



Matthew: The King and His Kingdom

Series: The Manifesto of the King, Part 26: Don't Be Deceived By False Prophets

Matthew 7:15-20

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Introduction

As we approach verse 15-20 this morning, we need to keep it in the context of what Jesus has been teaching so far. You remember that when we looked at this text last week, we said that Jesus is calling us, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, to a place of decision and response to the words that He has preached in the Sermon on the Mount. It is not just enough to hear these words, but these words must move you to response and your decision has very real and unavoidable consequences – quite literally, life or death. Last week we looked at Jesus' words when he said: "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few." (Matthew 7:13–14, ESV) There are two gates, two paths, two ways that you can follow – one ends in life and the other ends in destruction. Choose one and choose wisely. Today's call to choose is related to and intertwined with what we saw last week.

If you are going to enter the narrow gate and walk the hard way that leads to life, you cannot give your ear to everyone who claims to speak for God, who claims to speak with spiritual authority or wisdom. You must be discerning. You must exercise stewardship over your soul. You must make a very real choice regarding to whom you will listen and that choice has very real consequences. For that reason, Jesus tells us to beware of wolves in sheep's clothing. Jesus warns those who are listening to Him that they must be on guard, that they must be aware of and beware of false prophets. Listen to these words again: "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits." (Matthew 7:15–20, ESV) Now listen, Jesus is not an alarmist, nor is He like the little boy who cried wolf when there was

no wolf. Jesus is for you and for your soul, beloved. He is for your spiritual well-being and he wants you to know that you need to beware because false prophets are a very real problem and a true danger to your soul. Rarely does Jesus use the word “beware” but when He does we had better take notice.

1) Beware...False Prophets are a True Danger. False prophets are a very real danger and cannot be taken lightly. The presence of false prophets goes all the way back to the Garden, doesn't it? There, the father of all false prophets, Satan himself, undermined the words of God, minimized the warnings of God and ensnared the souls of Adam and Eve and brought spiritual death upon them. Since that day, there have been false prophets gone out in the world; liars and deceivers whose only purpose is bring death to the souls of men and women.

Don't miss this. When Jesus tells us to beware of false prophets, He is telling us that there are true prophets that He has sent out into the world and that there IS an objective standard of truth from which the lies of the false prophets is to be distinguished. The issue is truth. In biblical days, a true prophet was one who taught the truth of God by divine inspiration and a false prophet was one who claimed to speak for God but instead propagated lies. Jeremiah drew the distinction between the true and the false prophet in this manner in Jeremiah 23: False prophets “speak visions of their own minds” while the faithful prophet is one who “as stood in the council of the Lord to see and to hear His word” and who “speak from the mouth of the Lord” proclaiming God's word to His people. False prophets have always been a plague in this earth.

As far back as Deuteronomy 13, Moses wrote this strong and clear warning for God's people. (Deut. 13: 1-5, ESV) God's people are to cut themselves off from any connection or relationship with false teachers. Speaking of these kinds of prophets, God says through Jeremiah (Jeremiah 14:14, ESV) But the threat was not just an OT phenomenon at all. Speaking to the elders of Ephesus at Miletus, Paul warned them, saying: (Acts 20:28–30, ESV)

False teachers are the enemies of God and the enemies of our souls. They are a real danger that we need to be wary of and able to identify. There is no greater threat to the church than false teachers, than those who lie about God, who lie about Christ, who lie about the Holy

Spirit, those who ensnare and damn souls by their lies. Jesus says they are ravenous wolves and they are. Ravenous to magnify themselves, ravenous to feast on the sheep and use them for their own gain, ravenous to rob Christ of his glory for the sake of their own glory, ravenous to rob Christ of his followers, ravenous to obscure or to destroy the true gospel.

You know, I think sometimes that we can get desensitized to the very real danger that false prophets present. We think of them as a historical problem or as a future problem rather than seeing that false prophets have infiltrated and continue to infiltrate the church. This is not just something that was a concern 2000 years ago; it is a grave concern now – now more than ever. Today there are numerous false prophets that are in the professing church today. They have massive followings and are massively popular. They flood the blogosphere and the bookstore. Their media machines have elevated them to cult status. Their reach is far greater and far more damaging than at any time in church history. And their ability to lead the professing church astray is perhaps greater than every because the so many professing Christians are thoroughly ignorant of the teaching of Scripture. Ignorance of the truth is fertile ground for false prophets. Ignorance of what the Scriptures teach is like putting a loaded gun in the hands of a murderer who has broken into your house. The corrupting and death-dealing ministry of a false prophet flourishes in an atmosphere of biblical ignorance. False prophets are a very real danger, and Jesus tells us that what makes them so dangerous is that they are so well-disguised.

