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Called to Speak for the Lord – the Book of Jeremiah

False Shepherds, Thieves, and
Robbers (Part 3)

March 28, 2021

Sermon Text: Jeremiah 23:16-40

Scripture Reading: Jeremiah 23:16-40

We have been looking at this 23rd chapter of Jeremiah which is a central passage in Scripture about false shepherds creeping into the church and working their evil. This has been an ever present danger to Christ's people virtually from the time Adam and Eve listened to the serpent. We are warned over and over in the Bible to be on guard against these agents of our enemy. It is not exaggerating to conclude that most professing Christians in our day are sleeping on duty however.

Let's look further into this subject then and grow wiser in our ability to spot the enemy at work. There really are very common, usual traits which are identified for us here.

False Shepherds Pronounce God's
Blessing on the Wicked

Jer 23:16-17 Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. (17) They say continually to those who despise the word of the LORD, 'It shall be well with you'; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, 'No disaster shall come upon you.'"

The teachings of these wolves is wrapped up in what we could call "Bible Language," but in fact does not originate in God's Word at all. They are crafted in the minds of the false shepherds.

Notice carefully the obvious – *we are not to listen to them. To listen and accept what they are saying is to believe a lie.* And what is the lie? –

They say continually to those who despise the word of the LORD, ‘It shall be well with you’; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, ‘No disaster shall come upon you.’”

There it is. It is exactly what Paul warned us of:

2Ti 4:3-4 For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, (4) and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

So these false shepherds put the same message in all kinds of different wrappers, but it all comes down to this:

- “God says His blessing is upon you, no matter what. You despise Him, but that’s ok. He still loves you anyway.”
- “God is not going to let anything bad happen to you. He is never

going to bring judgment upon you, even though you stubbornly do what you want to do and disobey Him.”

You see the same thing again down in verse 22 –

Jer 23:22 But if they had stood in my council, then they would have proclaimed my words to my people, and they would have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their deeds.

NOTE: Here, when the Lord speaks of “My people,” He is specifically referring to Israel – His people under the Old Covenant. This is how it was then – the people had to be told, “know the Lord,” “obey the Lord,” just as Moses had to continually tell them. It is radically different in Christ, in the New Covenant – all who are in Christ know the Lord and follow Him.

A sure mark then of false shepherds is that they do not proclaim God’s words, they do not call people who claim to be Christians to repentance from their evil ways. They only pronounce God’s blessing upon them.

You can be sure then that when you hear a preacher or some author or any person who claims to be a Christian, mouthing and preaching only “God loves you. God loves everyone. God wants to bless you...” Then you are listening to a lie and a liar. Such a person will never say things like this:

1Jn 2:3-4 And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. (4) Whoever says “I know him” but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him,

1Jn 2:15 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

NOTE: You will also find that false shepherds will claim to confront sin, but the “sin” they denounce, the person they rage against, is the person like Jeremiah. Jeremiah was persecuted by these false shepherds because he preached God’s truth and that was something they didn’t want to hear.

Therefore, think carefully about this. Very, very often a false shepherd appears on the surface to be a very nice,

kind, caring man. But for all that outward appearance, the fact is he is merely greasing the skids that take people to hell.

There is a repeated concept here:

- Who has stood in the council of the Lord?
- Who has given heed to His word and listened?
- If they had stood in My council

Jeremiah and all true prophets, received the message they preached from the Lord. They were, you could say, called into the council room of the Lord where the message they were to preach was given to them.

Jer 5:14 Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of hosts: “Because you have spoken this word, behold, I am making my words in your mouth a fire, and this people wood, and the fire shall consume them.

Eze 3:17 “Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me.

In contrast, as we have seen, the false shepherds get the message they preach from their own imagination. Or they borrow it from another false shepherd.

Many preachers claim to preach God's Word. In fact, the mere act of walking up to a pulpit in a church building is a claim to speak God's Word. But I hope that you know by now that you can travel around today from church to church and for all the talk of "God says....," in fact what is being declared is not God's Word at all. It is that same old blessing of the wicked.

A God Who Sees

Look again at this:

Jer 23:23-27 "Am I a God at hand, declares the LORD, and not a God far away? (24) Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the LORD.

(25) I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, 'I have dreamed, I have dreamed!' (26) How long shall there be lies in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart, (27) who

think to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, even as their fathers forgot my name for Baal?

False shepherds, and the people who listen to them, (though they would not admit it) actually believe that God does not see what they are really doing.

