

Get to Know the Tree

Matthew 7:15-20

I've lived for quite a few decades as an adult male in the United States. In all those years I have watched our society ebb and flow and at times make enormous changes – some good. But as a Christian I see most of the change brought about as not good, at least for Christians. We have gone from being a nation that pulls together to a nation of individuals with their own self interests. Most people consider things such as the economy, personal finance, health, safety, politics and social values to be of great importance. Each of these have some level of importance even though they have only a temporary affect upon us. We give more consideration to them because they are what affect us now. However, we must remember that our life here on this earth is but “vapor” (Ecclesiastes 1; James 4:14). The goal of life should be preparation for eternity.

A good government can make life a lot more pleasant and a bad government can make it a lot more miserable. God commands us to pray for those in authority over us (1 Timothy 2) and I believe that we should also be involved in the political process to help determine whether we have a good or bad government. Yet, we must also understand that a government **can only affect us outwardly**. Even if persecuted for being Christians, a government cannot change who we are internally. Society may crumble around us and make it more challenging to live a holy and pure life, but other people cannot stop the work Christ has begun in you and me (Philippians 1:6). All of these are outward. They can affect how you live but they cannot affect who you are. In our text this morning, Jesus warns us about those **who can affect us internally** by presenting false doctrine under the banner of truth, and getting us to believe and follow their lies. The greatest danger we face is what will affect us internally and determine our eternal destiny.

In a similar manner, the greatest danger and challenge to the church is not finances, government or social decline. History has shown that the church does best when troubled and persecuted because it then depends on God more, and those that are not serious about following Christ are less inclined to join the church. Even so, in good times or hard times, the greatest danger to those that would follow God are false prophets who would have people follow a false God or trust in someone or something other than Jesus Christ.

False Prophets in the Old Testament

Jesus' warning here about false prophets is not something new in the Scriptures. God has continually given warnings about those that would come, and present lies and falsehoods as truth. In Deuteronomy 18:20-22 God warns about false prophets that would come. ***“But the prophet who shall speak a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he shall speak in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die. And you may say in your heart, ‘How shall we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?’ When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken presumptuously? you shall not be afraid of him.”***

These false prophets did come and they led many people astray because the people failed to heed God's commands and warnings. The truth of the matter was that the people did not want to hear the truth. Isaiah said of them in Isaiah 30:9-11, ***“For this is a rebellious people, false sons. Sons who refuse to listen to the instruction of the LORD; Who say to the seers, ‘You must not see visions’; And to the prophets, ‘You must not prophesy to us what is right. Speak to us pleasant words. Prophecy illusions. Get out of the way, turn aside from the path. Let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel.”*** The horrible response by the religious leaders was that they listened to the people.

God, speaking through Jeremiah, rebukes them in Jeremiah 5:30-31, ***“An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule on their own authority; and My people love it so!”*** Things were so bad that in Jeremiah 23, Jeremiah warned the people to stop listening to these self-proclaimed prophets because they spoke of visions from their own imaginations and prophesied, but it was not from the LORD. The things these false prophets said were not true and the things they foretold did not come about. They should have been stoned, but the people were far from God and instead they listened to and followed the lies. The eventual outcome of it all was the captivity of both Israel and Judah.

False Prophets in the New Testament

This was in the Old Testament, but the same theme of warning about false prophets continues throughout the New Testament. Jesus gives warning here in Matthew 7 and in Matthew 24. Peter warns in 2 Peter 2:1 telling us ***“But false prophets also arose among the people. Just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies . . .”*** The Apostle John warned about them in all three of his epistles. Paul gives warnings in most of his epistles with 2 Timothy 4:3 even telling us that part of the reason for the rise of these false prophets and teachers is because the people ***“will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths.”*** That is the same thing Isaiah and Jeremiah described. False prophets will come and there will be plenty of people who will rejoice in their coming, because they **want to hear the pleasant words that please their ears.**

False prophets claim to be something they are not. They also claim to speak for the Lord, but they do not. Their false identity is always eventually revealed because what they say does not match the truth. Also what they predict does not happen.

Identifying False Prophets - Their Deception

The warning that Jesus is giving in this passage is a serious matter. The Old Testament tells us that false prophets deceived people in history. The New Testament tells us that we face the same danger, so beware, take heed, be careful of, watch out for false prophets.

Now look at Matthew 7:15. *“Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”* These false prophets that Jesus is warning us about are not easily spotted. You must carefully examine them and what they say. That is why the warning is to “beware,” to take caution. Everyone would agree that it is easy to spot someone who is advocating a non-Christian religion. You can spot the Hare Krishna, the Buddhist, the pagan, the idol worshiper, the Hindu, and the Muslim. But it can be very difficult to identify false prophets when they claim to worship the God we worship, and even use the Bible in their teaching. They do not appear to be enemies - but rather friends.

There is some difference of opinion as to what it means that they come in “sheep’s clothing.” Some say it means they come looking like a sheep. This would be the proverbial wolf in a sheep’s skin. But the more I have studied this, the more I believe this is not that they come looking like one of the other sheep, but that they come looking like the shepherd. They come appearing as the one that is supposed to be the protector of the flock. My reasons for understanding the passage in this way are simple.

First, the text says “sheep’s clothing,” not “sheep’s skin.” The word, “clothing” here refers not to an animal skin, but a garment made from in this case, wool. The same word is used back in Matthew 3:4 to describe John the Baptist having raiment (clothing) made of camel’s hair. It was not camel skin, but the hair of the animal woven into a garment. That brings up the second reason. A person’s trade was often identified by what the person wore, and the prophets often wore rough, hairy garments as did John the Baptist.

False prophets would put on such clothing to look like the true prophets. Zachariah talks about such false prophets in Zechariah 13:4 who “put on a hairy robe in order to deceive.” Shepherd’s wore clothing made from sheep’s wool, and a false shepherd would wear similar clothing to look like the true shepherd.

Paul’s comment in 2 Corinthians 11:13-15 give us some insight into this. *“For such men are false apostles, deceitful wonders, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself an angel of light. Therefore, it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their deeds.”* The false prophet does not come to be part of the flock as a sheep, but to lead the flock as a shepherd. That is why they are so dangerous. False prophets may look like shepherds, but inside they’re wolves. Their goal is not to feed sheep, but to eat them.

It is interesting to note that the word (arpages) “ravenous” here is translated as “swindler” or “extortioner” every other time it appears in the New Testament. Peter said of them in 2 Peter 2:3 that *“in their greed they will exploit you with false words . . .”*. They will take advantage of the sheep to get out of them what they want to fulfill their own desires. Their concern is themselves, not that of the sheep.

So, what is Jesus warning us about? Jesus, the Chief Shepherd wants His sheep to know there will always be wolves trying to destroy the flock. He tells us to always be on our toes and be wary of the one who is telling us something that does not ring true. Jesus says – **WATCH!** Jesus says **COMPARE!** Jesus says **PROTECT.**

False teachers are here in our community today. They are continuing what was begun in times past – leading people away from God. Judge them by their works and words according to what God has revealed. Always compare what is said with what God HAS said.