2) Beware...False Prophets are Well-Disguised. Jesus calls them ravenous wolves in sheep's clothing. In other words, they are not immediately obvious. Whenever we speak of false teachers, it is easy to conjure up in our minds the extremism of the fools and con artists on TV. Jesus is not talking about the holy cloth hucksters or the snake oil salesmen or the Holy Ghost cloud goofs – those guys are obvious. Neither is he talking about the fundamentalist, legalistic, extremist crazy types. Even normal lost people can pick those guys out. That is not what Christ is getting at here. They are subtler than that. Later in this very gospel, Jesus will speak of their subtlety saying: (Matthew 24:24, ESV)

The sheep's clothing that Jesus is getting at the ability of false prophets to blend in., to speak Christian-ese, their involvement in Christian activities, their showy acts of ministry or of helping Christianity progress in the community. The most dangerous false prophets are not the controversial and extreme but instead are smooth and likable men who claim to be followers of Christ. They claim to be servants of Christ who love Him and have a passion to follow Him. These are men who write books and publish articles in , men who attack the faith from within.

They are masters of deception who use Christian terminology and spiritual sounding lingo. They quote the Bible perhaps and even use what seem to sound like orthodox expressions, but they mean something entirely different. I can't tell you the number of times I have had people defend false teachers to me by saying, "He uses the Bible." Of course he does. What would he use? He may talk about God or Christ, even mention the cross. He might use the Bible or speak out against social wrongs, or seem to be moral guys. They speak in truisms, packaging their lies in clever, attractive and catchy messages in which they introduce error alongside of the truth.

They are likable and kind and they come in every shape and size. The nice, grandfatherly type, the scholarly, the emotional motivator, the trendy and socially adept, even little children who have dreams under the influence of anesthesia and tell unbiblical stories of heaven that are exploited by their fathers for financial gain. They are so likable. (2 Corinthians 11:13–15, ESV)

3) Beware...And Be Diligent to Discern Their Fruit. If these guys are so subtle and are such a danger to our spiritual well being, how do we discern who is a false teacher? Jesus tells us using an axiomatic, extremely clear, and sensible test. He says: (Matthew 7:16–20, ESV) Now what Jesus had in mind as He said these words were the buckthorn that had little black berries which could be mistaken for grapes, a thistle whose flower, from a distance, might be mistaken for a fig. But one bite from this berry would prove that it certainly wasn't a grape; and a closer look at this flower would prove that it certainly wasn't a fig. The truth is this -- false prophets can look like real prophets, and even their fruit may appear to be genuine. But the nature of the false prophet cannot be hidden forever; sooner or later he will be seen for what he is. You will recognize them by their fruits. What kind of fruit is Jesus speaking of?

First, their bad fruit is evident in their teaching. It is no coincidence that Jesus' warning regarding false teachers falls so closely to His call to the narrow gate and the hard way that leads to life. The false prophet confuses the way of life. False prophets are skilled at blurring the issue of salvation, at blurring the lines of the gospel. Others will try to redefine the words of Christ so as to make the narrow way much broader than Jesus said and to make those who pursue the true gospel sound as if they are over-zealous fools. There is nothing in their preaching that promotes poverty of spirit, nothing that makes men see their sin and cry out to God for mercy, nothing which rebukes hypocrisy, nothing to promote such faithfulness to Christ that persecution is inevitable.

