

WATCH OUT FOR FALSE PROPHETS
Sermon preached by Pastor C. John Steer
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No. 16: Kingdom Living
 Scripture: Matthew 7:15-23

Today we consider one of the most important questions of life. It is "Who are we following?"

Jesus shows us that our answer has eternal implications.

So please turn to Matthew chapter seven in your Bible and take out your message outline as Jesus' warns us to **"WATCH OUT FOR FALSE PROPHETS."**

Let's listen to his instructions again.

"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 thornbushes, 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." (v.15-20)

So Jesus challenges us, **"Watch out for false prophets." (v.15)**

He calls them "pseudo-prophets."

"Pseudos" is the Greek word for a lie.

So Jesus is saying look out for lying prophets.

We don't have prophets today and so this may not seem to be a problem.

If someone stood up in church and said they were a prophet it is unlikely we would take them seriously. But the word "prophet" includes anyone who speaks in the name of God.

It may make more sense in our culture to use the word "leader" or "teacher."

Jesus is telling us to watch out for lying leaders and treacherous teachers.

We can see why this is important.

Leaders and teachers are people who influence our thinking and our actions.

The immediate context here is the church.

We obviously have to be careful about the people who shape our spiritual perspective.

But there is also an application for the wider world.

We need to be wise in whom we follow when it comes to making up our minds about politics or government or our attitude towards other nations.

Think of the people whose blogs we read, whose videos we watch, or whose shows we tune in to.

These are the "prophets" of our day.
Their job is to influence our world view.

In telling us to beware of false prophets Jesus is informing us that there is such a thing as an objective standard of truth by which the false prophet can be identified. We live in a pluralistic society where some may regard it as intolerant to talk about false prophets. But while all are free to speak not all speech is true. In recent history we have seen the appalling consequence of following false leaders like Hitler, Stalin and Pol Pot.

We are to watch out because false leaders are dangerous.

Paul warned the Ephesian church of such people when he wrote, **"I know 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!" (Acts 20:29-31)**

Like Paul, Jesus describes these false leaders as **"ferocious wolves." (v.15)** Their desire is to tear apart the flock of God.

John Wesley said that such people, "murder the souls of men."
Sometimes they do more than murder our souls.



In 1978, 913 people died in a mass suicide in Guyana having drunk Kool-Aid laced with cyanide. They were followers of Jim Jones, a false prophet. Then in 1993 in Waco, Texas, 87 people died following an assault by the FBI on the Branch Davidian religious sect led by David Koresh, another false prophet.



It is a very serious matter to harm God's people and Jesus says that such pseudo prophets will be like trees that are **"cut down and thrown into the fire." (v.19)**

False prophets are an ever increasing problem in the church.

Jesus warns, **"Many false prophets will appear and deceive many people." (Matthew 24:11)**

The end times will be marked both by the world-wide spread of the gospel as well as a global epidemic of false teaching. That is why this warning runs throughout the New Testament.

Peter tells us, **“There were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves.**

**Many will follow their depraved conduct and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. In their greed these teachers will exploit you with fabricated stories. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping.
(2 Peter 2:1-3)**

Paul tells us where all this false teaching comes from when he writes to the Corinthians,

**“For such people are false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.”
(2 Corinthians 11:13-15)**

So behind these lying leaders is the evil one.
That is why they must not be tolerated.

That is all every well but how can we tell if prophets are false or genuine?
Jesus gives us the answer.
He instructs us how on **HOW TO PICK A LEADER.**

First he says, **“Don’t look at their looks.”**

Looking at externals doesn’t work because wolves can appear **“in sheep’s clothing.” (v.15)**

Yet appearances are often the way we evaluate leaders.

If they look good on the outside we assume they are good on the inside.

The problem it is easy to look good on the outside.

There are people to advise us on our grooming and power dressing so we make the right impression.

I was told once that I would be more effective if I wore torn jeans and a T-shirt in the pulpit.

That may be true, but it would be inauthentic to who I am. It is fine for other pastors but I am one of those odd people who actually like wearing ties and suits. If I start to dress inauthentically I may start to speak inauthentically.

There are services we can purchase to enhance our CV. We can take courses on how to present ourselves to the media. If we are public speakers we can be taught to manipulate people’s emotions.

We are great at putting on sheep’s clothing.

But a well-dressed articulate person is no guarantee of truth.

