

Beware of False Prophets

Call to Worship: Psalm 134

1st Scripture: 2 Timothy 3:1-4:5

2nd Scripture: Matthew 7:15-20

Hymn Insert- *10,000 Reasons*

Hymn Insert- *Speak O Lord*

Hymn Insert- *His Robes for Mine*

Introduction

Having come to the final portion of our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, last time, we considered the first of four closing warnings, namely, to beware of entering into the wide gate. This morning then, we move on to consider the second of these warnings, where we are cautioned to beware of false prophets.

To this end, we will consider the following four things:

- 1) The deceptive nature of false prophets (vs. 15)
- 2) The means of exposing false prophets (vs. 16-18, 20)
- 3) The ultimate end of false prophets (vs. 19)
- 4) The general principle given here, which applies to all people.

I. The Deceptive Nature of False Prophets (vs. 15).

[Note: No longer prophets today, as we have a completed Canon of Scripture, but teachers. If someone comes to you professing to have some form of new revelation, you can immediately disregard them, and call it a day. But, we do need to be concerned about false teachers.]

Our Lord begins with the general caution, "Beware of false prophets." And immediately, the implication that we can draw from this direct caution compels us to recognize that we must be responsible to diligently exercise this caution. We cannot take this charge in a nonchalant and careless manner. We cannot walk around in an aloof fog, as we live out our Christian lives. If you were walking in New York City, down a particular street where much construction work was being done on several of the tall buildings, and an officer or a construction worker came up to you and said, "Please, keep back from the areas where you see the yellow tape, and stay toward the right or left side of the road, and mind your surroundings, because construction work is being done here," you would probably walk down that street guarded, looking up and around, ensuring

that no debris comes falling down upon you from the sky. And, if you had young children with you, you would probably all the more be guarded, or maybe even travel down a different block to get to your destination, if possible. You would not walk carelessly, especially after hearing the warning, because you know that a lack of conscious consideration of the warning could be fatal for you or your children. Well, in the same way, our Lord wants us to take precautionary measures to ensure that we are conscious of the reality of the presence of false prophets. Now, why does our Lord give this warning, seeking to compel a diligent, focused and active response to it?

“Beware of false prophets, *who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.*” You see, we need to beware of false prophets because they are deceptive in nature. They come in a Christian guise, pretending to be fellow servants of Christ. They shroud themselves in the clothing of sheep, but underneath the outer get-up, they are actually ravenous wolves, who tear at the spiritual lives of Christ’s sheep. They are not easily recognizable. They look just like us, in so many ways. They bear a facade of grace, humility, faithfulness, Christian zeal and a desire to exalt Christ. They speak as those who come in His Name. You see, false prophets, don’t wear dark clothing with “We love satan” logos on them. They don’t come with alcohol on their breath, shouting obvious blasphemous statements against our Savior. They are crafty, subtle and cunning just like their father the devil, who deceived Eve in the garden. They are especially deceptive, because like atheistic, college professors, who string together half-truths with theories, and proclaim them to be evolutionary facts, they subtly feed you half-truths, mixed with unbiblical lies, making the pill of their deception more palatable for those who are considering swallowing it. Notice again, they “come to you,” in sheep’s clothing. You may not even be looking for them, but they will come to you. And when they do, you must be prepared so that you are not devoured by their deceptive lies. For, they come not with a drawn gun, but with the sword of their slick tongues, by which, they maneuver their carefully guided words into the welcoming hearts of their prey. And so, we must especially, consciously, beware of false prophets because of their deceptive nature. [*They often seek to divide Christ’s church, as well]

II. The Means of Exposing False Prophets (vs. 16-18, 20)

How then are we to exercise caution when looking out for false prophets? As Christians, we want to be careful that we don't present a skeptical eye to everyone who crosses our path, lest we unnecessarily offend Christ's true sheep. We do want to carry a sincere welcoming demeanor, giving the benefit of the doubt to those to whom we speak. But, is there then a means of exercising wise caution when interacting with others who profess Christ, be it in person or in any form of social media (TV, internet, reading materials, podcasts...etc)?