At the heart of the issue will always be a self-serving unfaithfulness to God, to His Christ and to the Scriptures. The false prophet will avoid the tough word, calling people to repentance. Instead, he will lessen the weight of God's words like the false prophets in Jeremiah's day. Of those kinds of prophets, God said: (Jeremiah 23:16–17, ESV) They never speak of the true requirements of discipleship, the call to die to yourself and take up the cross, the call to make much of Christ and little of yourself and they do not do that because to say these things so they can be popular and approved and well-received. They care more about their own comfort than the souls of men and woman to whom they preach. The man who claims to speak for God but soft-sells the gospel and soft sells the truth, who hides the "narrow gate" and "hard road" side of discipleship becomes a false prophet. The true prophet or teacher preaches and teaches the message of the Bible, and the false prophet preaches what he thinks the Bible ought to be saying and teaching.

The real root of it is a rejection of Christ. They may claim to believe in Jesus but which Jesus? It is a Jesus of their own making, a Jesus they have made in their own fallen image, a Jesus who only does and says and demands what they think Jesus should say or do or command. It is the Jesus of their own making, not Jesus Christ the image of the invisible God, the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, by whom all things were created, in heaven and on earth, the head of the church, the victor over hell, sin and death and Satan, the one who bled and died and rose again for the justification of His church, the one who is King of kings and Lord of lords, Lord of Glory, Lion of Judah, who is the Author and Finisher of our faith. False teachers deny this Christ, either by ignoring, redefining or minimizing Him.

And because of this redefining and minimization of Jesus, the version of the gospel commonly preached today and written of today bears little resemblance to the gospel preached by Jesus and the apostles. Many speak only of God's unconditional love, personal peace, and self-fulfillment. Yes God is loving, gloriously and graciously and abundantly and massively loving, but to tell an unrepentant, hardened sinner that God loves him and is pleased with him just the way he is, is irresponsible and unbiblical. To conceal the truth is as great a sin as utter heresy. The first thing that is needed for biblical faith is a true knowledge about the facts of the gospel.

If people are not confronted with the holiness, justice and wrath of God against their sin and of God's deep love in sending His Son to be the propitiation for sin then the cross of Christ becomes meaningless. If you refuse to preach of man's depravity, the fact that he is fallen and totally incapable of pulling himself out of the mire of sin and damnation then grace means

nothing. You can talk about the cross but it becomes nonsense -- not the one sacrifice needed to propitiate God and atone for man's sins – the very apex of God's grace, but it becomes some humanistic drivel about inspiration, some encouragement for us to do sacrificial things for others and following Christ becomes some self-improvement plan or is reduced to some junk about the best and most moral way to live.

You see, the real issue with the false prophets teaching many times is not what he says but rather what he leaves unsaid. He may say right things but he leaves out indispensable points of belief. He says nothing that is offensive to natural man. His message comforts and soothes and never warns of judgment. There is nothing to make anyone examine themselves, but rather only things to make people feel good and affirmed and falsely assured. They speak like everyone is a child of God, like everybody is a Christian.

Without the essential Biblical truths of justification by faith, propitiation, expiation, redemption, reconciliation, regeneration, repentance, faith and discipleship, the gospel is not the gospel and Christianity is not Christianity. Consequently, people walk the aisle, pray a prayer and sign a card often with no real understanding of the gospel. It is why the modern gospel has degenerated into "Ask Jesus to come into your heart." They cannot call anyone to repent and believe because he does not preach of sin and repentance and he hasn't spoken enough truth to believe.

Their bad fruit is evident in the results of their ministry. What kind of people does their ministry produce? Do these folks really know and love the Lord? Are they obedient to the Word of God, love Christ supremely, pursue godliness and righteousness. Do they have a high view of God's glory and of His holiness? Do they have a firm grip on the reality and the nature of grace – not as simply some get of jail free card but as the working of God to awaken the heart to fear the judgment that is coming against all unrepentant sinners, the work of God in Christ to provide a glorious salvation through The substitutionary atonement of Jesus, the work of God to make dead hearts alive and bring us to repentance and faith, and the ongoing work of God to keep and to sanctify His people for the day of judgment? What kind of people does a man's preaching produce – faithful followers of Christ or self-focused, self-indulgent, self-magnifying people? People who make much of Christ or people who make much of themselves? Invariably the ministry of the false prophet will lead to followers who reject the truth and the authority of God's word, leading them away from sound doctrine into lives dominated by sensuality and by human wisdom.

