

Sermon on the Mount, 12

by John Wesley

Beware of false prophets who teach a false way to heaven and know them by their fruits.

Scripture: Matthew 7:15

Topics: "Discernment", "False Prophets"

Description

John Wesley warns against false prophets who appear harmless but are actually destructive, likening them to ravenous wolves in sheep's clothing. He emphasizes the importance of discerning true prophets by their fruits, which reflect their character and the impact of their teachings on others. Wesley highlights the danger of following the broad way that leads to destruction, urging believers to adhere to the narrow path of righteousness. He calls for vigilance in recognizing those who teach a false way to heaven, stressing that true prophets will always lead others towards holiness and good works. Ultimately, he implores listeners to seek God's guidance and to be wary of those who mislead them in their spiritual journey.

Transcript

"Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit, but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them." Matt. 7:15-20.

1. It is scarce possible to express or conceive what multitudes of souls run on to destruction, because they would not be persuaded to walk in a narrow way, even though it were the way to everlasting salvation. And the same thing we may still observe daily. Such is the folly and madness of mankind, that thousands of men still rush on in the way to hell, only because it is a broad way. They walk in it themselves, because others do: Because so many perish, they will add to the number. Such is the amazing influence of example over the weak, miserable children of men! It continually peoples the regions of death, and drowns numberless souls in everlasting perdition!

2. To warn mankind of this, to guard as many as possible against this spreading contagion, God has commanded his watchmen to cry aloud, and show the people the danger they are in. For this end he has sent his servants, the Prophets, in their succeeding generations, to point out the narrow path, and exhort all men not to be conformed to this world. But what, if the watchmen themselves fall into the snare against

which they should warn others? What, if "the Prophets prophesy deceits?" if they "cause the people to err from the way?" What shall be done if they point out, as the way to eternal life, what is in truth the way to eternal death; and exhort others to walk, as they do themselves, in the broad, not the narrow way?

3. Is this and unheard-of, is it an uncommon thing? Nay, God knoweth it is not. The instances of it are almost innumerable. We may find them in every age and nation. But how terrible is this! -- when the ambassadors of God turn agents for the devil! -- when they who are commissioned to teach men the way to heaven do in fact teach them the way to hell! These are like the locusts of Egypt, "which eat up the residue that had escaped, that had remained after the hail." They devour even the residue of men that had escaped, that were not destroyed by ill example. It is not, therefore, without cause, that our wise and gracious Master so solemnly cautions us against them: "Beware," saith he, "of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves."

4 A caution this of the utmost importance. -- That it may the more effectually sink into our hearts, let us inquire, First, who these false prophets are: Secondly, what appearance they put on: And, Thirdly, how we may know what they really are, notwithstanding their fair appearance.

I. 1. We are, First, to inquire who these false prophets are. And this it is needful to do the more diligently, because these very men have so laboured to "wrest this scripture to their own," though not only their own, "destruction." In order, therefore, to cut off all dispute, I shall raise no dust, (as the manner of some is,) neither use any loose, rhetorical exclamations, to deceive the hearts of the simple; but speak rough, plain truths, such as none can deny, who has either understanding or modesty left, and such truths as have the closest connexion with the whole tenor of the preceding discourse: Whereas too many have interpreted these words without any regard to all that went before; as if they bore no manner of relation to the sermon in the close of which they stand.

2. By prophets here (as in many other passages of Scripture, particularly in the New Testament) are meant, not those who foretell things to come, but those who speak in the name of God; those men who profess to be sent of God, to teach others the way to heaven.

Those are false prophets, who teach a false way to heaven, a way which does not lead thither; or, (which comes in the end to the same point,) who do not teach the true.

3. Every broad way is infallibly a false one. Therefore this is one plain, sure rule, "They who teach men to walk in a broad way, a way that many walk in, are false prophets."

Again: The true way to heaven is a narrow way. Therefore this is another plain, sure rule, "They who do not teach men to walk in a narrow way, to be singular, are false prophets."

4. To be more particular: The only true way to heaven is that pointed out in the preceding sermon. Therefore they are false prophets who do not teach men to walk in this way.

Now the way to heaven pointed out in the preceding sermon is the way of lowliness, mourning, meekness, and holy desire, love of God and of our neighbour, doing good, and suffering evil for Christ's sake. They are, therefore, false prophets, who teach, as the way to heaven, any other way than this.

5. It matters not what they call that other way. They may call it faith; or good works; or faith and works; or repentance; or repentance, faith, and new obedience. All these are good words: But if, under these, or any other terms whatever, they teach men any way distinct from this, they are properly false prophets.

