

Beware of False Prophets Part Two

Matt. 7:15-23

On Oct. 23, 1983 in Beirut, Lebanon, a 19 ton yellow Mercedes Benz truck drove onto an access road that led to the US Marines barracks, turning suddenly to plow through the concertina wire that surrounded the barracks, then drove past two sentry posts, through an open gate, crashed through a guard shack and then smashed into the lobby of the barracks detonating the explosives that would kill 241 US Marines. The sentries were not able to stop the suicide bomber because, in keeping with the MNF peacetime rules of engagement, the sentries were ordered to keep a loaded magazine inserted in their weapons, the bolt closed and the weapon on safe with no round in the chamber. Only one sentry was able to chamber a round in time but by that time the truck was crashing into the building's entryway.

A month before the bombing, a message from the Iranian Intelligence Agency directing an Iranian ambassador to "take spectacular action against the American Marines" was intercepted by the NSA, but that threat, intercepted on Sept. 26, would not be passed on to the Marines until Oct. 26: three days after the bombing. The suicide bomber was able to get so close enough to the US Barracks to take so many lives because the US Marines were not warned, or allowed to be prepared, for such an attack.

Jesus warns us that false prophets are going to come to the church. They will come dressed in sheep's clothing but inwardly they are ravenous wolves who mean to tear apart the flock of God. The Apostle Paul also warns the Ephesian elders that false teachers will rise up and, like savage wolves, if they are allowed to have their way, will not spare the flock. It's not a matter of "if", it's a matter of "when".

False prophets come in all shapes and sizes. They can look weird, and they can look normal. They can be extreme, and they can seem very nice. But their objective isn't nice, it's destructive to the church and to people's faith. I have personally seen the destructive aftermath of people who have allowed false prophets and teachers close enough to their lives to do a great deal of damage. Jesus is warning us to keep the gates closed and to stand sentry - with weapons locked and loaded - and not allow them into our lives or our churches.

The problem is that false prophets are deliberately deceptive. They look like one thing, but they are something very different. They have the character of a wolf, but they wear the clothing of a sheep. On the outside they don't look dangerous, they look harmless. So how do we recognize a false prophet or a false teacher if they look like just another believer?

Jesus says we'll recognize them by their *fruit*. Last week we looked at the importance of inspecting the fruit of their *teaching*. False prophets tear apart the flock by twisting and distorting biblical teachings to make people believe the Bible says things that the Bible doesn't say. The primary gate the enemy wants to enter is our faith in the word of God. If he can destroy or distort our faith in God's word, he will tear apart our Christian faith easily. We need to always keep a tight grip - not just lip service, but a really tight hold - on the inspired word of God.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd who leads his flock to the green pastures of the the soul-nourishing word of God. Pastors as undershepherds of the Lord, need to feed God's flock the church the word of God. Every believer should be a student of the Bible so that individually we can discern the difference between

Jesus' voice and the voice of a false prophet or teacher. So we need to inspect the fruit of their teaching. But I believe there's another component that is involved in recognizing false prophets and that is inspecting the fruit of their lives.

I. Inspecting the fruit of their lives

I want to break this down into two parts (we'll take more time with the first part):

- *Examining the fruit of their character*
- *Examining the fruit of their influence*

a. Examining the fruit of their character

Fruit in the Bible often speaks of character. The fruit of the Spirit are all about character: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control - the character of Christ being worked in us by the Holy Spirit. When a person genuinely comes to Christ in faith and believes that Jesus died on the cross to pay the debt for their sins, the Lord forgives and cleanses them of their sin, but God's gracious work doesn't stop there. The Lord also adopts us as His son or daughter, so that God doesn't just become our God, He also becomes our heavenly Father. This has been brought home to my heart in a fresh way this week as many of you know that my daughter and son in law adopted a little boy, Asher Phoenix, who was born just this past Wednesday. Asher was born into a very troubled and unstable family situation, but through adoption has been brought into a very stable and loving family where he will be very loved and very well cared for. If you have placed your faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior, that's what God has done for you. You are His precious and very well-loved son or daughter. So our Father, through the work of the Holy Spirit begins to work on us on the inside, on our character so that we begin to look more and more like our heavenly Father. Inside of every true believer there is a growing family resemblance to Jesus Christ.

