
"BEWARE OF FALSE PROPHETS"

George Battey | 3/10/14

QUESTIONS:

- 1) If you put poison on a shelf with medicine, what do you need to do?
- 2) What did prophets do besides predicting the future?
- 3) In what way was God being fair with Satan when it came to prophets?
- 4) Why are there so many false prophets and false teachers in the world?
- 5) What was George Battey able to do with a sheep one time and what does this tell you about sheep?
- 6) If a well-meaning brother accidentally picked up on a false notion, does that mean he is a false teacher?
- 7) Are false prophets in sheep's clothing imitating sheep or shepherds?
- 8) What is the last thing to appear on a fruit tree?

INTRODUCTION

Matthew 7:15-20

¹⁵ "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.

¹⁶ You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles?

¹⁷ Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.

¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.

¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

²⁰ Therefore by their fruits you will know them.

In the previous chapters Jesus has preached the "*sermon on the mount*" – the greatest single sermon men had ever heard! He now pictures us as standing in front of two gates (a narrow gate and a wide gate) and we must now decide which gate to enter.

Jesus warns us: "***Beware of false prophets.***" They are standing in front of those gates offering to guide us; they are attempting to turn us away from the narrow gate and into the wide gate.

NOTE: It is not enough for Jesus to teach His own doctrine. He must warn against false prophets.

ARGUMENT: Why don't you "*church of Christ*" folks just simply preach your doctrine without condemning everyone else?

A: We are following the example of Jesus. We must (1) present the truth, and (2) expose error.

Someone once said: "*If you're going to put poison on a shelf with medicine, then you had better label it clearly.*"

So it is with false prophets. They must be clearly labeled and identified to prevent widespread destruction.

A PROPHET DEFINED

Q: What is a prophet?

A prophet was not necessarily one who predicted the future. He also instructed men in God's law.

In fact, the majority of the work of OT prophets was exhortations to bring men back to the Law of Moses which they had forsaken.

Jesus is warning not so much about men who try to predict future events, but simply men who teach false doctrine!

FALSE PROPHETS – AN OLD PROBLEM

False prophets were nothing new to Israel. Ever since God had His prophets Satan had his own. It's as though God was being fair and giving Satan equal opportunity.

- When God **spoke truth**, He allowed Satan to speak falsehood
- When God **worked miracles**, He allowed Satan to counterfeit them
- When God **entered human flesh**, He allowed Satan to possess men's flesh
- When God **had prophets**, He allowed Satan to have false prophets

False prophets always seemed to find a following while the true prophets struggled to convince men they were right.

Isalah 30:9-10

⁹ ... this is a rebellious people,

Lying children,

Children who will not hear the law of the LORD;

¹⁰ Who say to the seers, "Do not see,"

And to the prophets, "Do not prophesy to us right things;

Speak to us smooth things, prophesy deceits.

NOT AN ISOLATED PROBLEM

The problem of false prophets is not new, and it is not isolated.

1 John 4:1

¹ Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

2 John 7

⁷ ... many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist.

Matthew 24

⁴ And Jesus answered and said to them: "Take heed that no one deceives you.

⁵ For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many.

²⁴ For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.

WHY SO MANY?

Q: Why are there so many false prophets and false teachers in the world?

A: It's a simple case of economics: the law of supply and demand. When the demand for false prophets increases, the supply increases.

There are many false prophets because that's what's in demand! Men generally do not want the truth. They would rather hear pleasant, flattering words (even though dangerous and untrue) than to hear truth.

Jeremiah 5:30-31

³⁰ "An astonishing and horrible thing
Has been committed in the land:

³¹ The prophets prophesy falsely,
And the priests rule by their own power;
And My people love to have it so.
But what will you do in the end?

2 Timothy 4:3-4

³ For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers;

⁴ and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.

If there were no demand for false prophets there would be no supply.

TEXT (1)

Matthew 7:15

¹⁵ "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.

This picture Jesus paints of a wolf was familiar to the people in that audience. Most of them probably had sheep of their own, or worked for someone else who did.

The picture of wolves rending sheep was often used in the OT Scriptures (cf. Ezk 22:27; Zeph 3:3). These people knew exactly what Jesus was speaking about.

In Palestine wolves were the most common natural enemies of sheep. They roamed the hills and valleys in search of some sheep that may have strayed away from the flock. When the wolf found such a sheep he attacked quickly.

The sheep were **defenseless** against these vicious wolves.