6. How much more do they fall under that condemnation, who speak evil of this good way; -- but above all, they who teach the directly opposite way, the way of pride, of levity, of passion, of worldly desires, of loving pleasure more than God, of unkindness to our neighbour, of unconcern for good works, and suffering no evil, no persecution for righteousness' sake!

7. If it be asked, "Why, who ever did teach this, or who does teach it, as the way to heaven?" I answer, Ten thousand wise and honourable men; even all those, of whatever denomination, who encourage the proud, the trifler, the passionate, the lover of the world, the man of pleasure, the unjust or unkind, the easy, careless, harmless, useless creature, the man who suffers no reproach for righteousness' sake, to imagine he is in the way to heaven. These are false prophets in the highest sense of the word. These are traitors both to God and man. These are no other than the first-born of Satan; the eldest sons of Apollyon, the Destroyer. These are far above the rank of ordinary cut-throats; for they murder the souls of men. They are continually peopling the realms of night; and whenever they follow the poor souls whom they have destroyed, "hell shall be moved from beneath to meet them at their coming!"

II. 1. But do they come now in their own shape? By no means. If it were so, they could not destroy. You would take the alarm, and flee for your life. Therefore they put on a quite contrary appearance: (Which was the Second thing to be considered:) "They come to you in sheep's clothing, although inwardly they are ravening wolves."

2. "They come to you in sheep's clothing;" that is, with an appearance of harmlessness. They come in the most mild, inoffensive manner, without any mark or token of enmity. Who can imagine that these quiet creatures would do any hurt to any one? Perhaps they may not be so zealous and active in doing good as one would wish they were. However, you see no reason to suspect that they have even the desire to do any harm. But this is not all.

3. They come, Secondly, with an appearance of usefulness. Indeed to this, to do good, they are particularly called. They are set apart for this very thing. They are particularly commissioned to watch over your soul, and to train you up to eternal life. It is their whole business, to "go about doing good, and healing those that are oppressed of the devil." And you have been always accustomed to look upon them in this light, as messengers of God, sent to bring you a blessing.

4. They come, Thirdly, with an appearance of religion. All they do is for conscience' sake! They assure you, it is out of mere zeal for God, that they are making God a liar. It is out of pure concern for religion, that they would destroy it root and branch. All they speak is only from a love of truth, and a fear lest it should suffer; and, it may be, from a regard for the Church, and a desire to defend her from all her enemies.

5. Above all, they come with an appearance of love. They take all these pains, only for your good. They should not trouble themselves about you, but that they have a kindness for you. They will make large professions of their good-will, of their concern for the danger you are in, and of their earnest desire to preserve you from error, from being entangled in new and mischievous doctrines. They should be very sorry to see one who means so well, hurried into any extreme, perplexed with strange and unintelligible notions, or deluded into enthusiasm. Therefore it is that they advise you to keep still, in the plain middle way; and to beware of "being righteous overmuch," lest you should "destroy yourself."

III. 1. But how may we know what they really are, notwithstanding their fair appearance? This was the Third thing into which it was proposed to inquire. Our blessed Lord saw how needful it was for all men to know false prophets, however disguised. He saw, likewise, how unable most men were to deduce a truth

through a long train of consequences. He therefore gives us a short and plain rule, easy to be understood by men of the meanest capacities, and easy to be applied upon all occasions: "Ye shall know them by their fruits."

2. Upon all occasions you may easily apply this rule. In order to know whether any who speak in the name of God are false or true prophets it is easy to observe, First, What are the fruits of their doctrine as to themselves? What effect has it had upon their lives? Are they holy and unblamable in all things? What effect has it had upon their hearts? Does it appear by the general tenor of their conversation that their tempers are holy, heavenly, divine? that the mind is in them which was in Christ Jesus? That they are meek, lowly, patient, lovers of God and man, and zealous of good works?

3. You may easily observe, Secondly, what are the fruits of their doctrine as to those that hear them; -- in many, at least, though not in all; for the Apostles themselves did not convert all that heard them. Have these the mind that was in Christ? And do they walk as he also walked? And was it by hearing these men that they began so to do? Were they inwardly and outwardly wicked till they heard them? If so, it is a manifest proof that those are true Prophets, Teachers sent of God. But if it is not so, if they do not effectually teach either themselves or others to love and serve God, it is a manifest proof that they are false prophets; that God hath not sent them.

