

# Sermon 45, Beware of False Prophets!, Matthew 7:15

## Homiletical Outline

- I. The Christian's Enemy: A False Prophet
  - A. His Titles
    1. "False:" He's Not Genuine
    2. "Prophet:" His Main Business Is Speaking
    3. Therefore, he Is a False Teacher!
  - B. His Subtlety
    1. He Looks Just Like a Believer
      - a) He Wears the Right Clothes
      - b) What he Says Is Good (as far as it goes)
    2. He Is a Hidden Enemy who wants to Eat You
      - a) His Heart is Wolfish
      - b) His Appetite is Ravenous
- II. The Christian's Task: Beware!
  - A. Beware of What Christian Teachers Say
  - B. Beware of What Christian Teachers Don't Say
  - C. Beware of What Christian Teachers Want
    1. What Feeding Looks Like
      - a) Telling you the truth
      - b) Telling you about Jesus
      - c) Telling you about the reality of Hell
      - d) Telling you about the necessity of obedience
    2. What Eating Looks Like
      - a) An obsession with money
      - b) Telling you falsehood
      - c) Using you
      - d) Downplaying obedience
  - D. Beware of How Christian Teachers Act
- III. The Christian's Ally: Jesus, the True Prophet

**Proposition:** The Christian must shun false teachers by following Christ, the true prophet.

This morning, we come to one of the broadest and deepest veins of teaching in the whole Bible — that is, the character and destructiveness of the false prophet, the false teacher. These folks are mentioned throughout the Bible. Over and over, Christians are warned to beware of them. This verse has 41 other verses strongly cross-referenced to it. Thus, since this verse is far from isolated, it is very important for us to understand our Lord's teaching. What is He saying here?

Well, He's telling us to shun false teachers — and by implication, to follow Jesus, the true prophet.

## **I. The Christian's Enemy: A False Prophet**

As always, the best way to find out what the passage means is to find out what the words of it mean. So what does Jesus call this enemy?

### **A. His Titles**

#### **1. "False:" He's Not Genuine**

Well, he's "false." The Greek is literally "pseudo-prophet." He's not really a genuine prophet. He's lying about what he is. Just as we have "fake news," reports of current events which are actually false, so we have fake prophets.

#### **2. "Prophet:" His Main Business Is Speaking**

But what is a prophet? A prophet is someone known to many ancient cultures. He is a person who "speaks forth" (the etymological meaning of "prophet") messages from the gods. Israel, of course, had prophets who delivered messages from the true God. The first man called a prophet in the Bible is Abraham, and the OT contains stories and messages of many other prophets after him. Some of the best-known characters of the Old Testament, men like Isaiah and Elijah, were prophets.

So a prophet is someone who speaks on behalf of deity. A prophet is someone who says, "Thus saith the LORD!"

#### **3. Therefore, he Is a False Teacher!**

What does it mean, then, to be a pseudo-prophet? It means that you claim to be speaking on behalf of God, but actually, you are only speaking on behalf of yourself. A false prophet is someone who says his words are from God, but whose words actually aren't from God. A false prophet is someone who says, "This is what God says" when it's really not what God says. But we can go beyond that. The main business of a prophet is speaking. And thus, ultimately false prophecy in the broad sense boils down to any kind of false speaking about God. We can say this confidently because the Bible puts false prophets and false teachers in parallel with each other. "But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies" (2Pe 2:1). In short, anyone who claims to be telling you about God, but doesn't tell you the truth about God, is a what Jesus is warning against here. This holds true even if the alleged prophet doesn't claim to have received special revelation.

So these words of Jesus are a caution against not just people who say "God told me that the second coming will be on May 4, 2017" but also against people who say "God says that homosexual activity is okay." They are warning against anyone who speaks falsely about God. After all, lying about whether God spoke to you is just a subset of the general category of lying about God. And it's that category, that kind of person, against whom Jesus warns us here.

## **B. His Subtlety**

Now, why do we need this warning? Why the obsession in the Bible with people who lie about God? Wouldn't that be relatively easy to spot?

The answer is no. A false teacher is hard to spot. That's the point of Jesus' warning here.

### **1. He Looks Just Like a Believer**

The false prophet is hard to spot because he looks just a believer, because she looks just like a believer. Jesus says to us that these people are dressed in sheep's clothing.