But the Lord is omnipresent. He is infinite in His being so that the entire creation is filled with His presence. He sees everything. He knows every word that is preached every Sunday from every pulpit. He knows perfectly what people are being told in "Bible counseling" sessions. He knows who despises Him, though they sit in a pew every Sunday.

So then, He says "I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in My name...".

What do you suppose a king would do to someone who goes around the kingdom claiming to speak for the king, but who in fact has not been authorized to do so at all? What is that king going to do? What if this phony traveled his circuit in the kingdom and told the king's enemies that the king loves them

and forgives them and wants to bless them? The answer is obvious.

And look at this again:

...who think to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, even as their fathers forgot my name for Baal?

See it? False shepherds, no matter how sugar-coated and lovely they might appear outwardly, are agents for Baal. That is, they present a false Christ, a false spirit and a false gospel for the purpose of leading people away from Christ to a false religion worshipping an idol god.

Fire and Hammer

We have looked at these verses before, but they are definitely worth another look:

Jer 23:28-29 Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let him who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? declares the LORD. (29) Is not my word like fire, declares the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?

What are characteristics of God's Word? Here are two:

- Fire
- Hammer

Fire and a sledge hammer have effects. They have power. Fire burns up and destroys what is worthless, but it purifies as well. A hammer pounding away on the hardest rock eventually shatters it. All of these pictures are images of what God's Word does to those who hear it. It burns up the straw and refines the grain. It smashes through the stoniest heart.

Now, the fact that these false shepherds did not proclaim God's Word, but preached an ear-tickling message instead, was evidenced by the fact that the people continued unconcerned, unrepentant. And that is the very condition of most local churches today. They are not having the fire and hammer administered to them. So evil wrapped up in Christian disguise just goes on and on.

Tradition Disguised as God's Word

Jer 23:30 Therefore, behold, I am against the prophets, declares the

LORD, who steal my words from one another.

This is a very interesting characteristic of these wolves. They do not speak God's Word because they have not been commissioned by Him to preach, so where do they get their words? We have seen their message comes from their own imagination, but here you see another aspect of these liars – *they borrow from one another*. Do you remember this:

Mar 7:6-8 And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, "'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; (7) in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' (8) You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men."

Have you noticed how many of the things we are taught in churches or in Christian publications originate in a relatively small group of popular celebrities? And then what happens? The things they teach are borrowed by masses of others, and spread through the churches. Often those teachings are not true to Scripture, but are the

inventions, imaginations and traditions of men.

This is what was going on in Jeremiah's day – they stole "my words" (ie, what they claimed were God's Words) from one another. And this is what we must be very much on guard against ourselves. Many, many sermons are nothing more than the copying and pasting together of what various notable preachers or authors or theologians have said, and not at all a product of honest study of God's Word.

The Lord is their Enemy

Jer 23:31-32 Behold, I am against the prophets, declares the LORD, who use their tongues and declare, 'declares the LORD.' (32) Behold, I am against those who prophesy lying dreams, declares the LORD, and who tell them and lead my people astray by their lies and their recklessness, when I did not send them or charge them. So they do not profit this people at all, declares the LORD.

What does it mean to have the Lord Himself say "I am against" someone? Not only is He not with the false shepherd, He is *against them*. What

does that mean? It means that the Lord is their enemy. Understand this clearly now – these people who stand in pulpits and who write books and conduct counseling sessions, who claim to speak for the Lord saying “the Lord declares,” but who in fact only announce God’s blessing on the wicked and never call them to repentance, who allow wicked people parading as Christians to fill the pews of their churches – *have God as their enemy*. And you might recall that Jeremiah described the Lord in this sobering way:

Jer 20:11 But the LORD is with me as a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble; they will not overcome me. They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonor will never be forgotten.

Eternal dishonor. Another description of hell.

Do you also understand that Jeremiah’s description of these false shepherds necessarily indicates that *they appear as nice guys!* They only pronounce God’s blessing on people, no matter how wicked they are. Their mantra is “God loves everyone.” I found that

even in seminary, this was the model of a preacher that was promoted. I remember one well-known church growth expert that was a professor there and when I had him listen to a sermon tape of a sermon in which I confronted the congregation with widespread and longstanding sin, his reaction was – *you were quite hard on them*. And I remember him telling the class “I love the ministry. It gives me a rush. I think of Captain Kirk in Star Trek sitting on the bridge in his command chair on the Enterprise and giving the command to “engage” and that is what I like to do in leading the church.” Everything positive, you see. Everything always exciting. People flocking in greater numbers. So there was no place in his philosophy of ministry for confronting evil. It was all too negative. He would pronounce this church and our ministry here to be an utter failure.

