

Sermon on the Mount: Wolves in Sheep's Wool

by J. Glyn Owen

The sermon warns against the peril of false prophets who come in sheep's clothing but are inwardly ferocious wolves, and teaches how to recognize and avoid them.

Duration: 45:12

Scripture: Deuteronomy 13, Matthew 7:15-23, Acts 20:29-30

Topics: "Sermon on the Mount"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of discerning false prophets and finding the narrow gate that leads to life. He cautions against adopting a judgmental attitude towards others, as we are not infallible judges. The key to finding the narrow gate is to listen to and practice the words of Jesus, building our lives on the rock of God's Word. The speaker reminds us to be watchful for false prophets, but also warns against hasty conclusions, as true fruit takes time to manifest.

Transcript

Will you kindly turn with me to St. Matthew's Gospel chapter 7 and the passage that awaits us in our ongoing study of this Sermon on the Mount begins with verse 15 and it really goes on until going through verse 23. And I would like to read that passage now even though we may not deal very fully with the latter half of it. Watch out for false prophets.

They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.

A good tree cannot bear bad fruit and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus by their fruit you will recognize them.

Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles? Then I will tell them plainly, I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers.

Wolves in sheep's wool. The very notion of being on the lookout for false prophets, as commanded by Jesus here, runs counter to popular and contemporary view of things. A world that has lost the sense of

values which distinguishes sharply between right and wrong, truth and error, is a world that can never fully understand this kind of thing.

In a pluralistic society such as that in which we live, it is doubly unpalatable. One person's view is deemed to be quite as good and as valuable as another's. And the attitude that we are encouraged to cultivate is one of a tolerant syncretism.

Let everybody have his say and you add your insights into the pool and we'll just go on like that together. We must agree to a kind of hodgepodge of everybody's views and take them as our guide in life. That's the way of the world.

What conceivable reason could there be, we are asked, for taking the apparently arrogant stance of saying that one view is to be preferred to all other possible views, yesterday, today or tomorrow. And I've no doubt there will be some hearts re-echoing that question in our service this morning. There is, however, one valid reason for so doing, and only one.

That is, that the Almighty Creator, God of the universe, our Redeemer God, has spoken, and has given us the means whereby we should judge between what He calls truth and what He calls error, between what He calls right and what He calls wrong, and has not only indicated mildly that we should do so, but commanded us so to do. And that is adequate reason for the child of God, humbly, we must underline that because we are all prone to arrogance, humbly, nevertheless diligently and honestly be on the lookout for false prophets in an evil day. And that, of course, is the burden of our Lord here.

God has spoken, and because God has spoken, His Son tells us on the basis of what God has said, look out for prophets who speak in His name, but not His word. Now the first thing I would like us to consider is the fact that Jesus alerts us here to the peril and to the deception of those whom He designates false prophets. It's all there in verse 15.

Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves, or as the King James has it, ravenous wolves. Now though we are warned in the very opening verse of this same chapter, now remember this, we must see things in balance and in perspective, we are warned in the very opening verse of this chapter not to assume a judgmental attitude, as if we individually were the sure and infallible judges of our fellows in all things.

We're warned against that. Nevertheless, the same Lord, the same Son of God, the same teacher divinely endowed for His mission on earth, the same Lord utters these words, and we must hold both truths in tension and in balance. Watch out for false prophets.

Remember, you may make a mistake, and if I may now go to the very end of what I want to say this morning, Jesus will tell us, you shall know them by their fruits. And that means, you see, that we must not come to hasty conclusions. A tree doesn't bear fruit immediately.

What appears immediately may not be what will be there by and by. We must wait for the time of fruit before we can really say, this is so. But watch out for false prophets, we must.

False prophets. The very words, I'm sure, will jar upon the liberally minded. Biblically speaking, a prophet, not a false prophet now, but a prophet, is the mouthpiece of God, authorized by Him and given His message, God's message, to declare to men.

