

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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BEWARE OF FALSE PROPHETS

Matthew 7:15-20

The problem of false prophets has always been part of the history of the Christian church. These false prophets have caused much damage to the church and their destructive influence continues to be a challenge today. In Matthew 7:15-20, the Lord Jesus is telling His people to beware of false prophets.

Matthew 7:15. "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.

16 "You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles?

17 "Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.

18 "A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.

19 "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

20 "Therefore by their fruits you will know them.

In sheep's clothing

Here the Lord Jesus says to His disciples, to His church, 'Be very careful with the false prophets. These people come into the church in sheep's skin, in sheep's clothing. But the truth is that inwardly, i.e., in their hearts, they are ravenous wolves. They are ready to tear you down and to devour you. They are as dangerous to your souls as hungry wolves are to a flock of sheep.'

One of the fearful things about these false prophets is that outwardly, they look exactly like the sheep. If you look at them in a flock of sheep, you couldn't tell the difference. You will not be able to see that they are actually wolves, and not sheep.

So Jesus is telling us that not all that looks like a sheep is really a sheep. As you know, Christians are pictured as sheep in the Bible. When the Lord Jesus says that they look like sheep, it means that they look like Christians. They have Christian ways. They talk like Christians and they behave like Christians. They appear within the church and gather a following within the church. When Paul was leaving the church of Ephesus, he gave the elders this warning. *For I know this, that after my departure **savage wolves** will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also **from among yourselves** men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch...* (Acts 20:29-31).

Beware of these people. 'From among your own group of people will arise men who will draw away the disciples.' Now we can see the point of the Lord's warning. The enemy who is outside is much less dangerous than the enemy who is found inside the church. It is easier for the shepherd to

take care of his sheep when the wolf is outside the fold. But the wolf that is inside the flock, in the disguise of a sheep, is discovered rather late. By that time, it had already eaten up a few sheep. That is why it is so important to know who are these false prophets and how we can discern them before they cause too much damage.

The typical language of a false prophet

But first, let us look at the context of Jesus' words. Jesus just spoke about two roads. There is a narrow road and there is a broad road. The road that leads to life is a narrow road. It is difficult. The road that leads to destruction is the broad road. It is a comfortable road. Which road will you take?

Here we see the connection between this passage and the warning about false prophets. The Lord Jesus invites us to take the narrow road. But the false prophets tell us something different. They say, 'Let's go down the broad road.' You see, the false prophets are the people who make it hard for seekers to find the narrow gate and the narrow road. Their teaching makes us believe that the narrow road is in reality quite broad, that the hard way is actually quite easy. They play down the cost of discipleship and they blur the issue of salvation. They even say that the broad road does not lead to destruction. Their preaching is never disturbing because they only talk about what you like to hear. They tickle your ears by saying things that give you pleasure and comfort. You can see that with this kind of language, they can gain quite a hearing.

This is precisely one of the main characteristics of the false prophets in the OT. They spoke to people by appealing to their likes. They expressed a wrong optimism which denied that God is the God of judgment as well as of love and mercy. In fact, God accused them of 'filling His people with vain hopes.' *They say continually to those who despise the word of the Lord, 'It shall be well with you'; and to every one who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, 'No evil shall come upon you'* (Jeremiah 23.17). Their talk gives a false sense of security. When people should be dealing with their sins, they say that everything is all right. They say, '*Peace, peace,*' *but there is no peace* (Jeremiah 8:11).

Four hundred false prophets

There is an incident in the OT involving the prophet Micaiah that gives us a striking contrast between a true and a false prophet. It is a good illustration of how they look like. This account occurs twice in the OT. The first time in 1Kings 22 and the second time in 2Chronicles 18.

What does 1Kings 22 tell us? In this section, we have two kings: the king of the southern kingdom (Judah), Jehoshaphat, and the king of the northern kingdom (Israel), Ahab. Jehoshaphat was a good man, but not necessarily a strong man. Ahab was evil. He wanted to go to war and he asked Jehoshaphat to ally with him against Syria. Jehoshaphat wanted divine counsel before making any decision. So Ahab called for the prophets. About four hundred of them came to give their advice. But these prophets knew exactly what the king wanted. The king wanted to go to war. So they told him what he wanted to hear. They said, 'Go to war and God will be with you. You will win.'