"You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit... Therefore by their fruits you will know them" (vs. 16-18, 20).

How can we discern false prophets? By their fruit. Now, we can understand this in two critical ways. First, if what they teach does not line up with the Scriptures, then we know that they are false prophets. And in that sense, what they offer will be exposed for the false teaching that it is. Scripture is the grid, whereby, we are to carefully test all teaching and teachers. And when someone is outside of that grid, we must recognize that that individual is a proponent of bad or rotten fruit. The Scriptures alone are what the Spirit uses to bring about good fruit, and they alone are sufficient to equip the man of God for *every* good work that is in keeping with God's will and desire. And so, we test teachers by measuring their teachings up to the Scriptures, with a Berean spirit (a spirit like those from Berea, who tested everything the Apostle Paul taught, by the Scriptures that they had, the Old Testament. Only, we have both testaments!).

But, even more in line with the immediate context, and the analogy here given, we are to test them, as well, by examining their lives, and especially, in keeping with the kingdom attitudes that we have looked at throughout the course of this Sermon on the Mount. Hold up a teacher to the grid of this Sermon; hold their lives up to the beatitudes (not expecting perfection, but to see if there is a general pattern of "the religion of the heart" herein described), to see if the Spirit of God is indeed the One who is working in and through them. And if not, do not give them an audience, because they are not of God, and therefore, have not the power or authority of God upon them. There motives cannot be pure and unto the sincere service of God, because the love

of the Father is not in them. They are of the world and love the world, even though they come in the guise of Christian humility. And so, give them time, and their fruit will expose them. A bad tree can only hide its condition for a time, and eventually, especially under pressure, the truth will come out. The true grounding of the roots, will be seen by the fruit.

Now brethren, it is important to understand something about what this exposing of false prophets entails. If we are to look at the fruit, to discover the root, then the implication here is that often times, false prophets will not necessarily (in fact, more often than not, they will probably not) be immediately recognized. It will take patience and time for them to be exposed. For this reason, all the more, we have to have a good handle on the Word of God, and we have to be diligent to be well aware of our surroundings. And even as we look out for one another, as brethren, serving as a corrective means of grace for one another, we also have to consider if we see fruit that would validate hypocrisy in the body, and especially among those who teach. While we are not talking about every minutia of doctrine here, our ears ought to perk up if we find any of our core doctrines compromised in this pulpit or in this body. And, in due time, every false prophet will be exposed, because a truly good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a truly bad tree will not bear good fruit. One can only pretend to embrace what Christ teaches in this Sermon on the Mount for so long. Eventually, the bad heart will be exposed for what it is, because all that is put forth in this Sermon, are fruits of the Holy Spirit, whom false prophets do not have.

But brethren, there is another significant factor that we must consider, which is particularly relevant, in our day of significant technological advancement. We have a means of welcoming false prophets into our homes, which was unheard of during the time of our Lord. We have social media. We can access blogs and podcasts and YouTube clips, and all kinds of preaching and teaching from all over the world, with but a few taps on our digital screens! And we have the printed/digital writings of all kinds of religious materials suffocating bookstores, such that we can get materials delivered to our phones or doors, via [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com), virtually immediately. And fancy, attractive book covers or sermon titles, coming in the guise of authentic Christianity, are so easily accessible to us. And so, I think we really need to be careful with the type of media that we expose ourselves and our children to. And we need to be most careful about alleged “Christian” media. There are many, many, many media formats that utilize the

name of Christ and perhaps many pockets of truth, which are strung together with gross and soul-destroying heresies. And they lure you in, gradually and subtly, until you swallow the whole pill of their false, heretical system. How does a pastor even, who has embraced and taught reformed teaching for decades, come to the point of claiming that Christ has already returned, that there is no physical resurrection of the body, and the final judgment has already taken place? It has happened right here on Long Island. And so, we must be on guard, brethren. We must diligently stand fast and lay hold of the doctrines that have been faithfully handed down to us.