#### **a) He Wears the Right Clothes**

That is, they wear the right clothes! Now, in our society Christians don't have a uniform. You can't walk by someone on the sidewalk and say, "Oh, a Christian!" Muslims, at least Muslim women, are in some place forced to wear uniforms. When you see a couple of girls draped in black from head to toe walking by, you can say, "There go some Muslims." But Christians don't have a uniform. So what does Jesus mean when He says they wear sheep's clothing?

Just that they fit into the Christian world. They listen to the right music. They belong to the right institutions. They give to their church and to the crisis pregnancy center. They subscribe to Christian periodicals. They bemoan the ungodly state of society. They homeschool their children, or send them to the right Christian schools, or talk about how they are witnesses in the public schools. Insofar as you can identify a Christian by externals, these people are it!

#### **b) What he Says Is Good (as far as it goes)**

More than that, they sound so good. Do wolves bleat and baa? Of course not. But these people bleat and baa. They make the same sounds sheep make. They talk about theology. They speak of relying on Jesus. They say they love God and believe in Him. They profess great respect for the Bible. Just think of liberal Episcopal churches, where the person serving the altar is a flamboyant homosexual, and yet she kisses an ornately bound copy of the Gospels at a key point in the service. Talk about showing respect for Scripture! Just as you'll never hear a Mormon say, "I think Jesus never existed," or "I think Jesus was nothing more than a good man," so you'll never hear a false teacher speak of Jesus in anything but the most respectful terms. Such a person is in sheep's clothing, and speaks the dialect of sheep!

### **2. He Is a Hidden Enemy who wants to Eat You**

Yet Jesus insists that not everyone who looks like a sheep, walks like a sheep, talks like a sheep, and smells like a sheep is actually a sheep. Some ostensible sheep are actually wolves.

#### **a) His heart is wolfish**

What does this name indicate to us? The wolf is a ferocious, lethal kind of animal. Some of the big timber wolves of Canada can take down an adult moose. I've heard people talk about seeing wolf tracks the size of dinner plates. These animals are larger, fiercer, and more dangerous than almost any domestic dog.

But also, specifically, we need to understand the attitude of the wolf toward sheep. My father keeps sheep for a living, as did his father and his father and his father all the way back to the 19th century. One of the biggest threats to their operation is coyotes. The entire area where

sheep are kept, nearly 200 acres, has to be enclosed with a fence at least 6 feet high, with chicken wire across the bottom to a height of three feet or so. Anything less, and a coyote would be able to crawl underneath and/or jump over the top. And once a coyote gets in, his habit is to run from sheep to sheep and tear their throats out. If the sheep are penned and he gets among them, he is happy to kill every sheep in the pen, often without eating a bite out of any of them.

This is a little tiny coyote. You all know that coyotes are far smaller and less lethal and ferocious than wolves. Yet even a coyote will slaughter hundreds of sheep in a single sitting if given half a chance. Imagine, then, what a wolf will do to sheep.

#### **b) His appetite is ravenous**

Jesus informs us further that these aren't just any wolves, but that they are *ravenous* wolves. That is, they have a very powerful appetite. They love killing and eating sheep, and killing far more than they can possibly eat.

So that's the substance of this illustration. In the real world, wolves are some of the most dangerous animals to sheep. Wolves go through sheep like a scythe through grain, like a lawnmower across a golf course.

What's the application? How should we respond to this information? Jesus sums it up in a single word: Beware.

#### **II. The Christian's Task: Beware!**

Brothers and sisters, that is indeed the Christian's task. Beware of wolves in sheep's clothing. Beware of false prophets!

Let me translate this into terms that are relevant to your life. Jesus' illustration is powerful when you understand how wolves and sheep relate. But it becomes far more powerful when you understand what activities are characteristic of the false teacher in your daily life and experience.

#### **A. Beware of What Christian Teachers Say**

So the first application here is to beware of what Christian teachers say. Just because someone says "I'm a Christian teacher" doesn't mean that you should swallow everything he says. Obviously, there are plenty of people who say "I'm a Jewish teacher. I'm a Buddhist teacher." We all know that they won't be teaching us Christianity. But Jesus warns us against listening to Christian teachers.

What kinds of things do false teachers say? They say pleasant things, smooth things. They prophesy peace to those who feed them, Micah says. They prophesy peace and safety, says Jeremiah. They prophesy ease and comfort. They focus on God's love, and omit His wrath. They focus on Jesus' acceptance of sinners, and leave off the part where He says those who reject Him will go to Hell. They focus on generalities, and don't expect you to think too hard or understand anything complex. Above all, they would never ask you to memorize something, or focus on giving you a deep and thorough understanding of Scripture.

