

Matthew 7:13-20
Watching for False Prophets
Beware of false prophets...v. 15

As the Lord Jesus concludes His sermon by pressing the issue of the kingdom of heaven upon His hearers – exhorting them to enter by the strait gate and keep to the narrow way – He next issues a warning and in that warning it becomes clear why there are so many that are found on the broad road leading to destruction and so few that find the narrow way. If sinful men were left to themselves there would still be plenty of them on the broad road and few on the narrow way. But to add to the difficulty of entering the kingdom of heaven by the strait gate we find false prophets contributing to the destruction of sinners.

There is nothing so criminal as a man with the appearance of being a Christian teacher or preacher encouraging a sinner that the broad road to destruction is the right road to be treading – nothing like a religious leader to convince a sinner that the road to hell is the road to heaven – or a religious leader that succeeds in undermining the faith of those that would endeavor to follow Christ.

And so the Lord warns His hearers about these criminals. *Beware of false prophets* our Savior says. And then He goes on to describe them. They are wolves in sheep's clothing. They bear a fair external appearance but inwardly they are ravening wolves. They appear to be innocent and tame when in fact they are deceitful and destructive. One commentator, in order to illustrate the figure our Lord is using draws from a couple of examples in Jewish history of the nature of ravening wolves:

Of the ravenousness of wolves among the Jews, take these two examples besides others. "The elders proclaimed a fast in their cities upon this occasion, because the wolves had devoured two little children beyond Jordan. More than three hundred sheep of the sons of Judah Ben Shamoe were torn by wolves." (Lightfoot).

How tragic we would regard such incidents today were we to read of a couple of children literally being devoured by wolves or were we to read of a flock of innocent sheep being torn to pieces by wolves. And yet in the spiritual realm it's as if we think there's no danger to our faith – there's no danger to our children – there's no danger to our churches. And so it's as if we let our children play with ravenous wolves or in our pride we think we can play with them ourselves. And when you consider that we live in such a sentimental age where it's never polite to criticize as our Lord does in such harsh terms then it magnifies the danger all the more. It's more in keeping with our politically correct culture to allow the wolves in sheep's clothing to do their destructive work than it is to expose and reprove the unfruitful works of darkness.

Our Lord, however, was not governed by political correctness or by sentimentalism. He was governed by the truth of heaven and hell. He was governed by the reality of judgment and the need for salvation. And to those that twist and distort the gospel – the Lord

Himself will judge them but in the mean time He would warn His followers to beware of them.

And so I want to focus on Christ's warning today. I want to think of the theme of watching for false prophets – or to use Christ's word directly:

Beware of False Prophets

And in the moments that remain I want you to think with me on how we can heed Christ's warning. Consider first of all that if we would heed Christ's warning:

I. We Must Know the Certainty of the Existence of False Prophets

False prophets have been in existence for just about as long as the entire history of civilization. If you define a false prophet as any one who twists and distorts the true religion of God and by example teaches others to do so then you could say that false prophets go all the way back to Cain in Genesis 4. In that chapter we read that Abel brought an offering to God from the firstlings of his flock but Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground.

For whatever reason Cain was repulsed by the idea of a blood atonement but was enamored with his own works. And it could be argued that ever since that day the clear mark of a false prophet has been that prophet's abhorrence for a blood atonement as well as his belief in his own ability to commend himself to God.

Christ Himself demonstrated the prevalence of this mark of apostasy when He spoke spiritually of eating His flesh and drinking His blood. So we read in Jn. 6:60 *Many therefore of his disciples, when they had heard [this], said, This is an hard saying; who can hear it?* And a few verses later we read Jn. 6:66 *From that [time] many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him.*

One of the surest indicators, then, that a man is a false prophet would be his attitude toward a blood atonement and all the ramifications of such an atonement. We see, then, that false prophets have a history that is traceable to the very dawn of creation. They have been on the scene of time ever since.

And so we read of Balaam in the book of Numbers who was motivated by worldly gain and would have turned the blessing of God for the people of God into a curse had God allowed it. And we read the instructions that God gave to Moses in Deut. 13:1-3 *If there arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and giveth thee a sign or a wonder, And the sign or the wonder come to pass, whereof he spake unto thee, saying, Let us go after other gods, which thou hast not known, and let us serve them; Thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams: for the LORD your God proveth you, to know whether ye love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.*

The Lord allows false prophets. They serve a definite purpose in the Lord's cause of redemption. They serve to distinguish between those who truly love the Lord and love the truth from those who are content with some external form of religion who would be drawn to certain personalities more than they would be drawn to the Lord Himself.

And so we find the history of Israel to be a history of false prophets. Christ's warning in His sermon was not a new warning. God had given many warnings through His prophets about the danger of false prophets. Isaiah issues such a warning – Jeremiah issues such a warning – Ezekiel warns – the prophet Micah warns.