ILL: One time my brother-in-law had a black sheep and I chased it, caught it and held it down to the ground. That illustrates:

- They cannot run fast
- They are not strong
- They are not very smart

Against a wolf they are totally helpless!

"RAVENING"

Jesus described the wolves who attacked as "*ravening*."

ravening (ἄρπαξ) – the same word translated "extortioner" in other passages.

1 Corinthians 5:11

¹¹ But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or **an extortioner** — not even to eat with such a person.

This is referring to being deceitful and merciless in ravaging people out of their money and property.

The false prophet is like a "ravening wolf" – aggressive and hungry to the point of rage.

NOTE: *These are not well meaning brethren who have accidentally picked up on some false notions. They premeditate how they will ruin the flock.*

Q: Why, then, do we attempt to handle these ravenous wolves with "kid gloves"?

Invariably when one of our preachers "goes off" and begins teaching false doctrine there are sympathizers who criticize us for rebuking the wolf. They picture the false prophet as:

- A loving brother
- A sincere brother
- Perhaps as a "misguided" brother

Jesus said they are "ravening wolves" and if they are left in the flock they will destroy it. They are men who know the truth, but have rejected it. They seek not the welfare of the flock, but their own interests.

Romans 16:18

¹⁸ For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple.

A wolf is not to be handled with "kid gloves," but every scriptural measure should be taken to expel them from the flock.

"SHEEP'S CLOTHING"

Matthew 7:15

¹⁵ "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, ...

In OT times true prophets were often recognized by the rough, course clothing they wore.

- **Elijah** – special mention is made that he was a "hairy man" (2 Kings 1:8) which scholars say refers to the garments of animal hair which he wore.
- **John the Baptist** – wore a rough coat of camel's hair and ate locusts and wild honey (Mt 3:4).

This rough clothing symbolized that these men were foregoing the comforts of life to serve God.

Hebrews 11:37

³⁷ ... [God's saints] wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented —

Prophets, then, generally speaking, were identified by their rough, plain, course clothing.

Therefore, if a man were a false prophet he would deceive the people by wearing rough, hairy garments:

Zechariah 13:4

⁴ "And it shall be in that day that every prophet will be ashamed of his vision when he prophesies; they will not wear **a robe of coarse hair** to deceive.

The center column has: "a garment of hair."

Like the prophets, **a true shepherd** could be identified by the clothes he wore – **woolen clothes** made from the wool of the sheep he tended.

This is the "*sheep's clothing*" Jesus was referring to. The false prophet was not impersonating a sheep, he was impersonating the shepherd who wore "*sheep's clothing*" (in the form of woolen clothes taken from the sheering of the sheep).

- The false prophet impersonated the true prophet by wearing clothes of a true prophet.
- The false shepherd impersonated the true shepherd by wearing the clothes of a real shepherd.

These men are especially dangerous because they are being looked at by unsuspecting sheep as being the true shepherd.

Zechariah 11:16

¹⁶ For indeed I will raise up a shepherd in the land who will not care for those who are cut off, nor seek the young, nor heal those that are broken, nor feed those that still stand. But he will eat the flesh of the fat and tear their hooves in pieces.

This shepherd is more dangerous to the flock than any outside beast because he poses as their protector and they get close to him because they trust him. He is suppose to:

- Seek the lost
- Help the newborn
- Heal the injured
- Feed the flock

Instead he slaughters them and eats the choice lambs.

Acts 20:28-30

²⁸ Therefore take heed to yourselves and to 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.

²⁹ For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.

³⁰ Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.

These false prophets are leaders among God's people, not just "ordinary members."

An "*ordinary member*" (or, sheep) can go astray. He can believe a false doctrine, but he will not likely lead many away with him.

But a teacher is influential and is likely to lead many astray if he turns bad. That's why James warns:

James 3:1

¹ My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.

SUBTLETY OF FALSE PROPHETS

Now, the false prophet wearing "*sheep's clothing*" is very subtle. He has nothing glaringly wrong with himself.

- He is pleasant
- He always seems to say the right thing
- He talks about God; about Jesus; about the cross
- He emphasizes the love of God
- He pleases everybody
- He quotes a lot of Scripture

He seems to say everything a Christian ought to say. He is in sheep's clothing and there is nothing to arouse our attention.

ARGUMENT: "Wait a minute! A man cannot be a false prophet if he quotes Scripture for everything he teaches."

