

# The Sermon on the Mount

## Session 13 – “Beware!” – Matthew 7:15-20

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives four warnings that can either keep a person from hearing and responding to the Gospel, or lead them into dangerous territory. The first we looked at last week, that reminds us that each one must make a decision as to which path they will follow. This week, we look at a warning regarding false teachers, and then two more warnings next week as we conclude this teaching of Jesus.

**Verses 15-20...***Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.*

In looking at this passage, we must begin by remembering what a prophet is. We are apt to think first of one who foretells the future. But the majority of the time a prophet was a “forth-teller”, that is, one who spoke forth the word of God.



1. How do these verses relate to the previous section that we looked at last week about the wide and narrow gates?

The Old Testament frequently talks about false prophets. In Deuteronomy 18:22 the ultimate test of a prophet: 100% accuracy, 100% of the time. *If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the LORD does not take place or come true, that is a message the LORD has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him.*

Jeremiah 6:14-15 describes false prophets this way: *They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. “Peace, peace,” they say, when there is no peace. <sup>15</sup> Are they ashamed of their loathsome conduct? No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush.*

In Jesus’ day, it was rather common to describe the enemies of God’s people as wolves.

Ezekiel 22:26-28 *Her priests do violence to my law and profane my holy things; they do not distinguish between the holy and the common; they teach that there is no difference between the unclean and the clean; and they shut their eyes to the keeping of my Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them. <sup>27</sup> Her officials within her are **like wolves** tearing their prey; they shed blood and kill people to make unjust gain. <sup>28</sup> Her prophets whitewash these deeds for them by false visions and lying divinations. They say, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says’-when the LORD has not spoken.*

The last part also reminds us that these priests were also false prophets. The Greek word for false prophet is literally a “pseudo-prophet”. And that is why Jesus describes them as a “wolf in sheep’s clothing”. They appear on the surface to be a real prophet, but are not.

The Apostles also were concerned with the matter of false prophets. As Paul was taking leave of Ephesus, he gave a warning about wolves in Acts 20:29-31, *I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. <sup>30</sup> Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. <sup>31</sup> So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.*

Both Jesus and Paul warn that, not only would there be wolves in the world, there would be those wolves that would disguise themselves as sheep – that is, within the church. In 2 Corinthians 11:13-15, Paul says *Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. <sup>15</sup> It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.*

It is interesting that today the diploma from an academic degree is called a “sheepskin” (because diplomas were originally on parchment, made from the skin of sheep.) But just because someone has “great credentials” does not mean that they are speaking the truth.

There is a humorous story about a lady whose church was going to have a notable guest speaker. She invited her friend from another church, who was a very discerning, mature Christian, to join her. Their reactions were very different. After the address, which was quite eloquent, the first lady said, “Wasn’t he great? And look at all his qualifications. After his name it says ‘M.D., D.D., LL.D.’ I wonder what that stands for?” The second lady, who was unimpressed and rather concerned at the way the speaker twisted biblical texts, said, “I think the letters stand for ‘Mairzy doats and dozy doats and little lambsy dively!’”

In comparing this verse to the last passage, there is more apt to be a broad road than a narrow road in the teaching of false prophets. This is perhaps the first question that should be asked, is the teaching being presented presenting the Lord Jesus Christ as the only door to salvation?

The warnings about false prophets might cause one to be skeptical about the words of any prophet. A person could look so hard for false teaching that they fail to see true teaching. So the Apostle Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 5:20-22, *Do not treat prophecies with contempt. <sup>21</sup> Test everything. Hold on to the good.*

2. What do you think it means to “test everything”? How do we do that?

One way is to do what the people of Berea did. *Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. (Acts 17:11)*

3. What example of false prophets or false teaching do you see today?

Some people accept “false prophets” because the person is saying what the hearer wants to hear. That is why Paul warned in 2 Timothy 4:3-4, *For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. <sup>4</sup> They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.*

**Verses 16-20...** *You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? <sup>17</sup> In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. <sup>18</sup> A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. <sup>19</sup> Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>20</sup> Thus you will know them by their fruits.*

Jesus said that we can tell a false prophet by the fruit of their life. As a long-time gardener, I can tell you that there are a number of plants that produce what are called suckers. I have particularly seen these in roses and citrus trees. Both of these are usually because a plant is grafted on to a root stock. (Is this like the “old person” and “new person” of Scripture?) When the root stock sends up a shoot, it very quickly grows tall and straight, and it appears to be very healthy. But there are two problems, it rarely produces any fruit or flowers, and if it does, they are of poor quality. At the same time, it pulls nutrients from the rest of the plant that it needs to produce fruit or flowers. As soon as I see a “sucker” it is removed! The bottom line is, it is not only worthless, it is harmful.

There are at least three meanings to these verses.

(1) If a Christian life is genuine, it will produce fruit. This is not to say that salvation comes through good works a person does. Salvation is by God’s grace alone, received by faith. (Anything contrary to this is false teaching.) But it is equally wrong to say that salvation is real without good works. (James 2:14-17)

(2) The fruit should be spiritual fruit, not just good deeds of which anyone is capable.