False prophets know that we Christians are credulous people. They conceal their dark purposes beneath the cloak of Christian piety.

So Jesus says when it comes to picking a leader don't look at their looks. Instead he says, **"Do look at their lives."**

Look at their character. Look at what they produce for, **"By their fruit you will recognize them." (v.16)**

In other words, what's inside us will eventually show itself in our behavior.

Many false leaders have a disturbing arrogance.

They don't take advice well. Yet Jesus teaches us that humility, a thirst for righteousness and a merciful attitude are to characterize his people.

Sometimes it's hard to tell whether a leader is a wolf or a sheep. But if you watch them it will become apparent over time. The wolf will eventually behave like a wolf.

I've been around long enough to see this happen with churches. A man or woman starts a new ministry and initially it seems great but then discerning Christians become concerned. They notice that the emphasis is all on the love of God but not his holiness or justice.

These false leaders rejoice in the forgiveness of God but there is no call for a change of life or repentance.

As a result their message is popular and soon there is a large television ministry but over time the house of cards falls down. The church goes into bankruptcy and closes.

The sheep's clothing has fallen off and the wolf is unmasked.

This call to choose our leaders wisely is very relevant for us right now because we are selecting Elder candidates to present to you at our annual meeting in February. It is immensely important who serves on the Elder Board of this church. We want godly individuals who will make righteous decisions and will lead us in an attitude of humility and service.

So before we ask people to join the board, we look at their character and their conduct and their Christ-likeness. And the wonderful thing is that the Holy Spirit has given us many godly people at Autumn Ridge.

One of our hardest tasks is to select just four of the many who are qualified.

When selecting our leaders we are not just to give people a cursory glance but to examine them carefully.

Jesus asks, **"Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?" (v.16)**

In the Middle East there is a thornbush which at a distance looks like a vine.



It has black berries which resemble grapes.
 There is also a thistle which produces a flower which can be mistaken for a fig.
 But on closer inspection it is apparent that a thornbush does not produce grapes
 and a thistle does not produce figs.
 So it is with hypocritical leaders.

So what is the fruit we should look for in the lives of our leaders?

John Stott suggests we examine five things.

First we **look at their character** – who they are.

Second we **look at their conduct** – what they do.

Barry Black is the Chaplain of the US Senate. He is a retired admiral. His prayers to open each day's Senate business during the government shutdown have been remarkable. He has had the courage to reprove the Senate for closing down the government and causing hardship for many Americans. He has revealed himself to be a true prophet who speaks truth to power.

Third we **listen to their teaching** – what they say.

One of the characteristics of false prophets in the Old Testament was their denial of God's judgment.

As Jeremiah put it, **"They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace."**

(Jeremiah 6:14)

We need to weigh the words of anyone who claims to speak on behalf of God against what we know to be the word of God.

Fourth we **examine their influence** - the effect they have on others.

A false prophet is someone who does not advocate the narrow road taught by Jesus.

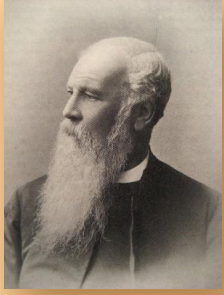
Fifth we **consider their relationship to Jesus** - who they are in private.

One of the tests of a true prophet is found in Deuteronomy. There it says that even if a prophet performs signs and wonders if they say, **"Let us follow other gods"** the people were warned, **"You must not listen to the words of that prophet."**
(Deuteronomy 13:1-3)

If our leaders pass these tests then they are genuine and can be trusted. We can follow them with confidence knowing that the counsel they give us will be good and the direction they are taking us is right.

Martin Luther gave this advice for selecting leaders,
 "Cling to the pure word of God for then you will be able
 to recognize and judge who is right."





Bishop Ryle put it this way, "Sound doctrine and holy living are the marks of true prophets."

Now this warning of Jesus is not an encouragement for us to become suspicious of everybody or to take up the popular hobby of heresy hunting.

Rather it is a solemn reminder that there are false teachers in the church and we are to be on our guard.

Truth matters for it is God's truth and it builds up God's church whereas error is devilish and destructive.

Having told us how to pick a leader Jesus now tells us **HOW TO BE SURE OF HEAVEN.**

The connection between these two points is simple.

If we follow false prophets we may not get to heaven.

If we follow true ones we will.