God has called him, God has commissioned him, and God has capacitated him to begin and will continue to capacitate him to finish the work that is given to him. The prophet is God's ambassador in a foreign land. He brings the word of his king and of his government into a new era, into a new situation, and he declares it, not as his own, but as the word of the God who commissioned him.

That is basically the prophet. Now, false prophets are those whom God has not called to do this, but they go anyway. And they take it upon themselves to be declaring the word of God, though they do not do that.

They say it is the word of God, but as Jeremiah says, they do not give the word of God, they speak out of their own hearts and out of their own minds. Though they say, thus saith the Lord. They have assumed the role, and that without the necessary divine authorization, Jeremiah 14, 15.

What they say is, let me repeat, out of their own mind, rather than out of the mouth of the Lord. To quote Deuteronomy 18, 22, they have spoken presumptuously. And they do that in many ways.

Sometimes, to quote from Ezekiel 22, 28, quite washing the evil deeds of men and saying, what you do does not really matter in the sight of the Lord. Or in the words of Jeremiah, they speak, peace, peace, when there is no peace. When God is at war, when God is angry, they say, peace, peace.

They are a very dangerous species, false prophets. They are a dangerous species in any society, whether it be ancient or modern. And it is no wonder that Jesus forewarns us of their existence and of the devastation they can wreak, especially in a society such as ours.

To quote just one other passage from our Lord, in which he deals with the same subject, writing in chapter 13, verses 22 and 23, Mark says, quoting Jesus, false Christs and false prophets will appear and will perform signs and miracles to deceive the elect, if that were possible. So be on your guard. I have told you everything ahead of time.

Jesus had forewarned his people as he has forewarned us. Neither is Jesus the only one to speak about this unpalatable subject in the New Testament. Paul likewise forewarned the Ephesian elders that farewelled him at Miletus of old.

You remember, you have the record in Acts chapter 20, verses 29, following, I know, says Paul, that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number, men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard.

It's the same warning, be on your guard. Peter and Jude also deal with the subject. Peter enlarges upon it in his second epistle, chapter 2. Jude doesn't use many words, but what he says is equally pungent and equally relevant.

Whilst in the first epistle of John, they are there in mind too. One contemporary commentator sums all that up in this way. He says, we hear of them, that is, false prophets, in nearly every New Testament letter.

They are called pseudo-prophets, as here in this text, that's how it goes in the Greek, pseudo-prophets, prophets, presumably, he says, because they claimed divine inspiration. Or pseudo-apostles, 2 Corinthians 11, 13, because they claimed apostolic authority. Or pseudo-teachers, 2 Peter 2, 1. Or even pseudo-Christ, because they made messianic pretensions, or denied that Jesus was the Christ, come in the flesh.

But each was a pseudo. And the Greek word underlying our English pseudo, which is pseudo, means a lie. The Bible couldn't be clearer.

They are liars. They pretend what is not true. They've neither been called of God, commissioned by God, nor have they been given their words and their message by God.

They've dreamt it all up. And they've taken it upon themselves to say, and to do, and to go, as they will. Their perilous deception is also envisaged here.

You see, false prophets, really, are the most dangerous people in any society. Now, you might question that. You do so, and think about it again.

Thugs, drunkards, wife-beaters, and child abusers, we hear so much of them today. Thieves and murderers and others are a scourge wherever they appear, of course. And we do not mean to minimize the significance of their evil influence and action.

They, however, generally attack the physical, the temporal, and the material. And though that is not a trivial matter, and that is not unimportant, false prophets attack the souls of men. And they trade in the souls of men, the immortal souls of men.

And for that reason, they are the most dangerous people in any society. Hence their devastating menace. Now, in summoning us to be on the lookout for false prophets, Jesus underscores two things of note, namely, the duplicity of their visible approach and the ferocity of their actual and invisible intention.

Let's look at these two briefly. First of all, their duplicity. They come to you, says Jesus, in sheep's clothing.

