

How to spot false prophets, Matthew 7:15-23, October 24th 2021.

Father send your Holy Spirit, to teach us, as we dive into the Bible would you awaken our hearts, expand our minds and shape my identities and lives today. We want to live a Jesus shaped life ... Amen.

How to spot false prophets, (Matthew 7:15-23)

In 1993, in Waco Texas, 87 deaths followed the confrontation, gunfire and subsequent siege between the FBI and a Branch Davidian sect led by David Koresh, a man who claimed to be the Messiah. In 1982 the FBI estimated there were over 3000 cults in the USA. Before her death in 2003, Margaret Singer, an expert in sects, believed the number had risen to around 5000. There are many more around the world...

In the first part of his Discourse on the Hillside, Jesus had warned against attacks against the church in the form of persecution. In the words just before this, he had warned about the choices we make – to take the narrow road and not the broad road. Now he Jesus warns about the attacks that come from the inside. As we heard in Acts 20, in Paul's closing words to the Ephesus church leaders, he talks of wolves coming from the outside who will not spare the flock, and how people from their *own number* would arise and distort the truth in order to draw disciples away after them. Paul says :''So be on your guard.'' So how can we be 'on our guard.'

There are kinds of false prophets, as in the examples just given, of those how are clearly outside the community of orthodox Christian belief, but who claim to be the true and only speaker / people of God.

However, there are others who speak within the church. Who appear to be saying godly and correct things, and yet are really leading people away from God. Some people in the church would say: 'surely all spiritual teachers, all leaders are good?' Or 'if a person talks about God and heals people, it must be all okay, right?'

But Jesus here tells us – that is not the case. There is a need to discern. This is one place where we must be judging – Jesus teaches us. There is a distinction between true and false and we need to discern, judge, the difference.

Jesus talks of prophets. Firstly Jesus's people – the Jews – had a long tradition of prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Elijah etc. And in the New Testament we read of Prophets in Acts, and also Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he says that Christ 'made some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, some to be pastors and teachers to equip God's people for works of service.' Prophet would include anyone who speaks 'in the name of the Lord'. So this would include those who claim to have a prophetic ministry in the narrow sense, but also anyone who claims to speak from God, such as pastors, priests, vicars, Christian teachers, evangelists and preachers. In all these case we need to distinguish true from false.

Jesus gives us a serious warning. He says false prophets are 'ferocious wolves'. The wolf is the natural enemy of the sheep. Paul says they are to 'draw people away.' It is a serious matter, Jesus says, to harm God's people and Jesus warns here, that such people will be like trees, that are 'cut down and thrown into the fire,' v19. On the day of Judgement, he warns, Jesus will say to them 'away from me, you evil doers.'

How do we spot these false teachers? How do we distinguish, as Jesus asks, to distinguish true prophets from false prophets? How do we know that we are on the right track, on that narrow road as Jesus exhorted us? How do we know that the Anglican Church isn't just a fundamentalist sect – as one UK paper suggested some years ago? Practically every Christian leader has at some point been accused of being a false prophet. How do we know that they are not?

There is only one test which Jesus gives and he repeats it: 'By their fruit you will recognize them' – in v16 and v20. Note, Jesus does not say that you will know them by their roots. The whole point of roots, they are underground and it would take years to investigate a person's roots. Fruit, on the other hand, is visible, relatively easy to test. Jesus explains the test more fully.

He asks: '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.'

In the Middle East there was a thornbush, which at distance looked like a vine. It had little black berries that closely resembled grapes. There was also a thistle which produced a flower which could be mistaken for a fig. On closer inspection, it was revealed that the thornbush did not produce grapes, and the thistle did not produce figs.

While we are to be wise and discerning, we are not to be suspicious of everyone. Nor are we to become heresy hunters, for false prophets will reveal themselves by their fruit.

Fruit Checking

- Matthew 7:15-20 NLT -



What kind of fruit should we be looking for? It will involve 5 aspects.

The Fruit of Character

The Fruit of Conduct.

The Fruit of Teaching

The Fruit of Relationship

1.The Fruit of Character.

