

“How to Recognize a False Prophet”
(Matthew 7:15-20)

I. Introduction.

A. Orientation.

We saw this morning

That Jesus is the teacher God sent from heaven,

And how we can know that He is:

If we are willing to do His will –

If, by His Spirit, you are willing

To submit to what He tells you –

To believe what He says,

To do what He says –

You will know –

You will not only find it to be true in your own life,

The Spirit will bear witness –

He will convince you of the truth.

He will bear witness to all of Scripture:

To the OT, because He inspired it.

And to the NT.

When Jesus finished His ministry and ascended to heaven,

He left His apostles on earth

That His Spirit might work through them

To complete His revelation.

And He will bear witness to His Word
As it is taught today.
The prophets and apostles have finished their work
And they too have gone to heaven.
But the Lord continues His teaching ministry
Through those He has called to this work –
And so the Spirit continues to bear witness
To the Word as it comes through them.
This is one of the ways
We can know it is His Word –
By the spiritual fruit it produces.

B. Preview.

This is particularly important to know
Because of the age of celebrities in which we live.
So many today are seeking fame
Through acting, singing, sports, and politics.
Sadly, this fame seeking is also in the Church:
Which is why we need to be careful
Whom we listen to.
There are those who are true
And those who are false.
How can we tell the difference?

Should we play the numbers game?

Look to see how many people are following them?

Surely lots of people can't be wrong!

Sadly, they can.

If we used numbers as our measuring rod,

Jesus Himself would fall short –

He only had a handful of followers by the end of His ministry.

Today the Mormon Church has over 15 million members.

In 2013, the Roman Church boasted 1.2 billion.

Does this mean they're right and Jesus was wrong?

There must be a better way.

Thankfully, there is,

The one Jesus gives us this evening:

You will know them by their fruits.

Let's consider two things:

1. Why it's difficult to recognize a false prophet.
2. How you can tell the true from the false.

II. Sermon.

A. First, why it's difficult to recognize a false prophet.

1. Originally, there were two gifts a prophet would exercise:

Since he was called by God

To prosecute His lawsuit against His people

For their breaking His covenant –

Which was a legally binding agreement –

They would both *forthtell* and *foretell* –

They would declare and predict.

They would declare what He had already said:

They would remind Israel of His faithfulness and mercies –

Both in the past and in the present –

What it is He called them to do on the basis of His mercies,

What He promised to do if they obeyed,

And what He threatened if they disobeyed.

They would also point out their sins

And call them to repentance

That they might turn and be blessed.

But they would also foretell or predict

What the Lord would do in His mercy,

When they wouldn't repent,

And after He had chastised them for their sins.

When the prophets exercised this ministry,

How could they tell whether they were true or false prophets?

There were basically two ways:

The first was if what they predicted didn't come to pass:

Moses tells us in Deuteronomy: “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him. This is according to all that you asked of the LORD your God in Horeb on the day of the assembly, saying, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, let me not see this great fire anymore, or I will die.’ The LORD said to me, ‘They have spoken well. I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. It shall come about that whoever will not listen to My words which he shall speak in My name, I Myself will require *it* of him. But the prophet who speaks a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.’ You may say in your heart, ‘How will 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 it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him” (18:15-22).

The second was if they predicted something –

And the Lord allowed it to come to pass –

And they told them to go after other gods –

Or to abandon what they already knew was the truth:

Again, Moses writes, “If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, ‘Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them,’ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the LORD your God is testing you to find out if you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall follow the LORD your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has counseled rebellion against the LORD your God who brought you from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, to seduce you from the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from among you” (Deu. 13:1-5).

2. Our job of telling them apart

Can be a bit easier today
Since the Lord no longer gives the gift of foretelling.
He's finished giving His Word.
We already know what He promises if we obey,
And threatens if we disobey.
We know what's next on the prophetic horizon.