False prophets bypass that inner working of the Spirit and the word. They just wrap a sheepskin over themselves so outwardly they look like just another believer. They talk the lingo, say all the right things, and got all the religious motions down pat. But inwardly their character isn't being changed, and it's bad. It's dark. It's sinister. They mean harm and not good to the people of God.

Recognizing them by their fruit means that we look beyond the surface and examine what their lives say about their character. A person can fake it pretty good on the surface, but eventually their character is going to show through. Fruit always flows from the root - if the root is bad, there's no way that good fruit is going to come of it. Thorn bushes don't produce grapes, and evil men don't produce godly results. So we need to examine their lives and their character before we allow them to have an influence on our lives.

Inspecting the fruit of someone's character doesn't mean we go all judgmental on each other. This chapter opened up with Jesus telling us not to have a judgmental and critical spirit. That's not a healthy way to live, and it's not healthy in the church - churches that become judgmental become toxic. So Jesus isn't telling us to be judgmental. He's telling us to be discerning. We need to look under the sheepskin a little bit. Obviously there are many shapes and forms wolves in sheep's clothing can take, but here are two things that the bible says are commonly seen when we lift the sheepskin:

1. They twist God's word in order to bend it back on themselves

I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. ³⁰ Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. Acts 20:29-30

False prophets are self-centered and egotistical. They bend it all back on themselves. Instead of making disciples who follow Jesus, they draw disciples away after themselves. Under the sheepskin is a self-centered wolf who doesn't care about God's people, or God, he cares only about his or her self-promoting agenda. Look under the sheepskin and run if you see any of these things:

- A controlling person who craves power. False prophet type dudes often act like they're closer to God than anyone and so you need to do what they say cause they're hearing from God. Often they use manipulation, spiritual guilt, or threats of divine punishment to motivate people to do what they say. One couple I met were told by their previous pastor that God would kill them if they left her church. That is flagrant spiritual abuse!
- An immoral person who uses their spiritual influence to promote immoral pursuits. We've seen this in cults, tragically we've seen it in the Catholic Church, and in Protestant churches as well. It is a horrible thing when sexual predators cover their immoral agenda with the cloak of God. It is committing evil against the victims and it dishonors God's name. Those who have been abused in this way find it very hard to ever trust anyone again, and often have a hard time trusting God because they associate God with their abuse. It leaves sheep torn apart and devastated.
- Apostate people who use their platform to deliberately move people away from a biblical faith in God. Like the wolf that just loves to kill for the sake of killing, those who have abandoned the faith - the Bible calls them apostates (they once held a confession of the faith but have left the faith) - apostates aren't content to be apostate on their own. They want to move as many people away from the faith as possible, they take joy in destroying other's faith in Christ. They want to influence as many people to abandon Christ as possible, or to abandon important biblical truths for their own pet version of Christianity. The sheepskin that apostate people often wear is being really nice - they're pleasant, friendly, they share uplifting, inspiring messages that are easy on the ears. But all the while they lead us smilingly away from Christ and away from eternal life.

If in any of these ways, or any other way, someone is displacing Christ and putting themselves at the center, making themselves important, and claiming to be spiritually elite, have nothing to do with them - run!

2. They interpret success in ministry as evidence of God's approval

Jesus gives one of the harshest and most surprising warnings in the entire Bible in vv. 21-23:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’ (Matthew 7:21-23 ESV)

Think about what he is saying here. There will be those (many) who did miracles and prophesied and cast out demons *in Jesus' name* who will be condemned by the Lord on that final day. It's not that they tried to do these things and failed - they actually did them and they did them in Jesus' name. We're talking impressive spiritual gifts and impressive ministry success.

