

Wolves

Matthew 7:15-20

Last week we studied a warning from Jesus. An invitation to the gospel, to be sure, but also a warning. The invitation was clear, from verse 13, “Enter by the narrow gate.” Enter! That invitation is also given clear in John’s gospel,

John 10:9 “I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture.”

Jesus is the door. Jesus is the gate. He is “the way, the truth and the life,” according to John 14:6. But there is also a warning in that verse, “No one comes to the Father except through Me.” So the gate we studied last week is a narrow gate. Thus the warning, “Wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it.” That warning is explained further,

v.14 “Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.”

What comes next in Jesus’ instructions to his disciples follows closely, another warning about those who would seek to deceive you by invite you to pursue that wide gate and broad way that leads to destruction. Jesus doesn’t specify the exact method of that deception in our text this morning, but he describes the danger of those who threaten the church and the well-being of God’s people. He uses a simple and easy to understand image, the image of wolves. Ravenous wolves. Dangerous wolves. They are the false prophets, who, rather than promising the hope of life actually represent the greatest possible danger. And that is the warning we come to this afternoon, with Jesus urging his people to identify, expose and even condemn those who would rightly be called false prophets.

I. A WARNING OF DANGER.

The words are plain and ordinary. “Beware of false prophets.”

In other words, the reality of life in the age includes,

A. The existence of false prophets.

A prophet is a man who is to speak from God, a spokesman for God. So when the prophet speaks, God speaks. The biblical definition of prophecy is this,

Deut. 18:18 “I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him.”

God’s people, therefore, were obliged to listen to a prophet. They were to believe, and they were to obey. So false prophets pose a grave problem, a crisis for those who are obligated to listen to and obey the true prophets. Those false prophets continue to be a grave problem today. Their existence continues today. Just consider these words from the New Testament,

2 Peter 2:1 “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, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. 2 And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. 3 By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber.”

2 Cor. 11:13 “For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. 14 And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. 15 Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works.”

Even more descriptively,

2 Tim. 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.”

The presence of false prophets requires that the shepherds of God’s people protect their sheep. Thus the biblical requirement for elders in the church are clear, and though they focus on character and leadership in the personal and family lives, this requirement is likewise included,

Titus 1:9 “[he must hold] fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict.”

That’s the duty of elders, especially of those whose calling and function is a teaching elder. A minister of the word of God must rebuke those who contradict sound doctrine. He must identify false prophets, and refute their false teaching. That’s an important part of what it means to guard the flock, that must be included in the biblical responsibility of keeping watch over the souls of God’s people.

Acts 20:28 “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. 31 Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.”

I’ll come back to the image of fierce wolves in a moment, but consider first how those false prophets appear to the church.

v.15 “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s

clothing...”

Wolves in sheep’s clothing. That is,

B. The appearance of false prophets.

They appear to be harmless. Good, profitable. To quote Martyn Lloyd-Jones, “The false prophet is a man who comes to us, and who at first has the appearance of being everything that could be desired. He is nice and pleasing and pleasant; he appears to be thoroughly Christian, and seems to say the right things.”

That is what is so dangerous. He looks like a sheep. Over and over again in the history of the church, there are teachers who seem to be preachers of God’s word, sounding initially like a faithful instructor, until they lead people away. Over and over again, and now, in this generation, they can proclaim their dangerous false teachings with all the effectiveness that the internet has to offer. They can gain popular approval, popular acclaim, fame and fortune, and for a time might appear to be helpful and good. They come in sheep’s clothing.

And the point is, this reality is still the reality of life today. This warning of Jesus is still the warning which God’s people today need. “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.” There is much at stake, as much as when a wolf enters a sheepfold. It is a matter of life and death. So great is,

C. The danger of false prophets.

They are ravenous wolves, wolves ready to eat and devour their prey. And that is the appropriate image. A vicious, violent and deadly wolf. The adjective ravenous stresses their greed and cruelty. It is related to the verb to snatch or seize. And so they are, these false prophets. They are not neutral. They are not

harmless. They poses a grave and deadly danger to your own soul.

Acts 20:29 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.”

The danger is a matter of life and death. The danger is the protection and well-being of your soul. And the warning from Ezekiel that was read earlier is still very, very appropriate.

Ezek. 34:5 “So they were scattered because there was no shepherd; and they became food for all the beasts of the field when they were scattered. 6 My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and on every high hill; yes, My flock was scattered over the whole face of the earth, and no one was seeking or searching for them.” 7 “Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: 8 “As I live,” says the Lord GOD, “surely because My flock became a prey, and My flock became food for every beast of the field, because there was no shepherd, nor did My shepherds search for My flock, but the shepherds fed themselves and did not feed My flock”— 9 therefore, O shepherds, hear the word of the LORD! 10 Thus says the Lord GOD: “Behold, I am against the shepherds”

In the words of Jeremiah,

Jer. 23:1 “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of My pasture!” says the LORD. 2 Therefore thus says the LORD God of Israel against the shepherds who feed My people: “You have scattered My flock, driven them away, and not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for the evil of your doings,” says the LORD.”

