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Matthew / Matthew 7:15–20

WOLVES IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING

INTRODUCTION

Let's turn to [Matthew 7](#). Last week we spent our time in [Matthew 7:13-14](#). Let me remind you of what Jesus says there:

[Matthew 7:13-14](#) (2016 ESV) — 13 “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. **14** For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”

We are naturally born through a wide gate onto a wide road, which is the way of the world; that road leads to destruction, eternal condemnation. We must enter the narrow gate – Jesus Himself, as He says in [John 10:9](#) – and walk the hard road – again, Jesus, as He says in [John 14:6](#) – because that narrow gate opens to eternal life, and that hard road leads to eternal life.

This is not a GRIM message, but it is a SOBER message. This life is not a game; it's not a competition to see who wins, or who can achieve the most here. This life is not a rehearsal for something coming later on; it's the real thing. Final judgment is called **final** judgment because it is **FINAL** – there won't be any second chances, or appeals, or any changes after final judgment. And because it is judgment, every human being will be sentenced according to their standing before God.

Those who remained in rebellion during their lives will be sentenced to eternal, ceaseless torment. Those who have been saved by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone will be welcomed into His eternal presence, into everlasting life, into the abundant life that He has promised.

While we don't like to think about it, perhaps, many will be condemned to hell for their sin and rebellion, and few will be saved. In [Luke 13:22-24](#) we read this:

Luke 13:22-24 2016 ESV

He went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem.

And someone said to him, "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" And he said to them,

"Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.

This is a sobering truth, isn't it? Many will try to enter eternal life, but they won't be able. It's not that Jesus is unable to save them, but that they insist on finding their own way instead of coming through Him. Jesus says in [Matthew 22:14](#) that many are called, but few are chosen.

There is Good News – that's what the word "Gospel" means – but we must never forget that the Good News is so good because the bad news is so bad. What is coming is not just a lower level of heaven, but horrific, catastrophic, eternal, conscious torment. There is just one remedy to eternal judgment, and that is the Savior, Jesus Christ. The message of the Gospel is an urgent message: believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, but don't delay because it may be too late – **today** is the day of salvation. God's primary work in creation is saving His elect for His own glory.

That's why Satan, the enemy of God, and the enemy of all that God has made, and very specifically, the enemy of all mankind, has made it his aim to keep as many people under the wrath of God as he can, any way that he can. Those methods include

- tempting people on to greater sin
- tempting people to pride and rebellion
- convincing those who are lost in their sins that they are just fine the way they are, AND,
- **sending false prophets and teachers and apostles into the church.**

And so Jesus gives us full disclosure and a precautionary warning:

[Matthew 7:15-20 \(2016 ESV\)](#) — **15** “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. **16** You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? **17** So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. **18** A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. **19** Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. **20** Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

Let’s think about the FACT of false prophets, their METHODS, and their true NATURE.

THE FACT OF FALSE PROPHETS

Jesus gives us a command, not a suggestion: Beware of false prophets. He knew that Satan would oppose the Gospel and the church just as he had opposed Jesus and His ministry. And the truth is that false prophets and teachers and apostles appeared in the early church, distorting the Gospel, and seeking to lead Christians away from the narrow gate and off of the hard road; that is, away from Jesus as Savior and Lord. This Satanic work would increase over time, reaching its peak as final judgment approached:

Matthew 24:24 2016 ESV

For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.

Satan's aim is to attempt to lead the elect astray, and so that is also the underlying motivation of false teachers, christs, prophets, and apostles. They aren't trying to fool the world; the world is already under the control of the evil one; the world is already perishing in darkness. They are trying to fool those who are truly in Christ; as a result, they do fool those who are false converts, those who are in the church but unsaved.

THE METHODS OF FALSE PROPHETS

False prophets will be careful to look genuine. When we think of false teachers, we probably think of the obvious ones: the Kenneth Copelands and Joel Osteens and Todd Whites of the prosperity movement. But there are false prophets and teachers who are far more dangerous, because they are far more subtle. They are the ones who quietly attend church, and read books by false teachers, and then quietly promote those teachings over coffee, or give books to others.

Sarah Young is the author of a book called "Jesus Calling", which claims to offer new words of revelation, channeled directly from Jesus to Ms. Young, who then wrote them down and published them. Those who happily hand her books out are just as dangerous, if not more so, than Ms. Young herself. If you have this book, or any by authors like Joel Osteen, Kenneth Copeland, and so on, destroy them. Get them out your house; don't give them away.

The heart of the church is the Word of God; Satan's greatest attacks are always on Scripture's sufficiency, inerrancy, and infallibility. The devil seeks to insert false converts into churches to mislead and distract the saints.

THE NATURE OF FALSE PROPHETS

Jesus calls them ravenous wolves. We know what wolves are: they are dangerous, apex predators, at the top of their particular food chain. Sheep are a perfect prey for wolves; small enough to easily take down, large enough to make it worth the effort.

Notice what Jesus says about false prophets:

First, they feed on Christians. They seek to consume and satisfy themselves with believers. Their attack comes through false doctrines and false claims about God. So desire money, others power, or positions of leadership. Some just want to watch the world burn; they live to spoil the peace and security of God's people.

Second, they are ravenous. That is, they have greedy, grasping, and thieving hearts. They are insatiable. They pretend to love the Lord Jesus and His people, but they are willing to tear a church apart to satisfy their own desires.