Not only do they deliberately disguise their true nature and intention, but they express their hypocrisy by appearing in the garb of a harmless, friendly sheep. The metaphor, of course, in all probability, is meant to indicate that they come as one of the sheep of the good shepherd's fold. In other words, as believers, as Christians, as men who believe what you believe, as one of us who belong to the Lord.

They come dressed up in all the paraphernalia of a Christian. They'll have the jargon. They'll speak as if they belonged.

They'll appear in all things it would seem as if they were sheep under his care. And it is very likely that unless you are on your guard, you'll not only receive them, but you'll be deceived by them. There is not one of us who is beyond being deceived by false prophets.

You see, real danger, ultimate danger, to the Church has rarely come from the Church's avowed and open enemies. Now, we need a lecture on Church history here, and I believe that it would validate this dogmatic statement that I'm making. The real danger has not really come from the open enemies, your Nero's, your Hitler's, your Stalin's, your Mao Zedong's, and whatever.

The real, the real terror, the real danger to the Church has not come from the open foe at any time. True saints of God, with the Bible in their hand, have been aware that they are to be persecuted, for righteousness' sake. And when this has come, they've received it generally in the name of Jesus.

Sometimes there's been a great purging of the Church, and those who simply professed faith without any real anchorage in Christ, well, they were shown not to be what they were. But the Church was purged, and

the blood of the martyrs became the seed of a new-born community of believers. That's how the Church has grown.

It happened of old, it happened in the early centuries of the Church, it happened in the Protestant Reformation, it has happened after the Second World War. Any of you who know anything about the state of the Church in Germany, post-war, that is, will know how the Church came to new life there, in very large measure. And the reason was, they were purged.

Many went under and showed that they were only believers with the head. But the Church per se, the Church as such, came through the fires, as the Word of God promises us. No, the real danger to the Church and to the individual Christian alike, comes from an enemy, garbed in sheep's wool, who can get so close to us that we really think he's one of us.

And we so listen to him that we think he's authoritative, and he so ingratiates himself upon us that we think of him as a friend. And somehow or other we have missed the capacity to discern beyond the superficial. And again the history of the Church would, I'm absolutely certain, prove that to be true.

I have no time to go after illustrations now. Their duplicity! But then our Lord also refers to their ferocity. Inwardly they are ferocious wolves, or you wouldn't think it, they're coming as sheep.

Many of you who've worked among sheep know how they can come alongside of you and brush along your leg and play with you as it were. They're so friendly and whatnot. And you think, oh, this is a dear little sheep, wants a little company, a little petting.

And you may be tempted to give that, make it a plaything. But inwardly, says Jesus, whose eyes are as a flame of fire, inwardly these are ferocious wolves. Would you believe it that there are ferocious wolves masquerading as sheep in the Church of today, speaking now of the Church at large? Externally they're so much like real Christians, a sheepskin, you see, and sheep's wool may take some considerable time to wear thin so that you can see through it.

But sooner or later it has to come. The maliciousness in their heart is probably basically against God and only against you because you are on the side of God and His Christ and His Word. The natural man and the natural mind is enmity against God.

Paul says that. Well, that's what we've got here. Only the application is a particular one.

The false prophet has a malicious, vicious heart. But the viciousness is against God primarily and against you insofar as you take God seriously and His Word and His Son and His Spirit and His Church and His will. If you're not taking God seriously, well then, of course, even the wolf may not take much time to trouble you.

Our Lord bids us walk that very narrow, tight rope. I've already referred to it. Judge not that ye be not judged, for with what measure ye judge it shall be judged to you again.

Be careful what you do because you must be prepared to be judged in exactly the same way yourselves, says Jesus. Nevertheless, you must walk this tight rope, difficult as it is. There are false prophets abroad.

Be on the lookout for them. For your own soul's sake, for your children's sake, for today's sake and tomorrow's sake, for the church's sake, for the world's sake, for God's glory, be on the lookout for them.

