

The Truth about False Prophets

“The emphasis today is on self-improvement, self-realization, self-satisfaction. All sorts of courses and recipes and secrets abound on self-fulfillment. Even Christianity has become just a better way to have a good time. The Bible does not teach self-development but rather death to self. The Church is not an Old Adam Improvement Society. The only thing we should do with self is consent to its crucifixion and cooperate with God in the process. We do not crucify ourselves, it is the work of the Holy Spirit. We do not become robots. Paul said, “I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live... yet not I ...” Christ lives in us and, as we allow Him to be Himself in us, there is less of us and more of Him. We are dead and our life is hid with Christ in God”¹ [Vance Havner]

At beginning this section of His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives an invitation to enter by the narrow gate,” to come to God the only way He has provided.

“Enter by the narrow gate, and walk by the narrow way that leads to life.” Dr. Boice writes,

“But Christianity is unique in claiming to have absolute truth, since it presents Jesus Christ as the sole way to God.... If Jesus is right, as He is, then there are no other ways to God for men to follow”²

Jesus also spoke of the broad way,

“...the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it.”

The broad way is a false way, a popular way, a well traveled way, perhaps a comfortable path; but it’s the wrong way.

Why do so many people choose to go the wrong way,
when it’s clearly shown as the way that leads to destruction?

Of all the reasons possible, Jesus immediately follows with a warning:

¹ Vance Havner, *All The Days*, (New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1976), p. 111.

² James Montgomery Boice, *The Sermon on the Mount, an Exposition*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972), p. 289.

¹⁵Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? ¹⁷So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. ¹⁹Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰So then you will know them by their fruits."

(Matt. 7:15-20)

Someone once said, "If you are going to place poison on a shelf where you have healing medicines, you had better label it clearly."

Just as there is a right way that leads to life, there is also a wrong way that ends in destruction. A false teacher is someone who misleads people to destruction.

Instead of there being only one way to the Father, a false prophet might say there are many ways, or that all ways lead to God.

I. The Warning of False Prophets

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

A prophet spoke from God. A false prophet is one who falsified God's word either by openly contradicting it, or by twisting it's meaning.

Jesus warned his hearers to beware of false prophets. Familiar term to Israel. As long as God has had true prophets, Satan has had false ones.

MacArthur writes,

"False prophets always find a hearing and often are encouraged by those who are displeased with God's ways."³

Isaiah wrote,

"For this is a rebellious people, [spoken of Israel] false sons, sons who refuse to listen to the instruction of the Lord; who say to the seers, 'You must not see visions'; and the prophets, 'You must not prophesy to us what is right, speak to us pleasant words, prophesy illusions'"

(Isa. 30:9-10).

³ John MacArthur, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Matthew 1-7, (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute of Chicago, 1985), p. 460.

God repeatedly speaks against the false prophets who were misleading the people, (from **chapters 5-23** in Jeremiah.)

When Jesus spoke concerning the end times, He said,

“See to it that no one misleads you. For many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will mislead many.... For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect” (Matt. 24:3-5, 24)

At the end of his letter to the Romans, Paul warned,

Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites, and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting”

(Rom. 16:17-18)

The New Testament speaks of false prophets:

- “Deceitful spirits” who advocate “doctrines of demons” 1 Tim.4:1
- “Those who secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them” (2 Pet. 2:1)
- False brothers (2 Cor. 11:26)
- False apostles (:26)
- Liars (1 Tim. 4:2)
- False witnesses (Matt. 26:60)
- False Christs (Matt. 24:24)

John wrote,

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1)

Paul warned the Ephesian elders of what would come when he left them,

“Be on guard for yourselves and for 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. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert...” (Acts 20:28-31a)

“There has always been a large market for false prophets, because most people do not want to hear the truth. They prefer to hear what is pleasant and flattering, even if it is false and dangerous, over what is unpleasant and unflattering even if it is true and helpful.”⁴

II. The Danger of False Prophets

false is pseudos – the Gk. for ‘a lie.’

A true prophet hears from God and brings God’s Word to His people.

His job is more than foretell,

and to forth-tell God’s word and explain how God’s people are to live.

A false prophet brings lies and deception to those who will listen.

He claims to be from God and to speak on His behalf

God told Jeremiah,

“An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land, the prophets prophesy falsely and the priests rule on their own authority, and My people love it so!” (Jer. 5:30-31)

Again He said,

“The prophets are prophesying falsehood in My name. I have neither sent them nor commanded them nor spoken to them; they are prophesying to you a false vision, divination, futility and the deception of their own minds” (14:14)

Jesus warned, “Beware!”

Always a warning of danger

– conveys the idea of *holding the mind away*.

“False prophets are more than wrong; they are dangerous, and we should not expose our minds to them. They pervert thinking and poison the soul... false prophets are spiritual beasts and are immeasurably more deadly than the physical ones.”⁵

⁴ MacArthur, p. 461.

⁵ MacArthur, 464.

Both Peter and Jude call them “unreasoning animals” ... deceiving unstable souls luring them into their jaws through the lust of the flesh. (2 Pet. 2:12, Jude 10)

False Prophets are Dangerous and Deceptive

“¹⁵Beware of the false prophets,
who come to you in sheep’s clothing,
but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

The danger is the reality that false prophets are wolves.

Wolves were the natural enemy of the sheep, which were completely helpless and defenseless against.

Ravenous – harpax – transl. “Swindler”

False prophets are as dangerous to God’s people as wolves are to sheep.

John writes of Jesus,

“I am the good shepherd, the good shepherd, lays down His life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the sheep.”

(John 10:11-13).

Paul describes the pastor’s responsibility as a good shepherd:

“Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock...
savage wolves will come in among you not sparing the flock;”

(Acts 20:28, 29)

– they are responsible for leading some people to the very destruction they say does not exist.

Stott writes,

“Such talk was, to say the least, a grave disservice to the people of God. It gave them a false sense of security. It lulled them to sleep in their sins. It failed to warn them of the impending judgment of God or tell them how to escape it.”⁶

In Jeremiah, God complained,

“They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying,
‘Peace, Peace,’ when there is no peace” (Jer. 23:16-17).

Prophets were recognizable by what they wore.

⁶ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, Downers Grove, Ill: Inter Varsity Press, 1978), p. 199.

Elijah often wore rough, hairy, uncomfortable clothing as a symbol of their foregoing the normal comforts of life for the cause of God.

John the Baptist, as the last prophet of the Old Covenant, wore a camel's hair coat and ate locusts and wild honey.

The one who was impersonating a prophet would sometimes wear such clothing. Zechariah speaks of such men, who

“put on a hairy robe in order to deceive” (Zech. 13:4)

Shepherds wore woolen clothing, made from the wool of the sheep they tended.

That is the sheep's clothing of which Jesus spoke of here.

False prophets impersonated the shepherd, who wears sheep's clothing.

Stott writes,

“Not only does he feign piety, but he often uses the language of historic orthodoxy, in order to win acceptance from the gullible, while meaning by it something quite different, something destructive of the very truth he pretends to hold. He also hides behind the cover of high-sounding titles and impressive academic degrees.”⁷

We are taken in because we admire externals and lack spiritual discernment.

III. The Tests of False Prophets

How do we know if someone is a false prophet?

Become a fruit inspector.

¹⁶You will know them by their fruits

Jesus said that the way to test them is by observing their fruit.

What is their lifestyle?

What do they teach?

1. We must know the Word of God.
2. We must live according to God's standards.
“But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil” (Heb. 5:14).
3. We must have a doctrinal Statement that we live by.

⁷ Stott, p. 200.