A: Every prophet (whether true, or false) appeals to God's word for his authority. That's what makes him a prophet.

False prophets, by their very nature, are appealing to Scripture. ***But, they are misapplying what the Scriptures teach.***

The thing that makes him dangerous and false is not necessarily what he says, but what he does not say. He has no "*strait gate*," and no "*narrow way*" in his doctrine.

NO "STRAIT GATE"?

What do we mean by saying there is no "*strait gate*" in the false prophet's message? Peter helps us out with this:

2 Peter 2:1

¹ But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, ...

What were the false prophets like in OT times, because they still have the same "mode of operation."

Jeremiah 6:13-15

¹³ "Because from the least of them even to the greatest of them,
Everyone is **given to covetousness**;
And from the prophet even to the priest,
Everyone **deals falsely**."

He heals "slightly." He admits there is some slight healing that needs to take place, but he says no major overhauls are needed.



¹⁴ They have also healed the hurt of My people slightly,
Saying, 'Peace, peace!'
When there is no peace.

The false prophet is comforting! Everyone feels better after being around the false prophet!



¹⁵ Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination?

No! They were not at all ashamed;

Nor did they know how to blush.

Therefore they shall fall among those who fall;

At the time I punish them,

They shall be cast down," says the LORD.

John MacArthur:

"False prophets talk much about the love of God, but nothing of His holiness; much about people who are deprived, but nothing about those who are depraved; much about God's universal fatherhood of every human being, but nothing about His unique fatherhood only to those who are His children through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ; much about what God will give to us, but nothing about obedience to Him; much about health and happiness, but nothing about holiness and sacrifice. Their message has gaps, the greatest gap of which leaves out the truth that saves" (p. 472)

The false prophets in Jeremiah's day were saying, *"Don't listen to Jeremiah! He's narrow-minded, a heresy hunter, a non-cooperative!"*

People like the false prophet because it's reassuring and comforting to know that generally we are doing fine.

TEXT (2)

Matthew 7:16

¹⁶ You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles?

After warning us about false prophets Jesus now tells us how to identify them: *"You shall know them by their fruits."*

Verse 15 – deals with the false prophet himself

- his doctrine
- his motives
- his mode of operation

Verse 16 – deals with the final results of the false prophet

THE FRUIT TEST

There is one basic test which determines the genuineness of a prophet: ***the fruit test***.

This test is foolproof. It works whether you apply it to:

- The man's message, or
- The man's lifestyle

The fruit of the tree is the last thing to appear. First there are:

- the buds
- the leaves
- the blossoms
- and last ... the fruit

The fruit is the final product, the end result.

We don't judge the false prophet by how he looks, because he's in "*sheep's clothing*;" he looks just fine. Rather, we judge him by his fruits.

LEAVES Vs. FRUIT

In using this "*fruit test*" we must be careful to distinguish between fruit and buds, blossoms & leaves.

- **Buds, blossoms & leaves** – merely the props and disguises which make them look authentic
- **The fruit** – the final results of what they advocate

Matthew 7:22

²² Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?'

These people mistakenly believed that:

- Prophesying
- Casting out demons
- Working miracles

were good fruits. They are not. They are only leaves. These things only made the tree look authentic.

What was the final result of their teachings and miracles?

Matthew 7:23

²³ And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'

The fruit of their message and miracles was lawlessness – disobedience to God's will.

The question we must be asking is: "***Does this man's doctrine and/or miracles lead to obeying God's will, or disobeying God's will?***"

Deuteronomy 13:1-3

¹ "If there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, and he gives you a sign or a wonder,

↓

(Buds, blossoms & leaves)

² and the sign or the wonder comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying, 'Let us go after other gods' — which you have not known — 'and let us serve them,'



(Fruit – end result)

³ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, for the LORD your God is testing you to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

Now, compare what Jesus said in Mt 7 with Luke's record of the "*sermon on the mount*":

Luke 6:44-46

⁴⁴ For every tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they gather grapes from a bramble bush.

⁴⁵ A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.

⁴⁶ "But why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do the things which I say?"

Do you see the connection there between obedience and "*bearing fruit*"?

Obedience is the context of judging fruit. Look at where the prophet's doctrine leads. If it leads to disobeying God's law, he is a "corrupt tree." It does not matter:

- How **good** his doctrine seems
- How **wise** his doctrine seems
- How **logical** his doctrine seems
- How **scriptural** his doctrine seems

If the fruit (end result) is disobedience to God's law, it is a false doctrine and he is a false teacher.