4. A hard saying this! How few can bear it! This our Lord was sensible of, and therefore condescends to prove it at large by several clear and convincing arguments. "Do men," says he, "gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?" (Matt. 7:16.) Do you expect that these evil men should bring forth good fruit? As well might you expect that thorns should bring forth grapes, or that figs should grow upon thistles! "Every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit." (Matt. 5:17.) Every true Prophet, every Teacher whom I have sent, bringeth forth the good fruit of holiness. But a false prophet, a teacher whom I have not sent, brings forth only sin and wickedness. "A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit." A true Prophet, a Teacher sent from God, does not bring forth good fruit sometimes only, but always; not accidentally, but by a kind of necessity. In like manner, a false prophet, one whom God hath not sent, does not bring forth evil fruit accidentally or sometimes only, but always, and of necessity. "Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire." (Verse 19.) Such infallibly will be the lot of those prophets who bring not forth good fruit, who do not save souls from sin, who do not bring sinners to repentance. "Wherefore," let this stand as an eternal rule, "By their fruits ye shall know them." (Matt. 7:20.) They who, in fact bring the proud, passionate, unmerciful, lovers of the world to be lowly, gentle, lovers of God and man, -- they are true Prophets, they are sent from God, who therefore confirms their word. On the other hand, they whose hearers, if unrighteous before, remain unrighteous still, or, at least, void of any righteousness which "exceeds the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees," -- they are false prophets; they are not sent of God; therefore their word falls to the ground: And, without a miracle of grace, they and their hearers together will fall into the bottomless pit!

5. O "beware of these false prophets!" For though they "come in sheep's clothing, yet inwardly they are ravening wolves." They only destroy and devour the flock: They tear them in pieces, if there is none to help them. They will not, cannot, lead you in the way to heaven. How should they, when they know it not themselves? O beware they do not turn you out of the way, and cause you to "lose what you have wrought!"

6. But perhaps you will ask, "If there is such danger in hearing them, ought I to hear them at all?" It is a weighty question, such as deserves the deepest consideration, and ought not to be answered but upon

the calmest thought, the most deliberate reflection. For many years I have been almost afraid to speak at all concerning it; being unable to determine one way or the other, or to give any judgment upon it. Many reasons there are which readily occur, and incline me to say, "Hear them not." And yet what our Lord speaks concerning the false prophets of his own times seems to imply the contrary. "Then spake Jesus unto the multitude, and to his disciples, saying, The Scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat," -- are the ordinary, stated Teachers in your Church: "All, therefore, whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do. But do not ye after their works; for they say and do not." Now, that these were false prophets, in the highest sense, our Lord hath shown during the whole course of his ministry; as indeed he does in those very words, "They say and do not." Therefore, by their fruits his disciples could not but know them, seeing they were open to the view of all men. Accordingly, he warns them again and again, to beware of these false prophets. And yet he does not forbid them to hear even these: Nay, he, in effect, commands them so to do, in those words: "All therefore, whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do:" For unless they heard them, they could not know, much less observe, whatsoever they bade them do. Here, then, our Lord himself gives a plain direction, both to his Apostles and the whole multitude, in some circumstances, to hear even false prophets, known and acknowledged so to be.

7. But perhaps it will be said, "He only directed to hear them, when they read the Scripture to the congregation." I answer, at the same time that they thus read the Scripture, they generally expounded it too. And here is no kind of intimation that they were to hear the one, and not the other also. Nay, the very terms, "All things whatsoever they bid you observe," exclude any such limitation.

8. Again: Unto them, unto false prophets, undeniably such, is frequently committed (O grief to speak! for surely these things ought not so to be) the administration of the sacrament also. To direct men, therefore, not to hear them, would be, in effect, to cut them off from the ordinances of God. But this we dare not do, considering the validity of the ordinance doth not depend on the goodness of him that administers, but on the faithfulness of Him that ordained it; who will and doth meet us in his appointed ways. Therefore, on this account, likewise, I scruple to say, "Hear not even the false prophets." Even by these who are under a curse themselves, God can and doth give us his blessing. For the bread which they break, we have experimentally known to be "the communion of the body of Christ:" And the cup which God blessed, even by their unhallowed lips, was to us the communion of the blood of Christ.

