourselves as Christians?

³ C.H. Spurgeon, *Commentary On Matthew: The Gospel of the Kingdom* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2013), 74.

Let me suggest 3 ways we can do that based on how the Apostles applied this teaching in their own congregations and ministries. First of all then, to protect ourselves as Christians we need to:

1. Be alert

In Acts 20 the Apostle Paul met with the elders of the church at Ephesus and said to them:

“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. ²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ Therefore **be alert**, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.” (Acts 20:28–31 ESV)

That's a pretty incredible thing to say, if you think about it. Imagine a pastor who is resigning his position and moving on to start a new work in another city gathering together his board of elders and saying to them: “Be alert to the very real possibility that after I am gone FALSE TEACHERS will arise FROM THIS BOARD – from among YOU – who will attempt to lead this congregation astray into heresy and destruction. Be on guard against that deadly possibility.”

Can you imagine saying that?

The Apostle Paul had no problem saying that – he was ALERT to this ever-present danger. And I think it is long past time for us as evangelicals to recognize this danger in our day. It amazes me how many people will be offended merely at the suggestion that there could even BE such a thing as a Christian pastor who is actually a wolf in sheep's clothing. A number of years ago I published a little bulletin insert here at the church that caused a bit of a firestorm. On the first of the insert I listed 5 or 6 authors and preachers that I trusted and recommended without reservation to the church and then on the back of the insert, I listed 5 or 6 authors and preachers that I suggested folks avoid. No one was too concerned about the first side of that handout but I

received some serious pushback with respect to the second side. “Isn’t it RUDE and JUDGMENTAL to warn people away from other pastors? Shouldn’t we give all professed Christians – and particularly Christian pastors – the benefit of the doubt?”

Well, I don’t think so – not based on this teaching from Jesus and not based on the example of the apostles. The Apostle Paul wrote to his people saying:

“I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them.” (Romans 16:17 ESV)

Avoid them. That’s what we said back then. We didn’t call anyone a heretic or a false teacher but we did recommend avoiding certain voices that did not appear to be commanding the narrow way of Jesus – and I think that is still part of the job. We don’t want to be censorious but we do want to be ALERT and DISCERNING – to dangers coming at us from all sides.

You know, for the first 25 years of my ministry I did all of my pushing back in one direction. I was constantly alert to dangers and false voices coming at us from the LEFTWARD side of the evangelical spectrum. And partly that’s because I spent a fair number of those 25 years pastoring in the CBOQ which was undergoing a pretty serious leftward drift. There were a ton of voices in the CBOQ commanding WIDER, EASIER and BROADER ways of following Jesus – and we pushed back on that. We spent 10 years as a church pushing back on that. But more recently I’ve found myself having to push back on voices coming from the RIGHTWARD side of evangelicalism. People who would have us be NARROWER and HARDER and less CHARITABLE and COMPASSIONATE than Jesus – and we have to be willing to push back in that direction as well. As soon as you think that all the challenges are coming from one direction, you are going to be leaving a door open or a window unlocked on the other side. You have to be 360 degrees aware and you have to be discerning. And that leads us to the second thing we need to do to protect ourselves; we need to test everything.

2. Test everything

That was obviously the takeaway of the Apostles. The Apostle Paul said:

“test everything; hold fast what is good.” (1 Thessalonians 5:21 ESV)

The Apostle John said:

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.” (1 John 4:1 ESV)

We have to test everything.

So how do we do that? We do that primarily by READING THE BIBLE. We talked a few minutes ago about how one of the ways you can spot a false prophet is by listening to the words coming out of his or her mouth – but that only works if you know what words are supposed to be coming out of his or her mouth. A real prophet speaks only that which accords with the word of God. For all his other faults, the prophet Balaam in the Book of Numbers, understood that. When he was urged by the King of Moab to pronounce a curse against the people of Israel he said:

“Must I not take care to speak what the LORD puts in my mouth?” (Numbers 23:12 ESV)

I can't just make stuff up, he said. I must be careful to speak ONLY what the Lord puts in my mouth – well so it is EXACTLY with the preacher or the pastor today. The preacher has not been sent by God to deal in contemporary opinions. He has not been sent by God to PARROT the spirit and wisdom of the age. The real preacher has been sent by God to speak only the Word of God, as written and contained in Holy Scripture – can you say amen to that? But here is the issue: how are you going to KNOW THAT - how are you going to TEST that – if you don't read and study the Bible for yourself?

You've got to read the Bible! And not just the New Testament and Psalms!