Jesus explains, **"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" (v.21-23)**

Martyn Lloyd-Jones comments, "These surely are the most solemn words ever uttered in this world not only by any man but even by the Son of God."

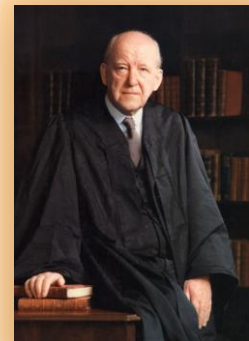
I agree so let's examine them carefully.

Jesus refers to **"that day."**

"That day" is the judgment day.

It is the day when we will all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. Jesus is not here speaking about atheists who have consciously rejected Christ.

The last place atheists want to be is heaven because it would mean spending eternity with someone they have no time for.



No, Jesus here is talking about people who think they are spiritually safe.

Who believe they are going to heaven. Their credentials seem excellent.

They call Jesus, "Lord."

"Lord" is a term of great respect, it means "master" or "owner." It is the New Testament equivalent of Yahweh.

So they acknowledge Jesus is God and they repeat it twice for emphasis, saying "Lord, Lord."
They are fervent.

They are saying the right words but there is no truth behind them. It is easy to use religious language but there must be reality behind the words.

Now a verbal profession of Christ is indispensable.
Paul tells us that to be saved we have to confess with our lips and believe in our hearts that Jesus Christ is Lord. These people seemingly did that.
They made a public confession.

The problem is there is talk without truth, profession without reality. Did you know it is possible to preach truth and not be changed by it? Paul was aware of this danger. He said, **"I make my body my slave so that after I have preached to others I myself will not be disqualified for the prize." (1 Corinthians 9:27)**

They use Jesus' name freely, but their name was unknown to him.
Their profession of faith is only verbal, it is not moral.
It concerned their lips only and not their life. They called Jesus "Lord, Lord" but never submitted to his lordship.

Not only is their speech spiritual but their deeds are dramatic as they explain, **"Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?" (v.22)**
They had prophesied but they were false prophets.

Jesus shows us it is possible to exercise spiritual gifts and yet be a total stranger to God's saving grace.
We might wonder how a person can cast out demons and be outside the kingdom.
But even Judas had this power.
When the Lord sent out his 12 disciples to preach and cast out devils they came back and said in great elation, **"Even the devils are subject to us."**
Judas was part of the twelve.

Despite their statements of belief and their seemingly supernatural ministry Jesus says to those who stand before him, **"I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!" (v.23)**

That is why these verses are so terrifying.
If we were on the reception committee on the day these folk arrived at the pearly gates we would admit them into heaven without a second thought, but Jesus turns them away. So what can we learn from Jesus about being sure of heaven?

First, Jesus is telling us, **"Don't trust in yourself."**
Their confidence is in what they've done.
"Did **we** not do this and did **we** not do that?"
Many of us fall into the same trap.

If we were to die tonight and stand before God and he asked us, "Why should I let you into my heaven?"

Our first response may be to tell him what we've done, how good we've been, how kind we are to others.

We'd point out the places where we have volunteered and the money we have given to charity and the times we have been in church and it would be all about us.

But that's not how we get into heaven.

Jesus tells us if we want to be sure of heaven we must **do the will of God.**

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father." (v.21)

The Father's will is not simply to be admired, discussed, praised and debated. It is to be done.

The Didache, which was a second century instruction book for new Christians, explains, "Not everyone who speaks in the spirit is a prophet, except he has the behavior of the Lord."

So what is the will of the Father?

It is that we should trust his Son.

That's why when we stand before God one day, as we all will, some of us in the near future, others in the far future, the only answer that is going to save us is to tell the Father, "I've trusted in the finished work of your Son on the cross for me."

It's not what I've done but what God has done that matters. That's why we need to choose leaders who will teach us to trust Christ and point us always toward Christ.

Jesus' concern throughout this chapter is that we should enter the narrow road that leads to eternal life.

Before we go through the small gate we look around us and we listen to what others are saying.

It is at this point Jesus warns us to beware of the false prophets who will distract us from that narrow road and point us to the broad way that leads to destruction.

We need to take his warning seriously.

Jesus said that many will say to him on that day.

Not just a few, but many will be deceived.

May God grant us honesty as we face this terrifying truth. If you feel you are condemned, confess it to God. Hunger and thirst after righteousness.

Turn believingly to the Lord Jesus Christ and ask him to save you.