9. All, therefore, which I can say, is this: in any particular case, wait upon God by humble and earnest prayer, and then act according to the best light you have: Act according to what you are persuaded, upon the whole, will be most for your spiritual advantage. Take great care that you do not judge rashly; that you do not lightly think any to be false prophets: And when you have full proof, see that no anger or contempt have any place in your heart. After this, in the presence and in the fear of God, determine for yourself. I can only say, If by experience you find that the hearing them hurts your soul, then hear them not; then quietly refrain, and hear those that profit you. If, on the other hand, you find it does not hurt your soul, you then may hear them still. Only "take heed how you hear:" Beware of them and of their doctrine. Hear with fear and trembling, lest you should be deceived, and given up, like them, to a strong delusion. As they continually mingle truth and lies, how easily may you take in both together! Hear with fervent and continual prayer to Him who alone teacheth man wisdom. And see that you bring whatever you hear "to the law and to the testimony." Receive nothing untried, nothing till it is weighed in the balance of the sanctuary: Believe nothing they say, unless it is clearly confirmed by passages of holy writ. Wholly reject whatsoever differs therefrom, whatever is not confirmed thereby. And, in particular, reject, with the utmost abhorrence, whatsoever is described as the way of salvation, that is either different from, or short of, the way our Lord

has marked out in the foregoing discourse.

10. I cannot conclude without addressing a few plain words to those of whom we have now been speaking. O ye false prophets! O ye dry bones! hear ye, for once, the word of the Lord! How long will ye lie in the name of God, saying, "God hath spoken;" and God hath not spoken by you? How long will ye pervert the right ways of the Lord, putting darkness for light, and light for darkness? How long will ye teach the way of death, and call it the way of life? How long will ye deliver to Satan the souls whom ye profess to bring unto God?

11. "Woe unto you, ye blind leaders of the blind! for ye shut the kingdom of heaven against men. Ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in." Them that would "strive to enter in at the strait gate," ye call back into the broad way. Them that have scarce gone one step in the ways of God, you devilishly caution against going too far. Them that just begin to "hunger and thirst after righteousness," you warn not to "be righteous overmuch." Thus you cause them to stumble at the very threshold; yea, to fall and rise no more. O wherefore do ye this? What profit is there in their blood, when they go down to the pit? Miserable profit to you! "They shall perish in their iniquity; but their blood will God require at your hands!"

12. Where are your eyes? Where is your understanding? Have ye deceived others, till you have deceived yourselves also? Who hath required this at your hands, to teach a way which ye never knew? Are you "given up to" so "strong a delusion," that ye not only teach but "believe a lie?" And can you possibly believe that God hath sent you? that ye are His messengers? Nay; if the Lord had sent you, the work of the Lord would prosper in your hand. As the Lord liveth, if ye were messengers of God, he would "confirm the word of his messengers." But the work of the Lord doth not prosper in your hand. You bring no sinners to repentance. The Lord doth not confirm your word; for you save no souls from death.

13. How can you possibly evade the force of our Lord's words, -- so full, so strong, so express? How can ye evade knowing yourselves by your fruits, -- evil fruits of evil trees? And how should it be otherwise? "Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?" Take this to yourselves, ye to whom it belongs! O ye barren trees, why cumber ye the ground? "Every good tree bringeth forth good fruit." See ye not, that here is no exception? Take knowledge, then, ye are not good trees; for ye do not bring forth good fruit. "But a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit;" and so have ye done from the beginning. Your speaking, as from God, has only confirmed them that heard you in the tempers, if not works, of the devil. O take warning of Him in whose name ye speak, before the sentence he hath pronounced take place: "Every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit, is hewn down and cast into the fire."

14. My dear brethren, harden not your hearts! You have too long shut your eyes against the light. Open them now before it is too late; before you are cast into outer darkness! Let not any temporal consideration weigh with you; for eternity is at stake. Ye have run before ye were sent. O go no farther! Do not persist to damn yourselves and them that hear you! You have no fruit of your labours. And why is this? Even because the Lord is not with you. But can you go this warfare at your own cost? It cannot be. Then humble yourselves before him. Cry unto him out of the dust, that he may first quicken thy soul; give thee the faith that worketh by love; that is lowly and meek, pure and merciful, zealous of good works, rejoicing in tribulation, in reproach, in distress, in persecution for righteousness' sake! So shall "the Spirit of glory and of Christ rest upon thee," and it shall appear that God hath sent thee. So shalt thou indeed "do the work of an Evangelist, and make full proof of thy ministry." So shall the word of God in thy mouth be "an hammer that breaketh the rocks in pieces!" It shall then be known by thy fruits that thou art a Prophet of the Lord,

even by the children whom God hath given thee. And having "turned many to righteousness," thou shalt "shine as the stars for ever and ever!"

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