And what's worse is that, false teachers have the advantage of working in concert with the natural desires of our flesh. They know how to tickle the ears. They know how to ease and remove the burden of having to cooperate with the blessed, and yet very "difficult to accept" work of the Holy Spirit, who convicts us of sin, and leads us to repentance. They know how to tickle our pride, so that we can avoid the often humiliating labor of dealing with our sins and shortcomings. Hear again, the words of Paul to Timothy in this regard: "I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. *For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables*" (2 Timothy 4:1-4).

Listen also to the Apostle Paul's tearful words of warning to the elders of the church at Ephesus: "Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. 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. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears" (Acts 20:26-31). [*Seek counsel from us, concerning teachers out there]

III. The Ultimate End of False Prophets (vs. 19)

Finally, while we ought to loathe the reality that false prophets/teachers infiltrate the church; while we ought to exercise diligent caution, so that we are not taken unawares into the deceptive manipulations of the false teacher, we ought also to be reminded of their end. There is, perhaps, no worse condemnation than the condemnation that will fall upon a false prophet. To galavant about, seeking to deceive the people of God, is a heinous crime in the sight of God. Tampering with God's word for self-serving reasons is a capital offense in God's court. Hear the Lord's description of the judgment that will come upon such wicked individuals:

"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!" (Matthew 18:6-7). [See also James 3:12- Context of "teaching"]

There was hardly a sin that our Lord treated more harshly than the sins of the religious leaders, who, as we have seen in this Sermon, both taught and acted contrary to the will of God. And their sins were especially great, because they caused many others to stumble by them, being given positions of leadership and authority. And so, their judgment was great.

IV. The General Principle Given Here, Which Applies to All People

When our Lord addresses the judgement to come upon false prophets (in our text), it is important to recognize that He addresses it with a general principle that applies to all who profess faith in Christ. And this will be further elaborated upon, in the next warning that He gives. But, notice what he states in verse 19. Notice, how his declaration here, goes far beyond false prophets, widening into a scope of universal application. "*Every tree* that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

Our Lord has already stated that you can recognize false prophets by the kind of fruit they bring forth. Being bad trees, they will most certainly bring forth bad fruit. But then, notice, He adds that, "EVERY tree that does not bear good fruit" (not just false prophets) "is cut down and thrown into the fire." And so, here in the context of warning about false prophets, our Lord, consistent with all that He has already said in the Sermon on the Mount thus far, makes a critical

declaration here, which meets every single professing Christian. And this critical declaration highlights a very important component of the Christian faith, namely, the necessity of “fruit bearing.” And, in essence, our Lord avows that no matter what the profession of faith might be, if any individual claiming to be a follower of Christ does not bear good fruit, then they, being found to have a hypocritical faith, will be cut down and cast into the eternal fire. Again, we will get into this a bit more next time, when our Lord warns against false conversions, but see how this context already begins to bridge us into the next warning. Suffice it to say for now, that God’s intention in the salvation of sinners is not merely to save sinners from eternal condemnation. He desires to redeem them, so that, they will now be productive unto glorifying Him and serving the purposes of His Kingdom. And if our lives don’t line up with this design, then we have great reason to question the authenticity of our faith, brethren.

Before we close, hear our Lord addressing this matter in John’s Gospel, as well. [Read John 15:1-8; note branches “in Christ” *by way of profession* are cast out and burned; also, the need to abide in Christ]

Conclusion

Let us beware of false prophets. Let us *consciously* beware, because they are crafty, deceptive and disguise themselves as sheep. And let us ensure that we abide in Christ, and that our lives are bearing fruit unto the glory of God, and especially in His church.

[The Gospel for the unbeliever]

AMEN!!!

Benediction: Jude 1:24-25