And third, they run in packs. Jesus calls them wolves for a reason. If you find a false teacher rooted and established in a church, you can be sure that they are not alone. One false teacher in a church doesn't get very far; a pack of them can exert tremendous pressure on leaders. They love what's called the "bandwagon fallacy": this false teaching is true because a lot of people believe it.

TRANSITION: Well, if false prophets are wolves in sheep's clothing – if they are well and cleverly disguised – how can we discern who they are? Listen to what Jesus says, as He gives us a second parable, the parable of the trees:

WE MUST BE FRUIT INSPECTORS

Jesus gives us a good way to identify them: just examine their lives for the fruits of a Christian. A true follower of Christ will exhibit the characteristics of a Christian. This is because they have been born again, and have a new nature, and are filled with the Holy Spirit.

What fruit should we look for? We don't have to guess; the Scripture gives us a lot of detail.

There is the fruit of the Spirit:

Galatians 5:22–23 2016 ESV

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

A false prophet won't have the fruit of the Spirit. Now, some will focus on love, and perhaps joy. "Oh, they're so loving; they're so joyful all the time." Ok, fine, good, but do they demonstrate peace? Are they patient? Are they kind? Are they truly good? Are they faithful? Are they gentle? Do they exhibit self-control. False teachers I've known are impatient; they demand that leaders agree with them. They are not faithful to the Word of God, they are not faithful to follow their pastors and elders. They all lacked self-control; they insisted on doing whatever they were going to do, even when cautioned by elders.

The fruit of the Spirit is a good test. John also gives us a number of traits of true Christians in First John, several of which apply directly to false teachers:

- Walking in the light.

- Keeping God's commandments.
- Doing the will of God.
- Continuing in the faith once for all delivered to the saints.
- Adhering to the teachings of the apostles.

Only true Christians will exhibit these.

TRANSITION: Why are these characteristics proof that someone is a genuine believer? Jesus tells us by using agriculture.

GOOD TREE, GOOD FRUIT

ARE GRAPES GATHERED FROM THORN BUSHES, 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, NOT CAN A DISEASED TREE BEAR GOOD FRUIT.

Even non-farmers and non-gardeners understand this. You plant tomatoes because you want tomatoes; if you want radishes, you plant radishes. A plant produces fruit in keeping with its nature.

Likewise, you get truth from a true believer, and you get false doctrine from a false prophet.

TRANSITION: When someone fails the fruit test, what does that mean?

THE DESTINY OF FALSE PROPHETS.

EVERY TREE THAT DOES NOT BEAR GOOD FRUIT IS CUT DOWN AND THROWN INTO THE FIRE. Jesus says that these men and women are not genuine believers who just got a little confused; they are unbelievers under the judgment of God. They dress up as sheep, but they are actually wolves. Trees that do not bear GOOD fruit are BAD trees.

Good fruit is not just helpful, it is necessary. It is the way that we recognize when someone who claims to be a Christian is or isn't. It's what determines whether we welcome someone with the right hand of fellowship, or give them the Gospel in the hope that they will repent and believe and be saved.

False prophets can't hide themselves for long, as long as we are obedient to the Lord's command to "beware of false prophets," and diligently apply the tests that He commands us to apply.

Jude writes,

Jude 3-4 2016 ESV

Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.

For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

False prophets will sometimes defend themselves by calling us judgmental, or narrow-minded. They will say that we don't have the Spirit of God. They will say that we are missing the second blessing, or we are blind to the NEW thing that God is doing (most of them put huge emphasis on God doing something NEW). They will quote [Psalm 105:15](#), "Touch not My anointed ones!"

A woman once sternly warned not to “touch the Lord’s anointed” because I labeled Kenneth Copeland a false teacher. I told her that since I am a pastor, I am ALSO anointed by the Lord, and she had better beware of criticizing ME! It was kind of funny, her mind just locked up; she had no idea of what to say.

Of course, false prophets are not God’s anointed, by definition; they fail every test of God’s anointing, which is the godly fruit we’ve already discussed.

BRINGING IT HOME

Jesus gives us a command: beware of false prophets. He makes it clear that they will come into the church. He tells us how to identify them. Through His apostles He tells us how to deal with them:

Titus 3:10–11 2016 ESV

As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.

Do you see the phrase “a person who stirs up division”? That’s one word in the Greek language: heretic. A heretic is someone who is personally divided from the truth of Scripture, and who seeks to introduce division into the church.

The apostles had two concerns for the church.

A PURE GOSPEL

First, they were concerned with the PURITY of the GOSPEL. In Galatians Paul is absolutely scathing toward false teachers. Peter (in Second Peter) and Jude are as well. Jude says that we are to contend – to fight and argue and wrestle – for the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

A UNIFIED CHURCH

Second, they were concerned with the UNITY of the CHURCH. The unity of the church is not relational unity; it's not the unity of liking each other and getting along. It's doctrinal unity. Not all false teachings result in a false gospel, but all false teachings divide the church, because they introduce teachings that are contrary to Scripture.

Beloved, let's commit ourselves to obeying Jesus in this.

- Let's keep our eyes out for those who would introduce false doctrines.
- Let's be willing to confront them quickly, which is not only best for the church, but best for them.
- Let's protect ourselves and our church from divisive, unbiblical doctrines.

Would you pray with me?