Jehoshaphat was not very impressed with these prophets. Somehow he was not convinced that they were telling the truth. He said to Ahab, 'Don't you have other prophets in your kingdom?' 'Yes,' answered Ahab, 'we have another prophet called Micaiah. But this man always says the things that I don't want to hear. He attacks me all the time. He is always rebuking me. I don't want this prophet.' But Jehoshaphat insisted. 'Bring him here. I want to hear what he has to say.' So a messenger was sent for the prophet. This messenger, obviously on instruction, said to Micaiah, 'Don't say anything that would annoy the king. You know that he wants to go to war.' Micaiah said, 'I will say what God wants me to say.' That was a very dangerous thing to say. He was running the risk of losing his life.

When a true prophet speaks

So the prophet Micaiah came before the two kings. Ahab asked, 'Now, what do you say? Shall we go to war or not?' Micaiah said, 'Go to war. Go ahead.' And the king said, 'No, no. I want to hear the truth from you.' *"How many times must I adjure you to speak to me nothing but the truth in the name of the Lord (1Kings 22:16)?"* Here is a man who wanted to hear the truth but didn't want to do it. This reminds me of some people that I know. They want to hear the truth as long as nothing is required of them.

Micaiah said, 'If you go to war, Israel will be like sheep without a shepherd. You will be killed.' Ahab was not willing to consider the warning seriously. Perhaps, these thoughts were in his mind: 'How come all the other prophets are saying that God will be with me when I go to war and you have an opposite opinion? No one else shares your view. Can all those prophets be wrong and you alone are right? They are also prophets, aren't they? They are prophets of God.' Micaiah doesn't deny that. They were evidently prophets of the Lord. Baal's prophets would not have been acceptable to Jehoshaphat. So how can Micaiah prove that he is right? He has no way to prove it, except after the event.

Micaiah said to Ahab, 'Let me tell you about something serious that took place before God's heavenly throne. The Lord allowed a lying spirit to speak through 400 prophets as a means of bringing you to your death.' Micaiah's point was clear: the 400 prophets that Ahab heard were not telling the truth. In other words, they were false prophets.

One of these prophets came up to Micaiah and smacked him on the face. Notice that particular action. It is important. The Lord Jesus said, 'You will know the false prophets by their fruits' (Matthew 7:16). Observe their reactions under pressure. Observe the way these prophets behave. If Ahab had eyes to see, he would have discerned that a person who hits somebody like this cannot be a true prophet. Observe Micaiah's behavior. He doesn't curse. He doesn't hit back. He doesn't even argue with him. He simply said, 'You will fully understand in that day when you will hide yourself from the enemy.' *A good tree cannot produce bad fruit* (Matthew 7:18). Observe the conduct of those who preach the gospel of Christ.

Then the king went forth to war. Fearing for his life, Ahab decided to disguise himself and he asked Jehoshaphat to wear his royal cloth. Jehoshaphat did not realize that this tactic would put him in great danger because he would become the target of the enemies. As Ahab expected, the enemies concentrated their attack on Jehoshaphat but nothing happened to him. Ironically, an arrow shot at random hit Ahab and killed him. Micaiah's prophecy about Ahab's death was now fulfilled.

So from this story, we can see the difference between a false prophet and a true prophet. The great refrain of false prophets is, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace. They only have comfortable messages, the kind of message that you want to hear and that makes you feel good. This doesn't mean of course that a true prophet never preaches words of comfort. But he will not preach words of comfort when the situation requires a word of rebuke. In other words, he does not lull people to sleep in their sins.

You will know them by their fruits

There is another way of recognizing false prophets. Twice the Lord Jesus says, *You will know them by their fruits* (Matthew 7:16, 20). Jesus started this section with a metaphor involving sheep and wolves. Then He changes it and speaks about trees and their fruits. He moves from the risk of non-recognition (wolves can come in sheep's clothing) to the responsibility of identifying them by their fruits. Jesus seems to imply that a tree cannot hide its identity. A wolf may be able to disguise itself but a tree cannot. The nature of its fruits will inevitably reveal its identity. That is why Jesus says,

Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor figs from thistles, are they (v. 16)? Harmful thorns and thistles cannot produce edible fruit like grapes and figs. Only a fig tree can bear figs. Only a vine can bear grapes. Jesus reveals to us a spiritual principle that is reflected in the natural world: the fruits of a tree must be of the same sort as the tree itself.

What then are these fruits? I would like to suggest three things. Firstly, they refer to the conduct that comes out of one's life. They refer to your character and the way you behave when you interact with other people. In John 15, in the parable of the vine, fruitfulness means Christlikeness. You bear good fruits when you manifest the likeness of Christ. We see in you the meekness and the gentleness of Christ, His love, His purity, His patience. Paul has the term 'the fruit of the Spirit.' On the other hand, when you bear bad fruits, you have the fruit of the flesh, which is described as the 'works of the flesh' in Galatians 5. The works and the fruits mean exactly the same thing. No matter how good his teaching may be, we are justified to suspect that someone is a false prophet if we see in him the works of the flesh, i.e., impurity, covetousness, anger, selfishness, and all these things.