False shepherds do not provide even the slightest benefit to those listening. “They do not profit this people at all” is the way the Lord puts it. People can often try to strike a compromise in this regard – “well, I know lots of people in my church and there are lots of activities for my kids...” but – if the pulpit is filled by a false shepherd, *there is absolutely no profit or advantage to*

be had in such a place. We are told not to listen to false shepherds.

I have met people who actually know something is very wrong in the church they have been members of for many years. One man showed up here a long time ago and after the service he talked to me. He asked me if I thought it was a good thing or not for a pastor to be a member of the masonic lodge, and if it was right for that church to hold a special Sunday each year honoring all the members who were masons. They would all come to church that Sunday in their masonic garb.

Well, of course I told him that the masonic lodge is a secret society which falsely claims to accept the Bible and that most conservative denominations specify that no one can be a member of their churches if they are a member of a secret society.

That man seemed encouraged by my answer, and then he went right back to that church and did nothing about it. He knew the pastor was a false shepherd, but he did not want to give up the “benefits” of staying there. But there is no benefit. None at all, and in fact those who resolve to remain in such a place will find themselves the recipients of

the Lord’s declaration: *I am against them!*”

The Burden (Oracle) of the Lord

Finally, look again at vss 33-40:

Jer 23:33-40 “When one of this people, or a prophet or a priest asks you, ‘**What is the burden of the LORD?**’ you shall say to them, ‘**You are the burden,** and I will cast you off, declares the LORD.’ (34) And as for the prophet, priest, or one of the people who says, ‘**The burden of the LORD,**’ I will punish that man and his household.

(35) Thus shall you say, every one to his neighbor and every one to his brother, ‘What has the LORD answered?’ or ‘What has the LORD spoken?’

(36) **But ‘the burden of the LORD’ you shall mention no more, for the burden is every man’s own word,** and you pervert the words of the living God, the LORD of hosts, our God.

(37) Thus you shall say to the prophet, ‘What has the LORD answered you?’ or ‘What has the LORD spoken?’ (38) **But if you say, ‘The burden of the LORD,’ thus says the LORD,**

‘Because you have said these words, “The burden of the LORD,” when I sent to you, saying, “You shall not say, ‘The burden of the LORD,’” (39) therefore, behold, I will surely lift you up and cast you away from my presence, you and the city that I gave to you and your fathers. (40) And I will bring upon you everlasting reproach and perpetual shame, which shall not be forgotten.’”

(36) But ‘the burden of the LORD’ you shall mention no more, for the burden is every man's own word, and you pervert the words of the living God, the LORD of hosts, our God.

Have you noticed that within Christian culture or circles, within churches and among professing Christian people – certain phrases and sayings are often adopted and widely used? And that most of these sayings carry meanings that are untrue and unbiblical?

“God loves everyone” is a typical example.

Well, here is one such phrase that was widely mouthed in Jeremiah’s day, especially by the false prophets – *the burden of the Lord*. What was this all about? Why was it so obnoxious to God so that He forbade its use and promised judgment on those who persisted in saying it?

I think that verse 36 largely answers the question:

When a true prophet of God was given God’s Word to speak, that Word is often described in the Bible as a *burden or an oracle*. This phrase, “the burden of the Lord” had become a pronouncement that what a prophet was speaking was indeed and without doubt the Word of God. But it had been perverted by the false prophets when in fact the only burden or oracle they spoke was every man’s own word! God therefore pronounces the use of that phrase forbidden.

Let’s see if we can think of the very same thing being done in our day. Can you think of any phrases that are commonly thrown around which are intended to prohibit anyone from questioning what is being proclaimed as “the burden of the Lord?” The thing is very, very common today as it was then:

- God has shown me
- God spoke to me
- I had a vision

Now, sometimes phrases of this kind could be used with good motive, genuinely. But the false shepherd uses them to stop any doubt being permitted that what he is saying is really God's word.

All of us need to take great care and caution in speaking like this. We do not want to be putting our own imaginations into God's mouth, lest we find Him opposed to us. AND we need to be very much on guard when someone comes along peppering their speech with such phrases.

Because in reality, a real shepherd truly serving the Lord does not need to convince everyone that the words he is speaking are God's Words.

Jer 23:37 Thus you shall say to the prophet, 'What has the LORD answered you?' or 'What has the LORD spoken?'

Because God's Word is *self-authenticating*. *It is fire and it is a hammer. And it always accomplishes its purpose.*