I've been studying the Book of Zechariah for the last 4-5 months in preparation for the upcoming series on Into The Word and I have been absolutely BLOWN AWAY by the extent to which the New Testament apostles understood the suffering and death of Jesus through the lens of that most obscure book of the Old Testament. How many evangelicals have even read the Book of Zechariah? And yet – did you know – that Zechariah 9-12 is the MOST FREQUENTLY cited portion of Scripture in the passion narratives as contained in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John? Meaning – those 4 chapters of the Old Testament were essentially the lens through which the Apostles understood and interpreted the most important events in Christian history – so maybe we should read those chapters! We're going to studying the whole Book of Zechariah in Cornerstone U this fall on Sunday nights – you should come! You need to read the Bible – the whole Bible – from cover to cover and from cover to cover again. That's the only way you are ever going to be able to protect yourself and your family from the influence of false teachers. You have to read the Bible, you have to know the Bible and you have to use the Bible to test the things that are being taught to you on Sunday mornings.

There is too much crazy, too much confusion and too much outright demonic deception out there in the world – and in the church - for you to be simply TRUSTING that your pastor is speaking to you from the Word of God.

You need to verify that!

You need to have a Bible open in front of you every single time you sit down in a church. I've said this before, if you go to a church and in the first 5 minutes of the pastor's sermon he doesn't give you a chapter and a verse to reference, get up out of your seat, walk out the door and don't go back. You are responsible for the teaching that you sit under. So you need to read, read, read your Bible.

You've got to know the beautiful tune so that you mark and identify wicked distortions.

And then lastly, in terms of the things you can do to protect yourselves from the influence of false prophets, you can:

3. Support what is good and starve what is bad

Again – this is the very advice that the Apostles – the first hearers of the Sermon on the Mount – gave to their various congregations. The Apostle John said:

“Beloved, it is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for these brothers, strangers as they are,⁶ who testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God.⁷ For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles.⁸ Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth.” (3 John 1:5–8 ESV)

So the Apostle John had a network of churches in Asia Minor – at least 7 churches that we know of. And it seems that he trained up a number of younger men who served as itinerant preachers under his authority and supervision. These men would go out and preach the circuit. They would stay in the house of one of the local elders – which is probably why the NT says that an elder must be able to provide hospitality. Our best reconstruction is that each local church would have its own plurality of elders – 2-3 or maybe 5 or 6 in a larger setting – and these men would do some of the preaching, but then a district of 7-10 churches would SHARE 3-4 full time SALARIED TEACHING PASTORS – in this case, trained and supervised by the Apostle John. So here in this epistle, John is saying to these churches: support and send these teachers on in a generous fashion. Feed them well. House them well while they are preaching to you and then send them out generously equipped so they can take the message on to the next town. These are good men, John says, and they are working hard to bring you a good word from Holy Scripture.

“we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth.” (3 John 1:8 ESV)

But then, the flip side, John says, we must careful NOT to support teachers and preachers who have gone on ahead and who do not abide in the teaching of Christ. He says that in 2 John 1:9-11. He says:

“Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.¹⁰ If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting,¹¹ for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.” (2 John 1:9–11 ESV)

That's the first century system: Support the good teachers and STARVE OUT THE BAD. It's just that simple.

Did you hear about the big coyote problem in Stanley Park out in BC a couple of years ago?⁴ According to multiple news sources, the problem escalated dangerously in August of 2021. There were so many attacks on hikers and cyclists that they had to shut the whole park down for a couple of weeks while the ministry of natural resources conducted a massive cull. It turns out that for years hikers and visitors to the park had been FEEDING the coyotes. They had been bringing in dog food and leaving it for these cute little creatures along the path. But of course, as anyone ought to know, if you feed the predators, eventually the predators will start to feed on you. And that's what happened. There were 45 reported coyote attacks on children and adults in Stanley Park in the first 9 months of 2021. As the Bible says, my friends, you reap what you sow – LITERALLY in this case.

And that's exactly what has happened in the evangelical church over the last 40 years. We've been feeding the wolves and coyotes! We've been buying their books and funding their television programs and supporting their churches – and they have multiplied and as a result it is much more dangerous to walk this narrow way than it used to be.

We need to stop.

We need to go back to the first century pattern. We need to support pastors and preachers whose ministry ACCORDS with the APOSTOLIC GOSPEL – and we need to ruthlessly and intentionally STARVE OUT THOSE whose ministry does not.

⁴ <https://vancouversun.com/news/local-news/stanley-park-coyote-cull-recommended-last-summer-as-they-were-dangerous-wildlife-b-c-government>

Beware of false prophets, brothers and sisters, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. Do not feed them. Do not follow them. And do not fight them. Rather mark them, avoid them and carry on.

Let's pray together.