But it's an epic fail. On that day Jesus will say, I never knew you - depart from me. He will cast them out into eternal darkness. Why? Not because they did miracles. Jesus isn't against miracles, he sent out his disciples to do miracles in his name. The problem isn't that they did miracles, the problem is that they focused on miracles and gifts and ministry success but lost sight of simple obedience to the Lord. They made the mistake of thinking that spiritual power equaled spiritual maturity, that ministry success equaled God's approval.

These verses always make me think of some of the prosperity preachers and extreme word of faith preachers today. They point to the vast crowds who come to hear them, and the miracles that take place at their events, and the financial riches they've gained by sowing seeds of faith, and claim these are evidence of God's favor and approval over their ministries and their lives. And many of them do it in the name of Jesus. But often they leave a wake of financial scandals and rampant greed and power brokering, and worst of all, the biblical message of the gospel is missing or all but missing in their ministries. Their message distorts Jesus from being Savior of the world to being the Genie in the bottle who grants us our every carnal wish.

I remember when I was in the Ukraine in the 90's and the Soviet Union had just broken up, there was a spiritual vacuum and we saw a poster advertising a big name US faith healer crusade and it grieved our heart. We knew that he would attract thousands but they wouldn't get the gospel, in fact, he'd leave them farther from the true gospel than he found them. These aren't ministers of the gospel, they are workers of lawlessness and they do a lot of damage to the work of Christ in the name of Christ.

If you lift the sheepskin, it's pretty obvious that underneath is a ravenous hunger called greed. Greed for power, greed for fame, greed for riches. In pursuit of these things they have substituted humble obedience to Christ for an arrogant exploitation of Christ. They have substituted gifts for character. They assume God is pleased with them because they see results and they attract crowds. That's why I say this is one of the harshest and most surprising threats in the Bible, because Jesus says that he never knew them and commands them to depart from him forever. They spend their lives speaking of Jesus, but he doesn't know them. It's that serious and it's that tragic. False prophets aren't misguided Christians who get some biblical doctrine wrong. They are wolves who feed on the church, but one day they will answer for what they've done. We need to inspect the fruit of their character.

b. Examining the fruit of their influence

Gonna be real quick here, but all of our lives leave a wake behind us - lives we influence for good, for bad, for God, against God. Fruit reproduces - good fruit produces more good fruit, bad fruit produces more bad fruit. So one way we can inspect the fruit is to look at the wake they leave behind them, at the fruit they reproduce.

Jesus says in Matt. 18:6 *"If anyone causes one of these little ones--those who believe in me--to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea"*

Anyone whose influence on a child or a young believer is to make them stumble, to hurt their faith in Christ, to cause them to sin, maybe even coax them to stop believing in Jesus, it's going to be really bad for them on that day. It would be better for that person to have a millstone hung around their neck and drowned in the sea than what awaits them on judgment day. That is serious - and what it means is that if someone's influence in another believer's life is to cause them to fall away or stumble, then they will answer for that in a terrifying way.

If there are broken lives, stumbled people, exploited children, and damaged churches in the wake of someone's life and ministry, that fruit tells us something. If they produce bigger heretics than they are and that's the fruit of their influence, that is a warning to us.

This isn't a happy message, it's a warning, but a warning given by Christ in love. Jesus is our Good Shepherd. Good shepherds don't just feed the flock, they also protect the flock, and that's what Jesus is doing here and what he wants to do in all of our lives.

If we listen for his voice by knowing his word and being open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, we will recognize false prophets - their sheepskins won't fool us. And as we follow our Lord Jesus Christ, the good news is that he will work in our hearts and lives so that we look more and more like him from the inside out, and we will by the grace of God reproduce fruit that helps others to know Jesus as Savior, and fruit that brings glory to God. Let's pray.