In contrast, the true shepherd has a heart for the flock, a longing for the flock of God to be built up in Christ, to come to spiritual maturity, to grow in love for Christ, in love for the truth, in love for the brothers and sisters in Christ, and to be made ready for the day of judgment. It is the heart that is reflected in the prayer of Paul for the Philippians when he prayed (Philippians 1:9–11, ESV)

Their bad fruit is shown in the fruit of their own lives. Peter describes false prophets as “those who indulge in the lust of defiling passion and despise authority. Bold and willful...blaspheming about matters of which they are ignorant...blots and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions...they have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children!” (2 Peter 2:10–14, ESV) The false prophet is easily exposed by his pride, by his greed and immorality. He is dominated by his flesh and professes to know God but denies Him in the way he lives his lives. He may delight in his position of authority, but he refuses to submit to the authority of God and His word. The falseness of their teaching erupts in the disobedience of their lives. As Jesus described the Pharisees, false prophets: (Matthew 23:25–28, ESV) It may not be obvious at first, but the true fruit of the false prophet’s character will always show itself.

By contrast, the true prophet submits himself to the very truth that he teaches. He submits himself to the Word of God and pursues Christ. He labors for godliness, judging and hating his own sin. He is quick to repent and to cry out for the mercy and grace of God in Christ. He is earnest and honest and faithful. It doesn’t mean that the true prophet will be perfect, but it does mean that there will be the fruit of a growing conformity to the character of the kingdom: righteousness from the heart, transparent humility, purity, persistent prayerfulness, sacrificial love, an attitude of joy that triumphs over circumstances, spiritual peace, patience and longsuffering and a willingness to instruct those in error, generosity, submission to Christ, and a rejection of what is hypocritical. And the first place where it ought to be evident is in their marriage and in their home.

4) Application: How do we respond to this warning from Jesus today?

Desire and Know and Submit to the Truth -- Peter counseled those to whom he wrote: (1 Peter 2:2, ESV) To crave the Word of God means not to be satisfied with watered down, Christ obscuring, cross hiding, sharing of spiritual principles but to desire the preaching of the pure Word of God. We must value the truth of God and esteem it in light of its true worth. Proverbs speaks to us: (Proverbs 23:23, ESV) Do you know the truth? Do you love the word of God, do you love the theology of that word. And more than simply knowing the Word of God, we must bring our minds and our wills and our emotions into subjection to it. It must master us.

Do Not Give Credence to All that Passes for Spiritual Instruction – Be watchful, be diligent. As the Apostle John wrote: (1 John 4:1–3, ESV) The problem of false prophets is not an ancient issue but one that is a real threat right now and which is causing much turmoil and trouble in the professing church even today. This warning of Christ is relevant right now. It is a very foolish and reckless and dangerous thing to expose one's self to the teaching of just anybody who appears on television or on the radio, or who publishes a book, or sells tapes and CDs, or holds conferences and seminars, or even in a church pulpit. You must be vigilant regarding whom you listen to and what you accept when it comes to faith and doctrine.

Receive With Joy the Word of God -- Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, saying (1 Thessalonians 2:13, ESV) I encourage beloved to receive the word of God, even the hard words of God, with meekness and with joy knowing that the word of God is able to save your souls.

Hold Fast to the Gospel and the Teaching of Christ -- (1Co 15:1-2, ESV) Paul tells these Corinthian believers, these Corinthian Christians, of the indispensable nature of the gospel that he had preached to them and which they had heard, and understood and received with faith. The saving truths of the gospel must be fixed in our minds, fully believed and held fast to the end, if we would be saved. We need to hear this in our theologically flabby age. We believe in vain, unless we continue and persevere in the faith of the gospel.

Take Care that Your Life Match Your Profession -- This emphasis on the fruit of a profession is nothing new; and it is certainly not limited in application to those who may be suspected as false prophets. The Bible speaks many times about the fruit of a believer's life, meaning the character of his life, the way he relates to others, the way he uses his time on earth, and so

forth. The Scripture puts great emphasis on the fruit of your life as a reliable indicator of your spiritual condition.

There are two kinds of prophets in this world, the faithful prophet who faithfully preaches the truth of God, whose life gives evidence of His faithfulness to Christ, and the false prophet whose god is his himself, whose life gives evidence of his faithlessness and rebellion. Choose the one whom you will receive and to whom you will listen, and choose wisely.

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