William Barclay writes in *The Gospel of Matthew*: “There was a certain plant, the buckthorn, which had little black berries which closely resembled little grapes. There was a certain thistle, which had a flower, which, at least at a distance, might well be taken for a fig. The point is real, and relevant, and salutary. There may be a superficial resemblance between the true and the false prophet. The false prophet may wear the right clothes and use the right language; but you cannot sustain life with the berries of a buckthorn or the flowers of a thistle; and the life of the soul can never be sustained with the food which a false prophet offers. The real test of any teaching is: Does it strengthen a person to bear the burdens of life, and to walk in the way wherein they ought to go?”

(3) Consistency to the fruit. In horticulture, the fruit is consistent with the plant. You don't expect to get apples from your orange tree. In the same way, one who is truly proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ should live a life consistent with Scripture.

### **Some additional thoughts on false prophets and false teaching...**

When someone is being taught to recognize counterfeit money, they first study genuine currency until they know it so well, anything that deviates from it stands out. The same thing is true with learning to recognize false prophets and false teaching. When we are very well acquainted with Scripture, and orthodox teaching, that which is false will stand out.

The second thing that is a part of recognizing counterfeit money is to have a list of the most common errors. When it comes to the Christian faith, here are some things to look out for:

- 1) False teaching rejects the words of Jesus (Matthew 7:26 – more next week!).
- 2) Human traditions supersede the Word of God (Matthew 12:6).
- 3) Human rules are added to the Word of God (Matthew 23:16-22). (This was a big problem with the Pharisees.)
- 4) God's Word is obeyed selectively (Matthew 23:23-24).
- 5) False teachers distort the truth (Acts 20:30).
- 6) Syncretism (trying to mix Christianity with something else) is a false teaching (2 Corinthians 10:14-22).

The Apostle Paul warned the Colossians not to allow themselves to be deceived, enslaved or judged by the fine sounding arguments and deceptive philosophies which the false teachers had substituted for the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ (Colossians 2:4, 8, 16, 20-22).

Many of the errors of false teaching have to do with Jesus Himself.

#### **A. Who He was**

- 1) In His own day, people thought the Messiah would be a military or political leader. Jesus' miracles were misunderstood as an indication that He was that kind of Messiah. (Perhaps this is why He told some who were healed not to tell anyone.)
- 2) Misconceptions about the incarnation (that Jesus was fully God and fully man). This was the source of many of the heresies in the early church. Today, many also deny the virgin birth.
- 3) Some said – and say – that Jesus was just a man claiming to be God. (John 5:18) However, the Gospel of Mark begins (Mark 1:1) and the Gospel of John ends (John 20:31) with the affirmation that Jesus was the Son of God. In the Book of Colossians, especially the first and second chapter, Paul emphasizes the fact that Jesus was fully God. The short letter of 1John also emphasizes this. (See also Hebrews, chapter one.)
- 4) There have also been those who deny the real humanity of Jesus.

***B. The Substitutionary Atonement.***

Some deny that Christ really did die as our substitute, taking our place and paying in full the penalty for our sins. There are many other, far less biblical “theories” of the atonement. Another corollary is that Christ’s death only opened the door for us to earn through works or rituals.

***C. The bodily resurrection of Christ.***

- 1) This was central to every “sermon” of the Apostles in Acts, and in the letters.
- 2) Defining terms – here and in other matters – is always important. Some will say they believe in the resurrection of Jesus, but not the bodily resurrection.
- 3) Evidently there was false teaching about the resurrection in Corinthians. Consequently, Paul devotes chapter 15 or his first epistle to the subject.
- 4) To deny the resurrection of Christ is to deny His claims to deity.

***D. Denial of the Trinity.***

Though the word is not found in the Bible, the concept is clearly taught in many places. One error common in our day is “modalism”; that is that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are just different expressions or manifestations of God, rather than “God in three persons.”

***Antinomianism*** is an error concerning salvation that teaches that God’s grace liberates people to sin, that is, because our sins are forgiven it doesn’t matter how much we sin. Paul counters this in Romans 6:1-2, 15. Also, see Jude 8, 15-16. This is found in a subtle way in preachers/teachers today who refuse to even mention the concept of sin.

***Errors concerning the miraculous*** are at both extremes.

- 1) There are some who have “manufactured miracles” in order to attract followers. Jesus’ miracles were never to be sensational, to attract attention, or at the command of others. The miracles of Jesus were always to help people in need.
- 2) There are also those who deny anything miraculous in Scripture, both in the Old and New Testaments. They often go to great lengths to give naturalistic explanations.

***Errors concerning last things.***

- 1) Supposed localized appearances of Christ (Luke 17:22-38).
- 2) Claims the end is about to happen (Luke 21:8).
- 3) Setting the exact time of Christ’s second coming (Matthew 24:36; 25:13).

***Denying that the Bible is the Word of God.***

When recognizing and defining “false teaching”, the bible is our benchmark. We should always ask the question: “Is this particular teaching what the Bible teaches?” Obviously, if someone does not hold the Bible to be the complete and final Word of God, many of the Scriptures above are pointless. These people have no fixed standard by which to define and recognize truth. (Very early in our nation’s history, the U.S. government established the National Bureau of Standards to define weights, measures, currency value, etc. Without an accepted standard, we’re in trouble!)

One frequent error is adding to Scripture traditions, revelations, or other teachings or writings. Some specific problems:

- 1) Interpreting a verse or passage without respect to the context.
- 2) Interpreting a verse or passage without regard for its original meaning.

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- 3) Changing the clear meaning of a verse or passage to fit one's own ideas or beliefs.
- 4) Disregarding the type of literature in which the verse or passage is found.