Isaiah 8:20

²⁰ To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.

THORNS & THISTLES

Matthew 7:16

¹⁶ ... Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles?

"Grapes and figs" – symbolic of good gifts from God, but *"thorns and thistles"* are symbolic of sin and corruption:

Genesis 3:17-18

¹⁷ ... "Cursed is the ground for your sake;

In toil you shall eat of it

All the days of your life.

¹⁸ Both **thorns and thistles** it shall bring forth for you, ...

And you shall eat the herb of the field.

Thus, Jesus uses symbols of man's fall and sin to describe these false prophets.

Like thorns and thistles these men are:

- worthless
- corrupt
- destructive
- and destined for destruction

TEXT (3)

Matthew 7:17-18

¹⁷ Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.

¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.

Let's start by first examining: The good tree that **CANNOT** bear evil fruit.

Jesus is not saying that a Christian cannot sin. Even the best tree occasionally produces a bad apple.

Jesus is not talking about good men who occasionally make mistakes and occasionally produce a bad apple.

bring forth (ποιεῖν) – present, indicative: stressing linear action

Literally: *"Every good tree keeps on bearing good fruit and a corrupt tree keeps on bearing evil fruit."*

Even a bad, corrupt tree will occasionally produce a good apple. But what does the tree habitually produce?

Q: Does this man's doctrine continually lead men to obey God, or to disobey His will?

GOOD DOES NOT PRODUCE EVIL

Matthew 7:18

¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, ...

If a holy man *"speaks the truth in love"* (Eph. 4:15) it cannot result in evil even if:

- People are offended
- People get mad
- People are driven off

Occasionally we hear people say, *"There's a brother at church that's a good man, but his preaching is hurting the church – he's driving people away!"*

Listen: If he's really *"good"* then *"a good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit."* You cannot call his preaching bad.

We must "*adorn the gospel*" – yes (Tit 2:10), but if the truth is preached and many leave (cf. Jn 6), we cannot say that evil was done.

EVIL DOES NOT PRODUCE GOOD

In contrast to the good tree let's look at: The corrupt tree that **CANNOT** bear good fruit.

Matthew 7:18

¹⁸ ... nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.

The end does not justify the means!

If a practice, or doctrine is wrong it cannot result in good fruit to God's glory.

Romans 3:8

⁸ ... [Wicked men say] "Let us do evil that good may come"? ...

It doesn't matter what we are talking about, if something is unscriptural it will not bring forth good fruit:

- Sunday schools
- Church sponsored recreation
- Orphan's homes
- Nursing homes
- State Lottery

If it's not taught in the Bible it is evil and "*good fruit*" cannot come from them.

TEXT (4)

Matthew 7:19

¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Throughout the entire sermon Jesus reminds us of the final judgment. He approaches it from different angles, but He always comes back to it.

He knows we are apt to forget it and He knows repetition is the key to learning the lesson.

These corrupt, false prophets are worthless and destructive and are destined for eternal punishment.

Matthew 3:10-12

¹⁰ ... every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹² ... He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

WITHDRAW FROM THEM

Now, what is the whole purpose for what Jesus taught in this passage? Did He merely want us to identify false prophets and nothing more? NO! He intended that we expel them from the flock.

Romans 16:17-18

¹⁷ Now I urge you, brethren, **note** those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, **and avoid them.**

¹⁸ For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple.

Titus 3:10

¹⁰ **Reject** a divisive man after the first and second admonition,

When we know that a man is:

- a false prophet
- a ravaging wolf
- a corrupt tree with evil fruit

why would any of our people ever go around them:

- to seek advise
- to have some Scriptures explained
- to "gather some grapes," or
- to "gather some figs"

We should back away from them as Israel backed away from the tents of Korah lest we receive the same destruction that awaits them.

2 Corinthians 6:17-18

¹⁷ Therefore

"Come out from among them

And be separate, says the Lord.

Do not touch what is unclean,

And I will receive you."

¹⁸ 'I will be a Father to you,

And you shall be My sons and daughters,

Says the LORD Almighty."

CONCLUSION

As though to re-emphasize His point, Jesus repeats Himself:

Matthew 7:20

²⁰ Therefore by their fruits you will know them.

As we stand in front of the two gates (vv13-14) we must beware and take careful heed about whom we follow, for Jesus said there are false guides there who will attempt to leads us away from the "*narrow gate*" and into the "*wide gate*."