I'm struck especially by the prevalence of false prophets in Jeremiah's day. The thing that gave them such appeal was their seeming patriotism. They all proclaimed that no harm would come upon Judah or Jerusalem by the Babylonians and that those that had already been carried into captivity would soon be released. Jeremiah, by way of contrast, seemed to be the one who was unpatriotic with his pronouncements of judgment and a prolonged captivity. He was accused of being for the Babylonians when in fact what he was really for was the honor of God and the truth of God's word. And so the false prophets had the popular support of the people and Jeremiah was persecuted and imprisoned.

And so false prophets have always been on the scene of time and Christ makes known in His sermon that false prophets would continue to be on the scene of time. In the Olivet discourse He predicts their presence. Mt 24:24 *For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if [it were] possible, they shall deceive the very elect.*

And the warning that Christ gives was also picked up by the apostles and issued by them – so we find Paul warning the elders at Ephesus about false prophets. So we read in Acts 20:29-31 *For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears.*

We find Peter in his second epistle going to great lengths to describe them and to warn about them. 2Pe 2:1 *But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction.* And we find John in his first epistle echoing the warning: 1Jn. 4:1 *Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.*

With such a history, then, and with so many warnings and predictions coming from Christ Himself, coming from Paul and Peter and John, it would seem that the very worst course of action for a Christian to take would be to act as if there was no such thing as false prophets and that there is no grave danger on hand due to false prophets. And I fear that in our affluence and ease and worldly wanderings coupled with a culture of sentimentalism that places such an emphasis on feelings and so little stress on doctrine –

the professing Christians of this nation are more vulnerable than they think because they're more gullible than their fleshly pride will admit. The first thing, then, that must be done in order to heed the warning of Christ is that the warning must be taken seriously. There have been, there are, and there will be false prophets on the scene of time that will lead the people of God astray if they fail to heed Christ's warning and fortify themselves with the truth. These false prophets were creep in unaware to spy out the liberty of God's people and they'll arise from within the church itself. This is a warning, then, that the people of God must deal with.

This leads to my next point – for if we would heed Christ's warning we must not only recognize the certainty of false prophets but:

II. We Must Fortify Ourselves with the Truth

Lloyd-Jones is very helpful in his sermon on false prophets. He makes the observation that historically there have been two schools of thought pertaining to the Lord's words in v. 16 *Ye shall know them by their fruits*. It seems that one school of thought views these fruits in terms of doctrine while the other school of thought views them in terms of the lives that the false prophets live. Lloyd-Jones holds the view that neither view is correct to the exclusion of the other and that both schools of thought taken together represent the truth of what Christ is teaching.

Perhaps more importantly, however, is Lloyd-Jones' observation that the emphasis is on the subtlety of these false prophets. Listen to what he says in this regard:

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?

How then can we describe these people? What is wrong with their teaching? The most convenient way of answering this is to say that there is no 'strait gate' in it, there is no 'narrow way' in it. As far as it goes it is all right, but it does not include this. It is a teaching, the falseness of which is to be detected by what it does not say rather than by what it does say. And it is just at this point that we realize the subtlety of the situation.

Lloyd-Jones goes on to describe how such a person gains acceptance by everyone. Religious people accept such a man and even irreligious people accept such a man. I found it rather interesting to recall as I read this portion that Lloyd-Jones was one of only a very

few that refused to support Billy Graham evangelistic crusades in England. And when I hear him describe the universal acceptance of such personages it makes me wonder if he has Billy Graham in mind.

Be that as it may – the thing that I want to underscore from Lloyd-Jones' remarks is the subtlety of the false prophet. He is recognized more by what he doesn't say than by what he does say. The things that are missing from his pseudo ministry are the things that pertain in particular to the strait gate and the narrow way.

You would probably never hear such a false prophet preach on such things as predestination or election. Although I would hasten to add that this is not universally true. I think of one man in particular that is very definitely a false prophet. This false prophet actually set a date for when Christ was supposed to return and he ought to be recognized as a false prophet. Unfortunately he still has a substantial following. The man is undermining the truth that Christ will build His church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. He's undermining that truth by saying that the gates of hell have prevailed against the church and any man who is a true Christian should leave his church. On top of this heresy the man is a hyper-Calvinist. You will hear him emphasize the sovereignty of God and the doctrine of predestination. And in his emphasis of those things he allows no room of any kind for a sinner to even respond to the gospel.

So it wouldn't be entirely true to say that every false prophet is an Arminian. For the most part they are, however. The broad road, after all, must give recognition to the autonomy of almighty man. It becomes very strait and very narrow to suggest that a sinner is helpless and hopeless and totally depraved.

What I want you to see, now, from Christ's warning about false prophets is that the child of God must fortify himself to recognize false prophets by being grounded in the truths of the gospel. Those that are not grounded in the gospel will not know what essentials are being left out. They won't know enough of the truth to be able to tell. They'll hear things that are very broad and general and they'll be swayed by a pleasant personality and by a friendly social atmosphere.

One of the reasons that the dividing line between Catholics and Protestants is being erased is because Protestants aren't sufficiently grounded in the truth of Justification by faith to make the distinction. They learn that the Catholic church believes in justification by faith also. The Catholic church has always had a doctrine of justification. And if that's as far as a Protestant goes in his knowledge of that doctrine then he'll see no reason for the two main sections of Christianity to be divided. One of the latest fads in Reformed scholarly circles is what's called the New Perspective on Paul. This new perspective claims that the differences between Romanism and Protestantism can be bridged by viewing the doctrine of justification from an ecclesiological point of view rather than a soteriological point of view. In other words the doctrine of justification pertains to the doctrine of the church more than the doctrine of salvation.