Secondly, the fruits are not just about your character and the way you live. They also refer to a person's teaching. This is particularly obvious in Matthew 12:33-37 where Jesus applies the very same tree-fruit metaphor to our speech.

Matthew 12:33. "Either make the tree good, and its fruit good; or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. This is exactly the same metaphor that we find in Matthew 7.

*34 "You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? **For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.***

35 "The good man out of his good treasure brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth what is evil.

*36 "And I say to you, that every careless **word** that men shall speak, they shall render account for it in the day of judgment.*

*37 "For by your **words** you shall be justified, and by your **words** you shall be condemned."*

Jesus says in v. 33, *For the tree is known by its fruit.* Then He goes on to say in the following verse, *For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.* The point is clear: what the fruits are to the tree, the words of a man are to his heart. Just as a tree is known by its fruits, a person's heart is revealed in what he says. In the same way that a fruit indicates the nature of the tree, your words indicate the state of your heart.

Therefore we can test and we have the responsibility to test a teacher by his teaching. In 1John 4, John addresses the problem of false prophets. He says, 'Don't believe every spirit because there are many false prophets in the world. You have to test the spirits to see whether they are from God.' When we test a spirit, we have to examine both his character and his message.

Thirdly, the fruits refer to the influence of a person. A false prophet is not always recognized when we look at his character or at his teaching. Sometimes the falsity of his faith will become apparent only after we notice the disastrous effect that he had in the lives of his followers. By that time, the damage has been done. Paul uses the illustration of an influence that will eat its way like gangrene. *And their talk will spread like gangrene* (2Timothy 2:17). In that same passage, Paul also speaks of an influence that upsets the faith of certain people (2Timothy 2:18), that encourages ungodliness (2Timothy 2:16) and that causes divisions (2Timothy 2:23).

Test the prophets

We have to keep in mind that false prophets are not easy to unmask. As we mentioned, they look like real prophets and their fruits are not always there to give us an occasion to 'test the spirits.' You have to wait until the fruits appear. And even when they do appear, you still need an opportunity to examine them closely. You cannot really identify a tree or a fruit at a distance. Remember also that

a tree is not judged by a bad fruit here and there, but by the good fruits it bears. We all know that every tree produces some bad fruits. We are not concerned when we see a few bad fruits, but we certainly should be concerned when a tree leans toward bearing bad fruits. Therefore, in examining the prophets, we should not look only at single acts here and there. We must observe the whole behavior of their lives, the essence of their teaching, and how they affect other people in general.

This warning of Jesus to beware of false prophets is not an encouragement to become suspicious of everybody. That would make church life impossible. Jesus wants us to know that there are false prophets in the church and to be on our guard. He wants us to know that truth matters. There is such a thing as absolute truth from which the falsehood, the lies of the false prophets are to be distinguished. We live in a pluralistic society. Everybody has the right to his own opinion. That is a good thing but it doesn't mean that every opinion is right. If we care about the truth of God and about His church, then we must take Jesus' warning very seriously.

Examine your own fruits

We will close with this final observation. It says in v. 19, *Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.* Jesus states a principle that runs through the whole Bible: what is useless and evil will finally be swept away. A tree that continually bears bad fruits is marked as corrupt and is cut down. That will also be the destiny of the false prophets. They will be cast into the fire of hell. This verse reflects exactly what we read in Deuteronomy 13:5. It says there that the false prophets will suffer death penalty. *But **that prophet** or that dreamer of dreams **shall be put to death**, because he has spoken in order to turn you away from the Lord your God.*

Notice the word 'every.' ***Every** tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down.* John the Baptist used these same words in Matthew 3:10 to declare that the judgment of God is at hand. Just as the kingdom of heaven is near, so also is the judgment of God. And God will judge every tree, every individual person. In the same way, when the Lord Jesus uses these words, He does not limit the judgment of God only to false prophets. The judgment is for every tree, every person. The point is this: Don't be so busy looking around for false prophets and forget that it is also by your own fruits that you will be known. The same principle applies to all. A tree must bear good fruit or else it will be removed and destroyed. Profession of discipleship alone gives no protection against the coming judgment. Unfortunately, there will be professed disciples who will be rejected at the end. That is why Jesus says in the following verse, *Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven.* In our next lesson, we will study this verse in detail.