## **B. Beware of What Christian Teachers Don't Say**

So that leads us into being wary of what they don't say. They don't say, "Don't bother reading the Bible." They don't say, "Everyone who fails to believe in Jesus will go to Hell." They don't say, "The Bible says that God has chosen some people to be saved and will let the rest go to Hell for their egregious sins." They don't say, "God forgives you and yet requires you to try as hard as you possibly can to obey." In short, they won't tell you anything that makes you wonder how both could be true. They won't focus on the more difficult points of theology, like how God is three persons in one God, or how Jesus is one person with two natures. They won't emphasize that sanctification is the work of God's Spirit *and* that it requires your full effort and attention.

## **C. Beware of What Christian Teachers Want**

But also, Jesus warns us to beware of what they want. This person claims to be a Christian teacher. What is he driving at? According to Jesus, teachers who love Him feed His sheep. Teachers who aren't from Him eat the sheep.

### **1. What Feeding Looks Like**

What does feeding look like? How does a shepherd who feeds Christ's sheep act?

#### **a) Telling you the truth**

The first thing he does is tell you the truth. Jesus never told a lie. And true shepherds will not lie to you, about God or about themselves or about anything else. They will have a high respect for truth. So if you're hearing something from someone who says, "Oh, I was wrong? Who cares!" then you know he's not a true shepherd, not a true sheep, but a wolf in sheep's clothing.

The other thing here is that you need to know the truth. Jesus tells us that His true sheep have an innate ear for His voice. They will listen to someone who's speaking the words of Jesus to them. Cultivate that ear. Learn the truth for yourself so that you'll be able to tell whether someone is speaking the truth or not.

In other words, you're not off the hook here just because you're a simple sheep. While it's the shepherd's job to keep the wolves off your back, you need to pay attention too. Don't wander off alone. That's one of the best ways to encounter a wolf. That means come to church. We have anti-wolf defenses here. Don't neglect the reading of God's word. It's okay if you never read any other book in your life. But under no circumstances must you neglect reading the Bible. It and it alone will tell you whether any teacher is telling you the truth or not. It will tell you whether I'm telling you the truth. Don't assume that you already know the truth, that your foundation is solid enough. Every edifice needs maintenance or it will fall down. The Christian life is no exception.

You have to know the truth or you'll be taken in by false teachers. John tells us that he saw "another beast coming up out of the earth, and he had two horns like a lamb and spoke like a dragon" (Rev 13:11). As you ought to know, dragons are very persuasive. If you start talking to one, you will probably end up believing what it says. Yet all the time it can look like a lamb!

### **b) Telling you about Jesus**

True shepherds will tell you about Jesus. He will be the main content of what they have to teach. Everything will relate back to Him somehow. If it's all moral exhortation with no reference to Jesus, then it's the work of a wolf. If it's all theological niceties with no reference to Jesus, then it's the work of a wolf. If it's all therapy and life coaching and advice on how to have a great marriage and a wonderful time of singleness and all the rest of it, but with no reference to Jesus, then it's the work of a wolf.

So listen to anyone who says "I'm a Christian teacher" and evaluate it for whether it seems to be based on the life and ministry and being of Jesus Christ, or if it's something that a rabbi or Dr. Phil could just as easily tell you. If you're not hearing anything that Oprah or an NPR commentator couldn't tell you, then you're not hearing Christian teaching. You're not hearing about Jesus Christ. He's not just the founder of our faith; He is the content of our faith.

### **c) Telling you about the reality of Hell**

True shepherds, and true sheep, will tell you about the reality of Hell. Hell is an unpopular doctrine today. When you really confront the sheer magnitude of human suffering in the world today, the sheer number of people who grow up fatherless, poverty-stricken, sexually abused, and on and on and on, it is enough to break your heart. It's also enough to make many people say, "God, where are you? You are responsible for this mess. You created and sustained and decreed that all this brutality would happen. You are a bad God!"

If you're listening to a teacher who repeats those accusations, then he's a wolf. Any solution to the problems of the world which tells you that they are God's fault and that if we can just get God and His evil machinations out of the way we will do a lot better is the words of the wolf. Anyone who says "My God would never send anyone to eternal punishment" has no idea how bad sin is and no idea how good God is. This person is ignorant, unaware of what God is actually doing in this world, unaware of God's greatness and holiness and awesomeness. The reason Hell exists is because God is so holy. As Dante has it, the gate of Hell reads "Divine Power made me, The Supreme Wisdom and the Primal Love."