I was asked last fall to address the issue of the New Perspective when I had the opportunity to preach in Dr. Judy's church out in Greenfield. I addressed the issue by simply saying that when I learn of a new perspective that denies that the imputed righteousness of Christ is the sole ground for the sinner's acceptance with God then I immediately come to the conclusion that this new perspective has a lot in common with a lot of old perspectives. It eliminates the strait gate. It does away with the narrow way and ultimately brings men back to the bondage of salvation by works.

I'm making reference now to this scholarly fad only to illustrate the need for Christians to be grounded in the doctrines of the gospel. If ever there was a generation that allowed such sway to false prophets it would have to be our generation. And the reason false prophets can gain such clout is because doctrine is not seen as something of any real value to the Christian's life. The emphasis in our day is on subjective feelings or raw emotions. And since doctrine is viewed as something that is dry and impractical the people of God become very vulnerable to anything and everything that may prey upon their feelings. If it feels good – it must be true. That's the governing principle of all too many today.

If we would heed Christ's warning, therefore, we must acknowledge the reality that false prophets have been and will be on the scene. We start there but then we must go the next step which is to fortify ourselves in the truth. I was told some time ago that when members of the Secret Service are trained to recognize counterfeit money they don't spend their time studying every attempt to duplicate dollar bills. They spend their time, instead, becoming so aware on the intricacies of the real thing that they're able, then, to recognize a counterfeit when it appears. This must be the approach that we take to the doctrines of the gospel. We must know them so well that counterfeits will become easily recognizable.

It remains for us to consider finally and briefly that if we would heed Christ's warning to beware of false prophets:

III. We Must Humbly Practice the Discernment that Sees Beneath the Surface

I use the term *humbly* deliberately because we need to remember the command that comes at the beginning of this chapter – *judge not, that ye be not judged*. And you may recall when we studied that verse that we noted that this command does not call for us to set aside all moral and spiritual discernment. It calls upon us, rather, to be very much aware of our own sins and shortcomings when we endeavor to evaluate others.

We must also keep in mind the subtlety of the false prophets. If there was some glaring shortcoming in their lives – some sin that would make them stand out even by the world's standards then it would be a very simple matter of guarding ourselves from them. The truth of the matter, however, is that you can find unsaved sinners that are morally upright. Lloyd-Jones references a book with the title *The Failure of the Good Pagan*. It's an analysis about those that are not Christians who nevertheless for one reason or another live lives that are above reproach. Even the ancient Greek pagan philosophers could set forth great moral teachings – and yet as Lloyd-Jones observes the Greek philosophers were often the most bitter opponents of the Christian gospel. I remember working with a man in

the printing industry who could probably put many Christians to shame in terms of his devotion to his family. This man made no pretense about being a Christian and yet he rose to a very high Christian standard.

How, then, do we discern false prophets in terms of their lives? How do we get beneath the surface, so to speak, to be able to tell that they are false both in terms of their doctrine and in terms of the lives they live? One very important factor that needs to be determined is not just what they do and what they don't do but why they do what they do or why they don't do the things they don't do.

The very beginning of our Lord's sermon can prove to be helpful on this point. Does the good pagan who now becomes a false prophet see himself as poor in spirit? Does he mourn over his sins? Does he hunger and thirst for a righteousness that he's willing to admit he doesn't have in and of himself? Or does he think that his relative moral uprightness somehow commends him to God. Perhaps he doesn't feel that he has any sin to mourn over – after all, his life is above reproach. He could stand before men the way Samuel of old did and call on them to expose his faults and they'd have to admit that they couldn't find anything to accuse him of. We could not point to anything in his life and find fault with him.

If his uprightness constitutes his righteousness in his own eyes then the man's life, even though it may appear righteous before men is nevertheless not consistent with the doctrines of the gospel. The gospel, you see, teaches humility. It is by the grace of God that we confess that all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags. And the gospel teaches us to live humbly in the power of gratitude. We should live righteous lives but we should never own such righteousness as the grounds for acceptance with God.

I love the words of Paul in Philippians 3 in this respect. Paul writes beginning in v. 7 of that chapter: *But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus, my Lord; for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.*

Such a man will be different. He'll be different from a morally upright man even though he may, like that man, be above reproach before other men. Motive and humility counts for everything and the man who thinks his personal righteousness commends him to God – however sincere and however personable and likable he may seem – he is nevertheless in bondage and insofar as he teaches others he will lead them into bondage and pride. Such a man is a false prophet. I trust then this morning that you'll see fit to heed our Savior's warning regarding false prophets and that you'll labor to be established in the doctrines of the truth. I trust also that your own lives will be so effected by the truth the way the Christian life is meant to be effected by the truth. The result will be your ability to humbly discern the difference between a real man of God and a false prophet.