You're no friend of God by pretending a friendship with false prophets.

That is not a sign of holiness. It is a sign of the opposite. And the second main thing I want to bring out this morning is this important complementary truth.

Jesus announces a method for the recognition of such false and ferocious wolves. I'm glad of this. I tell you, it does not give one joy to speak about false prophets.

Because you see there is a lot that is false in one's own heart. Before God there is not one of us who can say there is nothing that is false in my life. One discovers something all the time.

Don't you? I do. And therefore it is a very difficult thing, honestly, biblically, with biblical balance and equipoise, to proclaim what the word says in this respect and to act on it. But I am glad of this.

Simply to alert us to the existence of such evil-intentioned enemies masquerading like sheep among us, like angels of light, as their evil master before them, that announcement in and of itself would have been enough to strike terror in the heart of the early church and in our hearts too. But Jesus adds. He tells us how to recognize them.

He makes it unnecessary for us to be thus downhearted on account of it. And he tells us how to penetrate the outer garb and see into the inner life. And how to recognize the one from the other and separate them.

Let's look at what he says. Can I remind you that scripture generally would add a lot about this? I read this morning from Jeremiah. There is much about false prophets in chapter 23 and in other places in Jeremiah.

So is there a way back in Deuteronomy chapters 13 and 18 and again in the book of Ezekiel. You see this is not a new phenomenon. From the very beginning there have been false prophets and Peter in his second letter when he introduces the subject he says there were false prophets among the people, that is the people of Israel.

So also will there be among you. The phenomenon has been there all along the years says the New Testament. But now what does Jesus tell us? Here in concluding or drawing his sermon on the mount towards a conclusion.

He gives us two indications as to the way to recognize such people. The one by a clear inference from the immediate context and the other by his reference to two trees. Now the first, the clue from the context.

Once again I find myself asking you good people to notice the text in its context. When I am gone this is one of the things you will be glad to perhaps not to hear so often as you've been hearing it from me. But we've got to look at this text in its context and if you see it in its clear context you will see that it lights up.

Failure to see it clearly is to miss a crucial clue to the identity and devastating ministry of the prophets concerned. Jesus has just followed his general teaching about asking, seeking and knocking. That is about certain methods of prayer.

With the specific and very urgent teaching about the two gates, the two ways, the two destinies. We were with it last time. Here it is.

Enter, he says, through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction. And many enter through it, but small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life and only

a few find it.

Now notice, no sooner are those words out of his mouth, only a few find it, he says, watch out for false prophets. I believe that's a key. There's the gate, awaiting your coming, awaiting your discovery, those of you who are seeking the way to God and the way of life.

There's the gate, it's small, it's narrow, only a few find it. Why? One reason, not the only reason, but one very important reason is this. There are so many false prophets around who tell you it isn't there.

That the way to God is found elsewhere. That the route to heaven is to be begun elsewhere. You're on it already.

Or you go this way, or you go that way. But not here. Not the narrow gate of which Jesus spoke that separates you from friends and sundry and requires you to be with people all moving in the same direction.

All behaving generally in the same way and getting away from the vast teeming multitudes. That's not the way, says the false prophet, come with us. What does this say about false prophets? It says this, that even though they themselves may be champions of a narrow exclusive mode of living on the wide road, that's what I mean, on the wide road they're taking.

Let me explain how many of the cults live very narrowly, very disciplined lives. Deny this and deny that. They don't want this, they don't want that.

They give up this, they give up that and they have a groove on the broad road to destruction. It's a narrow, narrow, narrow groove. But that's not what Jesus referred to as the narrow way.

Though this is narrow and exclusive, as it is with Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses and with some of the older religions such as the Muslim, only to mention illustrations. They're all to be distinguished from the narrow road to which Jesus pointed. Jesus' narrow way is going in the opposite direction.

