

“Beware of the False Prophets”

Matthew 7:15-23

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Madison, Wisconsin
November 8, 2009



Introduction:

»PPT» From time to time, we run across various signs or warnings that make no sense. The sign on the wall back here can be found right outside the Vatican in Rome, and not knowing the language, we stood there looking at it for a little while, but the longer we looked at it, the more disturbed we became. I think we finally concluded it had something to do with a dress code, and yet with the woman missing a leg, we thought for a little while that it might have been a sign banning one-legged women—we just didn't know, but it was rather disturbing, to say the least—not even to mention the chunk that is missing from the man's arm in the lower right—I have no idea what that is about!

But then there are other times when in a foreign culture that you appreciate some of those graphic signs. »PPT» This picture was taken on the subway in Rome, and although we could not read the fine print, we very clearly got message that you were not to be standing in the door! This little graphic of a man basically getting chopped in half is something that caught our attention and definitely kept us from being anywhere near the door when it was ready to close!

»PPT» This sign is found at the top of one of the many trails going down to the waterfalls along the Black River going out to Lake Superior up north of Hurley. The sign warns that you are to pace yourself to avoid over-exertion.

»PPT» We took this picture in New York City. After a heart-stopping cab ride, we got out and walked for a little while, and we were amazed to discover that honking is not allowed—there is a fine for honking!

»PPT» This one was taken at the National Zoo in Washington, DC. The warning is that this particular area is off limits due to bamboo storage—only the staff are allowed to get between the Pandas and their food.

»PPT» A year or so ago, we helped go through some items in my grandparents house down near Nashville, Tennessee, and when we opened the door to a closet in one of the back bedrooms, we found this warning sign taped to the top of one of the boxes. They had at one time had a brown recluse infestation, so the sign was warning us to **“Watch out for spiders!”**

Perhaps others have seen a picture that has been on-line for some time. »PPT» And again, this is one that seems to be making fun of a particular sign. The sign

seems to be warning about some kind of giant red lightning bolt falling out of the sky, and the man in the road apparently did not pay attention!

»PPT» And then this final picture comes from Keola's work. I took a little tour a few weeks ago, and this was a sign on her machine that pretty much caught my attention. I know almost nothing about that machine, and yet I know that I do not want that to happen to me, and so I kept my hands in my pockets—I wanted nothing to do with that!

Well, this morning, in response to a request that was made by one of our Senior Saints, I would like for us to start a brief series of lessons on various parables that were taught by the Lord, and I would like for us to start with a short parable that was given as a *stern warning*. As you might know, the word **PARABLE** literally refers to something that is "**cast beside,**" and the idea is that a statement or a story has a double meaning. On one hand, there is a physical picture we can see, but on the other hand, there is a hidden or a spiritual meaning. A parable, then, can be just a short statement, a series of comparisons, or even a long story, but it is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.

Our parable for this morning comes in the Sermon on the Mount, the passage is found in **Matthew 7**, and it comes in the form of a warning about the danger of false prophets. »PPT» In our pew Bibles, the passage is found on **page 1511**. In the New Testament, these warnings about false prophets are repeated over and over again, they are very solemn and somber, and they are most certainly not to be taken lightly. Over and over again, the Bible clearly warns us about the danger of those who would dare to try to change the gospel message. And in fact, a person does not have to read very far in the New Testament to come to the first of these many warnings about the danger of false prophets. Many people think that the Sermon on the Mount is this incredibly positive sermon, a cute little speech about peace, and forgiveness, and loving everybody. And so it comes as quite a shock to some people that roughly the last 1/3 of the Sermon on the Mount is basically one huge warning about the danger of false prophets. With all of this in mind, this morning I would like for us to focus in on **Matthew 7:15-23**...

¹⁵ *"Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ "You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? ¹⁷ "So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ "A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. ¹⁹ "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ "So then, you will know them by their fruits. ²¹ "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. ²² "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' ²³ "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.'*

As we look back over these nine very dark and somber verses, I would like for us to consider, first of all, the warning that Jesus gives, secondly, what Jesus tells us about how to tell the good from the bad, and then finally, let us end with the question: What does all of this really mean for us?

I. **First of all, though, let us consider THE WARNING GIVEN BY JESUS in verse 15, "Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves." »PPT»**

And in this particular setting, the Lord was warning these people about their own religious leaders. They claimed to be speaking for God, but they were faking it. And certainly the Lord would not have given a warning unless it was a problem. In other words, the people were trusting their teachers. The people were falling for it. And so the Lord is giving a very important warning—almost like the picture of the hand getting crushed by the machine—it was a very real danger.

If someone comes to us with a message from God, we need to be on our guard—we need to be careful, we need to remember the warning—we need to look in the Bible for ourselves and figure it out on our own, or, as the Lord says, we need to, "**Beware.**" The word means that we are to pay attention. It means that we need to be on guard. We are not to be fooled by what is on the outside, but we need to look deeper.