To look at the outward clothing does not work Jesus says, for 'ferocious wolves' can come to you in 'sheep's' clothing. What can this look like? 'Sheep's clothing' can be an outward profession of faith. Jesus said: Not everyone who says 'Lord Lord', will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven'. So verbal profession is not enough. It is not sufficient to be know all the Christian jargon and recite the Christian creeds.

The Sheep's clothing could also include supernatural activity. Jesus warns that '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 perform many miracles.' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you, away from me you evildoers!' Just to say here, Jesus is not speaking against the activities themselves. He

clearly expected that his people would 'prophesy', 'drive out demons' and 'perform miracles'. We see this for example within the Book of Acts. In fact, as Matthew writes this Gospel, to include this part of Jesus teaching, suggests that these activities were continuing in the church. Yet in themselves they are not sufficient to prove that a prophet, one speaking in the name of the Lord, is genuine. Later Jesus when speaking about the End Times, says: "For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect."

Rather we need to look for the fruit of their character. The image of fruit is used by Paul in his famous words about Christian character – 'the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. Against such things there is no law.' Galatians 5. These are the characteristics we expect to see growing in a person who is a true Christian and who has the Holy Spirit of God living within. Jesus at the start of Sermon on the Mount pointed to character – character that will be shown as people seek to live out the sermon on the mount – humility, a great thirst for righteousness, merciful attitude, peacemaking, meekness, purity etc etc.

We need to look at Christian leaders and ask, honestly, questions about their character. Of course, we will never find perfection. Paul reminds us in the same passage in Gal 5, how in each believer there is a battle between the sinful nature and what the Spirit wants, so at times 'you do not do what you want'. All leaders are subject to the same temptations and weaknesses as the rest of us. But we can and need to ask whether there are fundamental flaws in their characters.

For example, it is noted among scholars, that with many cult leaders, there is a high level of arrogance, which should put us on our guard. We should always be suspicious of those who in their arrogance, exclude all others. Many cults regard themselves as the only real Christians in the entire world. This is far beyond discernment. Nicky Gumbel shares one time asking how many Christians were there in Spain. None the person said – because that particular cult did not operate in Spain. It did not matter whether people were Baptist, Anglican, Pentecostal, Evangelical or Roman Catholic etc. His cult considered none of them to be genuine.

2.Fruit of Conduct.

Jesus says we heard 'those who enter the kingdom of heaven will be those who do the will of his father'. They are on the narrow road. They are hearing and obeying the words of Jesus and putting them into practice. What we believe will affect how we live. Our creed determines our conduct. As James later said: 'What good is it my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no needs.' James 2.

Jesus in his sermon, has set out the Jesus shaped life/ A life of forgiveness, love, faithfulness, integrity, forgiveness and forgiving our enemies. We all make mistakes from time to time. The Lord is gracious and forgiving and enables us to pick ourselves up and start again.

But there is a significant difference between seeking to live a consistent Christian life and what Jesus is describing here : wolves who set out to deceive, disguising themselves as sheep for their own gain.

The Lord's Resistance Army was a guerilla army based in Northern Uganda. Now it is dispersed and in small numbers in parts of central Africa. But for 20 years, from the mid 1980s, it is responsible for many human rights violations: murder, abduction, mutilation, sexual enslavement of women and children; forcing children as young as 5 years old to fight. They claim to be fighting in the name of God and that they wanted to establish a Ugandan nation living under the 10 Commandments. However despite taking on the Lord's name, we look at the conduct. These are wolves.

Often we see great ongoing sexual immorality. David Koresh, plucked sexual partners – whether already married or not – from his flock. Koresh even persuaded his followers that it was an honour to do so, for by sleeping with their wives or daughters, they became part of the House of David, with all the Messianic connections that phrase held.

As sheep, we sometimes stray from the right path – we wander off that narrow road – and we make mistakes. When that happens we need to repent and be forgiven. We then try again to do and live the will of God and live a consistent life, a Jesus shaped life. This is very different from the deliberate deception and ongoing abuse undertaken by cult leaders.

3. The Fruit of Teaching.

What we teach has an impact on people's lives. Jesus uses another image of fruitfulness later: ³'Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognised by its fruit. ³⁴You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. ³⁵A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.'