These narrow, narrow routes on the wide road are going all to destruction. False prophets may well have their own exclusiveness then, but their narrow groove, their narrow way is to be distinguished from Jesus' narrow way. You see, what is characteristic of Jesus' narrow way is this, you separate from those who influence you to sin, from the world outside of you and the world within you which we call the flesh, and from the devil who is the author of temptation and of sin, you separate from all and sundry every conceivable thing that binds you to him or to it, in order to give yourself to one King, Jesus.

You enter the gate alone to be solely his. And you go down with penitence and remorse for your iniquity and transgressions, and you mourn for your sins against him and the God he represents, and you begin to walk with him and his people. That's his narrow way.

False prophets divert you from that narrow way. I never take pride in saying this, but lest somebody thinks that I'm talking through my hat, do you know that the minister of the church where I worship, I can't call it worship really, but where I went when I went to church as a young man, when I told him that the grace of God had wrought a work in my heart, he said to me, that's the most terrifying thing I've ever heard. It's the greatest insult to your people.

Don't you know, he says, that your great-grandfather founded these twelve churches in such and such a place? Don't you know that somebody else before you did this, that and the other? Don't you know that your father and mother are people of character? And they count in this place, and here you say that you've been born again. Boy, he says, you're not thinking straight. And I was only a week old, and I remember looking up at him and saying, you confuse me, sir, but Jesus did say that you must be born again, or you do not enter the kingdom of God.

And I've committed myself to trust him. I met a false prophet, very sweet, very kind to the family, very scholarly, and much else. And I've known them, some of them, throughout my life.

The conclusion, the second thing, and the last thing this morning, that's the first way, that's the first clue to recognizing them. They'll dissuade you from going through the narrow, wicked gate and walking alone with Jesus under his kingship. Keep away from them.

Keep them away from you. The second is this. The conclusion to be drawn from their fruit, by their fruit, you will recognize them.

Now, Jesus, now you notice, changes the metaphor, so that the false prophet becomes now a bad tree bearing bad fruit. But don't forget, he's talking about the same species. He's talking about the false prophet still.

He's now under the metaphor of a bad tree bearing bad fruit. Now, why that change? Why did Jesus change that metaphor? Well, I've puzzled over this, and I've come across a little statement from one of our contemporary writers who puts it like this, and I'm sure he's right. In so doing, Jesus moved from the risk of non-recognition to the means of recognition, and that's a general statement.

Although you may sometimes mistake a wolf for a sheep, he seems to say, you cannot make the same mistake with a tree. No tree can hide its identity for long. Sooner or later it betrays itself by its fruit.

A wolf may disguise itself. A tree cannot. Noxious weeds like thorns and thistles simply cannot produce edible fruit like grapes and figs.

Not only is the character of the fruit determined by the tree, a fig tree bearing figs and vine grapes, but its condition too. Every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit. Can you see it? Why did Jesus change the metaphor? For this reason.

He says, sooner or later, you see, your false prophet masquerading as a wolf, he's going to bear fruit of some kind that will prove his identity. Just wait. Just give him time.

Jesus knew full well, of course, as did everyone around him, that the buckthorn grew little black berries that might at some stage and by some people be mistaken for grapes. I guess some of you theologues may be remembering that. And that there was also a brand of thistles whose flower viewed from a distance at any rate might be mistaken for a fig.

But listen, no one would confuse the buckthorn and the grape once they tried to make wine out of them. You can make no wine out of the buckthorn, only of the grape. And no one would confuse thistles from its accompanying fruit here.

No one would eat thistle flower for supper thinking he was eating figs. Of course you wouldn't. And that's what Jesus is saying.

Just let them grow. Just give them time. Just be patient.

Just wait upon God. Arm yourself. Be ready.

Don't let him influence you. Don't let her influence you. Sooner or later the fruit will be manifested.