We think about the shooting down in Texas this week. On the outside, the shooter might have looked very normal—physically, he would have fit in very well—but on the inside something was terribly, terribly wrong. In a similar way, those who are false prophets look quite harmless on the outside. They walk and they talk like all of us. Like a sheep, they may have beautiful woolen coats. They may appear to be very peaceful and gentle on the outside. After all, have you ever heard of someone getting attacked by a sheep? Are we always reading in the news about little children getting mauled by lambs that are out of control? No, we don't! We don't hear about sheep attacking people, because sheep are not like that. They do not have any claws. They do not have any fangs. They do not have giant teeth. It is interesting, therefore, to think that false prophets will disguise themselves as sheep in order to work their way in among God's people. They come to us with the harmless outward appearance of sheep, but Jesus warns us in verse 15 that on the inside they are "**ravenous wolves.**"

As far as I know, I have only seen one wolf out in the wild, and we saw it this past summer when we were camping up north of Hurley, right near the shore of Lake Superior. We were driving back to our campsite late one night, and right there by the side of the road was this giant wolf. And I'll tell you, they are a lot bigger and a lot scarier in person than I thought they would be. Maybe it was my imagination, but this animal was huge—much bigger than a dog. In North America, wolves generally weigh around 80 pounds, but have been known to weigh as much as 175 pounds. They are known for their endurance and are able to cover several miles at around 6 MPH. Some have been known to reach speeds up to 40 MPH. They can be more

than 6 feet long from nose to tail. Their main weapon is their teeth, and with their teeth they are able to deliver a bite with roughly twice the pressure of a similar sized dog. They travel in packs, and they often go after other animals that are either sick, or young, or pregnant. In fact, when they kill a pregnant animal, I have read that they will sometimes tear in and eat the babies, leaving the mother uneaten. Their yearly requirement is 1.5 tons of meat, and they are not very picky. We understand, then, why the Lord describes these creatures as **“ravenous.”** They are always hungry, and they do not have the best interests of the sheep in mind at all, but they are selfish—they are only out for their own survival.

As we apply this warning to the church, we understand what the Lord was saying. A false prophet can come in with such apparent innocence, with gentleness dripping from his fingertips. He may be skilled socially. He may be an eloquent speaker, using comforting words and accurate grammar. But inwardly, he does not care about the spiritual health and long-term well-being of the congregation. As the wolf that he is, he is selfish at heart and does not care about the well-being of the sheep. Like a wolf, he will slowly circle those who are weak and ungrounded, he will deceive and pull them away. And when challenged for his behavior, **“Who me? Oh, I must have been understood. I was just asking a question.”** We understand what Paul wrote in **2 Corinthians 11:13-15**, ***“For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness, whose end will be according to their deeds.”***

These are people we know and love. We remember what Paul said to the elders of the church in Ephesus in **Acts 20:28-31**, ***“Be on guard for yourselves and for 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. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert...”*** The false prophets in Ephesus would arise from within the eldership—these were men who had apparently met the qualifications set forth in **1 Timothy 2** and **Titus 1**. Apparently, these are men who had been selected and trusted by the congregation. Paul says that from among *that group*, men will arise and would tear up the Lord’s own church. Even the shepherds would turn on the flock! And what I find interesting is that these wolves are not interested in your food or your money—they want YOU! As Paul said, they will come in among you, ***“not sparing the flock,”*** and they will, ***“draw away the disciples after them.”*** They will come in and will remove people from the flock. The wolves are after YOU. You are their power base, you give them importance, and you become their flock.

First of all, then, the Lord warns us very clearly that false prophets will be deceptive in their appearance—they will come in as wolves in sheep’s clothing.

II. As we continue with this little parable (or comparison, or word picture), we find that the Lord now moves into some words of advice concerning HOW WE CAN KNOW THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THOSE WHO ARE WOLVES AND THOSE WHO ARE REALLY SHEEP. »PPT»

And we find in verses 16-20 that the Lord gives us a not-so-secret-sign to look out for, as He says to us, ***“You will know them by their fruits.”*** In other words, we are to pay attention. We are to keep an eye on what is happening. We are not to put our heads in the sand, hoping the problem simply goes away. We are not to judge them by their appearance, we are not to judge them merely by what they say, but we are to judge them based on the fruit that they bear. And this is the danger of false prophets: They will bear fruit. But in the long run, the fruit is not good.

We know, for example, that the faithful members of the congregation will often get discouraged as the result of a false prophet. It is discouraging to see all of the hard work that so many have done through the years, and to see all of that work basically vaporize as a result of the false teaching. The false prophet will cause strife and confusion. Christian unity is not possible as a false doctrine is taking hold within the congregation. A false prophet has a way of extinguishing people’s passion for God. After all, why go to church if something terrible is going on there. Many people are just not up to the fight and will start staying home more and more. Weaker members will be led astray, and the error will continue to spread. And if all else fails, a false prophet will have no reservations about splitting a congregation. A false prophet will often gather a group around himself, instead of around the Lord, and the group will end up following him instead of Jesus. And many times, if we were to do some checking, we would find a long trail of church fights and divided congregations in his past—weak Christians who have left the faith, strong Christians who have become discouraged. But the worst possible scenario is what can happen when the body of Christ is divided.