Since the danger of wolves is great, we need to know how to go about,

II. RECOGNIZING DANGER.

Jesus has much to say for our edification. And our Lord is, here, very practical and helpful. In one sense, it is very easy to recognize the dangers of false prophets and false teachers, because they will make themselves obvious. By the fruit of their lives which you can see and observe. Thus the key is,

A. Recognizing fruit.

v.16

Again, v. 20

This emphasis makes you realize that the reference to false prophets would include not only their false teaching but also the hypocrisy of their lives. Doctrine and life are so intricately woven together, that they cannot be separated. So false teachers will show themselves by their bad fruit. The fruit corresponds to the tree. As Jesus puts it, “Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles?” Ineed, you will get no figs from thistles.

Jesus expounds on that idea just a bit in,

Mat. 12:33 “Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or else make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for a tree is known by its fruit. 34 Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. 35 A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things.”

How dangerous is the spirit of our age that so consistently separates a man’s public work from his private character. The issue is certainly the same in the realm of politics, where we have learned as a society to ignore a man’s personal sins, his moral defects, since what he does in private doesn’t affect how he leads in public. That’s nonsense, of course, because what a man is in

private is what he is in public, and a man with moral failures in his private life will bring forth the very same fruit in the public realm.

How much more true is that with reference to those who teach and lead within the church. So take note of those qualifications of an elder, or overseer, according to 1 Timothy 3. Take note of the importance of a man's character.

1 Tim. 3:2 "A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; 3 not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; 4 one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence 5 (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?); 6 not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. 7 Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil."

Yes, yes, he must be able to teach. But he must be above reproach in his life. He must be self-controlled. He must be gentle. He must not quarrel, or be argumentative. And even among non-Christians, he must have a good reputation.

So a false prophet will make himself known, if you would but learn to recognize the fruit. Jesus teaches us how to go about,

B. Identifying a tree.

We are so focused on the outward and external qualities of a man. We are so focused on his charisma, his charm, his eloquence. It is easy to miss the tree. So look at the tree. Look at the big picture, the whole story. Learn to identify the good trees as well as the bad.

v.17a "Even so, every good tree bears good fruit..."

There are no exceptions there, are there? The healthy tree bears good fruit. So Paul writes to Timothy,

1 Tim. 4:16 "Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you."

And this is his personal encouragement to Timothy,

2 Tim. 3:10 "But you have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance, 11 persecutions, afflictions, which happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra—what persecutions I endured. And out of them all the Lord delivered me."

People of God, learn to identify a good tree, now that produces good fruit. And learn to identify the bad tree, as well.

v.17b "...but a bad tree bears bad fruit."

You identify a diseased tree by identifying the bad fruit. That's so simple, isn't it? So straightforward. That's why teachers of the word and ministers of the gospel should be called by a local church, for only in that context are they held accountable. There are many good and profitable things on the internet and much to be learned from many faithful teachers, but a Wikipedia entry is hardly a reliably authoritative instruction. And those comments on blogs! It's bad enough that everyone who rights a blog seems to think he has the right to be a teacher to God's people in Jesus' church, but how much worse are those who think that they can learn from the usually foolish and unrestricted comments that follow.

The biggest danger of Bible teaching on the internet is this anonymity, this complete separation of a man's character and the fruit of his life from his teaching. For how can you identify a bad tree unless you can recognize the bad fruit of his life.

How sad, and dangerous, it is when a church neglects this very thing as well. Allowing men to teach, whose life bears bad fruit, especially his family life. A man who is quick-tempered, a man who is given to much wine, a man who is not above reproach with regard to his relationships to women is not qualified to lead in the church. A man who demonstrates bad fruit must be identified. And, ultimately, with a significant threat of judgment.

C. Judgment according to fruit.

v.19

These words aren't comfortable. They aren't safe. But they are important. Thus the warning with respect to the church,

James 3:1 "My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment."

1 Peter 4:17 "For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?"

The worst example, as I read earlier, comes from the words of Ezekiel.

Ezek. 34:1 "And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, 2 "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD to the shepherds: "Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks? 3 You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the flock. 4 The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost; but with force and cruelty you have ruled them."

Ezek. 34:10 Thus says the Lord GOD: "Behold, I am against

the shepherds, and I will require My flock at their hand; I will cause them to cease feeding the sheep, and the shepherds shall feed themselves no more; for I will deliver My flock from their mouths, that they may no longer be food for them."

Jesus' own words here in our text are no less penetrating.

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

So where does that leave us? Perhaps the best conclusion is found in Paul's praise to the church at Berea.

Acts 17:10 "Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. 11 These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so."

So beloved,

v.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."

So learn to recognize them. Learn to identify them. And learn to reject them. And when you are taught the word of God, receive it eagerly, "with all readiness, [searching] the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so."