What then is the good fruit which a good prophet grows and which a false prophet simply lacks? I'll be very brief, though conscious that I'm not doing justice to the question. To the first hearers and to present day readers of the Sermon on the Mount, the answer is simple and straightforward. The fruit that makes a true prophet of God lies first in character, then in conduct.

And underlying both character and conduct are his beliefs. The true prophet believes what the supreme prophet has said. And the supreme prophet of God was the incarnate Son of God, born of the Virgin, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified dead and buried and rose again and is ascended.

What the supreme prophet, the prophet of Scripture of old, the one likened to Moses, what he has said, the minor prophets, if I may so speak, the rest of the prophets, accept, believe and act upon. The true prophets believe that. If it be asked what the distinctive marks of such character and conduct are, we would first stress that they are modeled according to the teaching of the Beatitudes and the ensuing parts of this Sermon on the Mount, dealing with the practical ingredients of how to promote a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees.

Read this sermon and you'll be able to note the character and the conduct of a true prophet. Whatever inspiration a man or a woman may claim, unless he has these characteristics and this kind of character, he's out of alignment with God. That, of course, is amplified by Jesus' teaching generally, but it is never modified.

It may be qualified and he will show more and more what is involved in Christian character, but he will never say less. But there is one thing, two things, very significant here. Two significant factors that will emerge are these.

The fruit that validates the claim to be a true mouthpiece or prophet of God will not be based simply on the fact that we call him Lord. Jesus said, look, he says, there are many people who call me Lord, and I will have to turn to them at the last day and say, I don't know you. Now, of course, Jesus knows everybody in his divine omniscience.

What he means is this, there is no intimacy, there has been no communion, there has been no real relationship between us, whereby I have communicated my word and my spirit and my life and my mind to you. None of it, I don't know you, you're mischievous, get away from me. But we called you Lord.

Lord, Lord, we prophesied in your name. Here they are. And they think that they are prophets because they called him by the right name.

But they've never known the right spirit of a saint nor of a prophet. And the other thing is this, of course, it goes along with that. The fruit that validates the claim to be a true mouthpiece or a prophet of God will not be based on simply calling him Lord, necessary though that is according to Romans 10, 9, nor upon

alleged participation in experiences of a supernatural dimension.

Did we not cast out demons in your name? And did we not prophesy in your name? Were we not able to do marvelous things, miraculous things? All in your name. And people know what we've done. Says Jesus, that's not enough.

Oh brothers and sisters, don't let's be hoodwinked. Men and women can do supernatural things today and even use the name of Jesus without having in their hearts the spirit of Jesus and without knowing him. Whom to know is life eternal.

I conclude then, where does Jesus put the stress? Everyone, he says, and I'm anticipating the last sermon in the series, everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who builds his house upon a rock. That's true for the believer, the subject of the kingdom, and it's true likewise for the prophet of God. He builds on the rock of the word of God.

He obeys the word that he has heard. He lives by it. He dies by it.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus bids us be on the lookout. Let us not confine the exercise, however, to a negative kind of heresy hunting which can be devastating to our own spirits. I suggest to you that perhaps the best way is to cultivate a spiritual climate in our homes, where we work, in our churches, that in the spiritual climate, well taught and disciplined in the word, our children and our friends and those we teach in Sunday school class or anywhere else can grow up into mature men and women that will have the discernment of the spirit.

God grant it. God grant it because you see the glory of God is at stake. Those who trade in the souls of men dishonor him.

He would not have any to perish and therefore he is not willing that false prophets should stand at the narrow gate and point people in the wrong direction. God grant us grace and courage to follow in his way. Let us pray.

Oh Lord, most high and glorious, we thank you with all our ransom power for your holy word, your holy spirit and your holy presence with us your people here upon earth. We would learn the lessons of your word today and we ask that you would grant us the enabling that must come from you so to do that we may live by this word and thus be acceptable in your sight at last and of glory to your name as we pilgrimage toward that city that hath foundations whose builder and maker you alone are. In Jesus name.

Amen.

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