Jesus, then, is telling us not just to look at the shiny exterior, but we are to look deeper—we are to look at the fruit. What has this person actually *done*? What has this person actually *accomplished*? And often we find not a huge list of converts to the faith, but we find a long trail of spiritual death and destruction. The Lord, then, says that we will know them ***“by their fruits.”***

III. As we look at the last few verses, we come to a part of this little parable that should be shocking to all of us, because as we ask ourselves WHAT ALL OF THIS REALLY MEANS, we discover that some people will show up on the Judgment Day thinking they are saved, when really they are lost. »PPT»

I mean, to us in our pluralistic, nobody-can-do-anything-wrong society, it seems so strange that seemingly good, morally upright, and religious people can be lost. Please notice what we know about these people (referred to in verses 21-23). We know, first of all, for example, that these people recognized Jesus as being the Lord. And so out of the nearly 7 billion people on the earth right now, we are not talking

about the atheists, or Buddhists, or Hindus, or Muslims, or any of the other religious groups that do not follow Jesus as being the Lord, but even here we are being very specific—these lost people recognized Jesus as being the Lord. In fact, Jesus says that *“many”* people are in this situation. And so, when we look at this passage and ask ourselves, *“So what?”* we need to realize that simply calling on Jesus as the Lord does not automatically result in salvation. After all, we remember from **James 2:19** that even the demons believe in God. First of all, then, we learn that many of those who are lost *will recognize Jesus as being the Lord*.

Secondly, let us also realize that these people *sincerely believed that they were saved*. Whether they had simply misunderstood the teaching of Christ, or whether they had been intentionally misled by others, we do not know. But whatever the case, in their sincerity, they were turned away by the Lord. In the end, they found that the standard they had followed was their own, not the Lord's. We remember how Paul was defending himself before the Jewish Sanhedrin in **Acts 23:1**, and even in spite of having put people in jail simply for being Christians, Paul said, *“Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day.”* In other words, sincerity does not guarantee that we will be accepted by the Lord on the Judgment Day.

So, these lost people believed in the Lord, they sincerely thought they were saved, but thirdly, let us also realize that these people were wrong and were lost *in spite of doing some amazing things in the name of Christ*. And what I find interesting here is that Jesus never denies their claims. Jesus never says, *“No, no, you were just faking it,”* but when these people talk about casting out demons, and prophesying, and performing many miracles, Jesus (by His silence) seems to agree. That is not the argument here. I know we look around us today, and we see some amazing things being done in the name of religion. Some time ago, in fact, I was discussing baptism with a young man right here in Madison, and his hang-up was that there are many religious groups out there who do not see baptism as being necessary, but they are doing some amazing works.

He took his honest and well-intentioned argument right here to **Matthew 7**, and he said, *“Good fruit cannot come from a bad tree; therefore, those groups doing these good things must not be wrong.”* However, please consider what Jesus is saying here. Some people will do some amazing things in the name of religion, but they can be terribly mistaken. All around Madison, we see churches feeding the poor, we see churches having blood drives, we see churches taking care of children—and these things are all great, but good deeds do not necessarily mean that we will end up being saved. We have a church here in Madison who will accept you if you are an atheist, and I am sure that their church does some good things for this community. I am also thinking of the Anglican Church—unless I have missed something, a church that was basically established because of the adultery of the king, so that Henry VIII could get a divorce—I am sure that they are doing some great benevolent works here in Madison. I am thinking right now of the Islamic Red Crescent Society. I mean, they are the Islamic version of the Red Cross, and I am sure that they are doing some amazing relief work all around the world, but good deeds do not necessarily mean that Christ will welcome us into heaven.

Well, all of this is pretty frightening, isn't it? I mean, if those who recognize Jesus as Lord, and think they're going to heaven, and perform amazing works in the name of Christ are going to be lost, then who can be saved? Well, the answer comes in **verse 21**, as Jesus explains that, ***"...he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter."*** Or, as Jesus said in **John 14:15**, ***"If you love Me, you will keep My commandments."*** As we think, then, very carefully about the meaning of this passage, we need to look very carefully at our own lives. Have we done the will of our Father who is in heaven? Have we kept the Lord's commandments? Will we be considered the Lord's friend on the Day of Judgment, or will He say to us, ***"Depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness"***? What a sad statement!

Conclusion:

Let us, then, consider this morning's passage as a **WARNING**. We cannot just mix a little Jesus into our lives in case the Bible is true, but we must keep the Lord's commandments. The Bible says nothing about being sprinkled as a baby. The Bible says nothing about attending catechism class. The Bible says nothing about being confirmed. The Bible says nothing about praying the sinner's prayer. The Bible says nothing about being voted into the church.

But rather, the New Testament tells us that we must believe in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. **»PPT»**

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

The Bible teaches that we need to make a public confession of our faith. **»PPT»**

"Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 10:32).

The Bible teaches that we must repent of our sins, that we must change our lives, that we must give up the old sins of the flesh and work every day to do what is pleasing to God. **»PPT»**

"I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3).

And the Bible also teaches that we must be immersed in water for the forgiveness of sins. **»PPT»**

"Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

If we can assist you in taking these steps, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's all stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org