That means if anyone predicts anything,
That person is a false prophet.
This can eliminate a large number of false prophets by itself.

But there is still the other area –
The area of what they forthtell.
God still gives this gift today –
The ability to explain, declare and apply
What He has already said in His Word.
There are many who claim to do this.
How can we tell the good from the bad –
The genuine from the false?

This is where it can get difficult,
Because they can all look alike:
Jesus says, 'Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing,
but inwardly are ravenous wolves" (v. 15).
There are so many who come in sheep's clothing –

Who pretend to be God's,
 Who claim to bring His Word,
 But they're only putting on an act.
 Inwardly, they're ravenous wolves
 Who want to take advantage of the flock
 For their own personal gain.

B. Since we can't see their hearts/motives,

Since we can't immediately tell if they're trying to deceive us,
 How can we know if they've been sent by God?

You can only know by what they teach,

And by what their teaching produces –

In other words, by the fruit of their ministry.

Jesus says, "You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn *bushes* nor figs from thistles, are they? So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits" (vv. 16-20).

1. Are they bearing the fruit of His truth?

Jesus emphasized this morning

That His teaching was not His own,

But was the Father's:

"So Jesus answered them and said, 'My teaching is not Mine, but His who sent Me'" (John 7:16).

Jesus tells us that the one who teaches His own opinions in God's name,
 Is doing nothing more than looking to enhance his own fame –
 Not God's –

Which is something He could not do:

He continues, “He who speaks from himself seeks his own glory; but He who is seeking the glory of the One who sent Him, He is true, and there is no unrighteousness in Him” (v. 18).

So here is the first test:

Does what they say agree with what God said?

Luke tells us that the Bereans

Were conducting themselves in an exemplary way

When they compared what Paul said with the Scriptures.

“Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily *to see* whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11).

If we simply applied this test

To a majority of so-called prophets/teachers today,

That would be enough to expose them.

We do need to be careful here though,

Because there are many who teach things

They believe are taught in God's Word

But they misunderstand: *E.g.*,

Dispensationalists,

Arminians,

Antinomians,

Charismatics.

We wouldn't want to conclude

That these are unconverted

Just because they make these mistakes –

Even mistakes as large as these.

As Edwards taught,

As long as they believe the Bible to teach these things,

They are bound to believe them,

And we are bound to believe they are Christians –

As long as they don't believe heresy

Or live like unbelievers.

If they know the Bible teaches something else,

Or don't reference the Bible at all –

If they purposely distort God's Word for personal gain –

Then we must reject them as false prophets.

2. Second, we need to consider the fruit their ministry is producing.

Not the numbers –

As we've seen,

Numbers can be deceiving –

But the fruit it bears in those who sit under it.

One of the reasons so many follow false teachers
Is that they're either unconverted to begin with –
Which is likely true of most –
Or they simply don't know what the Bible teaches.
Studying the Bible is hard work,
But it's the only thing that will keep you safe.

We need to ask this question:
Is their ministry producing sound and solid believers,
Who believe a true Gospel,
Who love God and are seeking to honor Him,
Who love the brethren
And are seeking to serve them –
Not just those in their church or denomination,
But those in every Christian church –
Who are loving their neighbors
And reaching out to them with the Gospel,
Who are studying His truth, applying it to their lives,
And growing in their likeness to Christ?
This is the fruit the truth of God's Word will bear
Through the power of the Spirit.
These are the marks of a true Gospel ministry.
This is the seal the Spirit sets on His work.

Or is it producing self-centered,
Self-seeking, unprincipled, worldly people,
Who want to be rich in the things of the world,
Not in the things of God,
Who don't care at all about personal holiness
Or the growth of God's kingdom?

We do understand that sometimes
No matter how good the teaching is,
This can still be the result –
But it will be in spite of the ministry
And not because of it.

May the Lord help us to recognize
The true from the false,
By studying His Word,
And examining the fruit of their teaching. Amen.

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