In Deut 13 there is a test of a true prophet. Even if a prophet performed signs and wonders, if he went on to say : Let us follow other gods.' The people were warned: 'You must not listen to the words of that prophet.' In other words, the OT tradition, which Jesus follows, is that people were to test the prophet by his teaching – whether he led people towards God or away from him.

Peter years later wrote: 'But 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. ² Many will follow their depraved conduct and will bring the way of truth into disrepute.'

We need to weigh the words of anyone who claims to speak on the behalf of God, against what we know to be the word of God. How do the words of the prophet, the one who speaks in the name of the Lord, stand up against the teaching of Scripture. We need to follow the example of the Bereans in Acts 17, who 'received message with great eagerness and examined the

Scriptures every day to see if what Paul had said was true.” Cults and sects often claim that the authority of the Bible is not enough for us, and that some other external source is needed. The Church of the Latter Day Saints – the Mormons – invoke as their authority the Bible and the Book of Mormon, a second source encouraged they say by an angelic visitation to the founder. Jehovah Witnesses have their own version of the Bible. Apart from an external / extra source they always depart from at least one major historic doctrine of the Christian faith, such as the Trinity or the Divinity of Christ. How do we assess this?

Caryl Matrisciana shares a helpful analogy when writing about the New Age.

“Mum has been working at a bank for over a year,’ my friend Chris told me. ‘And she’s getting the most amazing education’. What do you mean? I mean she’s really learning about money. They are teaching her to know the colour of each note, the size of it, even the way it is water marked. They are showing her the details of the inks and papers.

How do they teach her?

Well they just keep having her handle it. They point out all the various things they want her to remember. But they figure the more she works with money, feels it, counts it, stacks it, the more familiar it will be to her.

That makes sense, I suppose. But what’s the point?

Here is the point. Yesterday they blindfolded her. They slipped a couple of counterfeit notes into her stack of money. She picked them out by touch.

So she is studying counterfeit money too, then.

No, that is just it. The people at the bank know that a person does not need to study the counterfeits. The banks know that the counterfeits are getting better and better. More and more sophisticated. And it’s been proved a 1000 times over, that if a bank teller knows the real money extremely well, they cannot be fooled by the counterfeits.

We do not need to spend all our time studying the counterfeits. The heresies and the false prophets. In order to know the truth, we need to soak ourselves in it.

4. The fruit of relationship.

In John 15 Jesus uses the image of the vine. 15 ‘I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes^[a] so that it will be even more fruitful. ³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴ Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. ⁵ ‘I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶

If we stay close to Jesus we will bear much fruit. But without him we can do nothing. The way to produce fruit is to be personally related to Jesus. Unless we are in that personal relationship with Jesus we will bear no fruit. 'APART FROM ME YOU CAN DO NOTHING.'

Hence Jesus will say to the false prophets on the last day – his return – 'I never knew you'. They were not, despite all that appeared, were not living in a relationship with Jesus. The unseen roots of secret giving, private prayer, private fasting, being on the narrow road, did not exist.

Jeremiah was a man who encountered many false prophets. He spoke in days of stress, change, conflict, wars, tension and concerns about the future. He warns against false prophets who have visions from their own minds and not from the mouth of the Lord. This is one of the OT tests of being a true prophet. Jeremiah asks: 'But which of them has stood in the council of the Lord, to see or hear his word. ... If they had stood in my council, they would have proclaimed my words to my people. Jeremiah 23.

The true prophet knows Jesus Christ, listens to him, in relationship with him, and speaks his word. We look at their genuine relationship with Jesus.

To finish.

Let us watch for the false prophets.

Let's also be inspired by the true prophets, all those who truly speak in the name of the Lord. Whose lives reveal this fruit:

The Fruit of Character

The Fruit of Conduct.

The Fruit of Teaching

The Fruit of Relationship

Lord Jesus, I fix my eyes on you,
the author and perfecter of my faith.
Today I choose whom I will serve - I choose you Jesus.
Help me to know you more clearly, love you more dearly
and follow you more nearly, each and every day.
Amen.

Thank you to Nicky Gumbel's writing on this topic, in his book 'Jesus Lifestyle', which has greatly shaped this sermon.