### **d) Telling you about the necessity of obedience**

Finally, a true shepherd, or a true sheep, will tell you that you must do what Jesus says. After all, the rest of this sermon goes on to highlight how important it is to obey Jesus, and how obedience is not optional. A false teacher doesn't like to emphasize that you have to obey everything Jesus commanded. Or, alternatively, he may emphasize obedience but ground it in the wrong place. He might tell you that you better obey to earn your salvation, that you better obey to make God happy with you, that you better obey because you know you'll feel bad if you don't. But the Bible grounds the necessity of obedience in Jesus' finished work. You need to obey because He purchased you, He forgave you, He adopted you, and absolutely nothing can take you out of His hands. Listen for that teaching. Listen for a shepherd who exhorts you to obey because of Jesus' finished work saving you from your sin and giving you His Spirit to make you like Himself.

## 2. What Eating Looks Like

Well, the Bible also tells us some things that characterize a wolf. What does someone who eats the sheep look like?

### a) An obsession with money

Well, the obvious clue here is an obsession with money. If this teacher is mostly concerned with what he can get out of you, with how much he can cajole you into donating to him and his “ministry,” that’s a huge red flag. Now, the Bible explicitly tells us that those who preach the Gospel ought to make their living from the Gospel. It is not evil to pay your shepherd. In fact, God requires it. But any shepherd, any prophet, any teacher who is constantly harping on the theme of money, who is constantly talking about how you need to give money, who wants money more than anything else, is probably a false prophet. The Kingdom of God is not about money. Jesus explicitly commands us not to lay up treasures on earth.

### b) Telling you falsehood

Secondly, someone who lies to you is by definition a false teacher. Their job is to tell you the truth, and they tell you lies! So anyone who teaches false doctrine, as opposed to what Paul calls “sound” or “healthy” (the word is literally “hygienic”) doctrine, is a false teacher.

My father was asked to leave a church in Fort Collins – a PCA church just like this one – when he called out the pastor for lying to him. He did it very tactfully. It was a church business meeting, and the pastor announced that the elders had voted unanimously to have a benefit rock concert, I believe. Dad simply stood up and asked one of the elders, Kevin Follett, “Kevin, did you vote for this concert?”

Mr. Follett said “No.”

Within days, dad was asked to leave the church. Brothers and sisters, that’s the action of a false teacher. It doesn’t matter how good the cause is: if an allegedly Christian teacher is lying to you, he’s a ravaging wolf.

### c) Using you

If you’re there to advance the pastor’s vision of what this church will be, rather than him being there to lead you to know and love Jesus Christ, that man is a false teacher. I read not long ago about a man in Greenville, SC. His name is Perry Noble; some of you may know of him. He had decided up front that he was going to take his church to some size, 10,000 people I think it was, or bust. He was willing to do anything to achieve that number. He did, and he did it by using people to fuel his ministry. I think of the cartoon I once saw where two big rolls of toilet paper are running for their spaceship, and one of them is saying to the other, “I’ve never been a planet where I felt so *used!*”

### d) Downplaying obedience

False teachers downplay obedience, or else they downplay forgiveness. They seem to be incapable of finding the Biblical balance, which exhorts us to obey because Jesus has already done it all. They say, “You don’t need to obey; Jesus already did it all.” Theologians call this “antinomianism.” Or they said, “You better shape up. If you don’t, we and all your friends will

have serious doubts about whether you're even saved." Jesus never downplays obedience, and He never downplays grace. To Him, faith works. Grace teaches obedience.

#### **D. Beware of How Christian Teachers Act**

Finally, beware of how these people act. Do they personally obey God's law? One of my friends followed for several years a man who called himself an apostle and claimed to be holier than everyone else, and then turned out to have been a serial adulterer with the wives of his followers. Peter tells us that adultery is a huge characteristic of false teachers. Now, Jesus doesn't call us to hire private investigators to follow around a pastor before we agree to submit to his teaching. But just take care. If the life doesn't measure up, then beware. The person's teaching will inevitably be soft on his particular sin.

#### **III. The Christian's Ally: Jesus, the True Prophet**

Finally, beloved, remember that Jesus Christ is the true prophet. Remember that HE always speaks the truth, always lives perfectly, never uses you, always cares for you, feeds you instead of eating you. His warning against wolves is driven by His concern for His sheep. So pay attention to Him. Trust Him! He will preserve you from the wolves. He will deliver you safe and sound to His Heavenly Kingdom. So believe in Him and pursue Him Amen.