

## **Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time***

### **Beware of False Prophets, Part 1**

Scripture: Matthew 7:15-20

Code: 2253

Matthew, chapter 7, and I would like to read as the text from which we'll be studying this morning, verses 15 through 20 – verses 15 through 20. Matthew 7, verse 15, our Lord says, “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening 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 bad fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth bad 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.”

Now, in climaxing the masterful sermon of our Lord, we face an ultimate choice, and we saw last week specifically how our Lord draws us to that choice. Look at verse 13 and 14 for a moment. In climaxing the sermon, in bringing to focus everything that He has said, Jesus says this: “Enter in at the narrow gate; for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be who go in that way. Because narrow is the gate, and hard is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.” Now, as we saw last time, the Lord brings a choice, forces a decision. In other words, the response to The Sermon on The Mount is not to admire it, not to extol its ethical virtue.

The only permissible response to The Sermon on The Mount is make a decision, to either go through the narrow gate onto the narrow way that leads to life, or to go through the wide gate onto the wide way which leads to destruction. Those are the only two alternatives there are. You either have the religion of divine accomplishment, where you recognize your own sinfulness and accept what Christ has done, or the religion of human achievement, where you believe you’re good enough. Through the narrow gate, you go on the merits of Christ. It’s like going through, as we saw last time, a narrow turnstile, no baggage, which means you can’t carry yourself, your sin, your own righteousness, nothing.

You go through alone, you go through naked, and you go through with great difficulty, agonizing to enter that gate in the repentance of your sin. On the other hand, to choose the broad gate you can take your sin, your selfishness, your self-will, your self-righteousness – it’s a wide gate, it’s a wide way easily entered, easily traveled. And you make a choice, everyone makes a choice. You either choose God’s way or man’s way. You either believe your own human achievement is good enough to attain for you a place in the kingdom of God, or you know it is not, and in desperation you cling to Christ. That’s what Jesus was trying to do, force a decision.

He portrayed the broad way all through the sermon, and invariably His portrayal was that the broad way didn't make it. They had the wrong view of self, and the wrong view of the world, and the wrong view of the Word of God, and the wrong view of morality, and the wrong view of fasting, and the wrong view of praying, and the wrong view of giving, and the wrong view of money, and the wrong view of possessions, and the wrong view of other people. And all of these were the wrong things, and so Jesus was showing them that going the way of self-righteousness, and the way that says, "I can do it on my own, I'm good enough on my own, I'm religious by myself, I don't need a sacrifice, I don't have to recognize my sin.

"I don't have to be a beggar in spirit, mourning over sin and hungering for righteousness, I can do it on my own." But going that way is going to come up short. You're going to have to have a righteousness that exceeds that, and that's the narrow way. And so we are faced with a choice, a call for a decision. The message is not just to be heard, then, and admired, it demands a response. And clearly our Lord calls for the proper response, doesn't He, in verse 13? What does He say? "Enter in at the narrow gate." That is the great call that comes from the heart of our Lord, and throughout the entire Sermon on the Mount, beloved, that's what He's after, that one statement. Don't keep going your way, come God's way.

Strip yourself of your self-righteousness, your pride, your self-sufficiency, your sin, your self-will, your own goals, and come God's way, the narrow gate, narrow because you go alone, narrow because you can't carry anything through, narrow because you come with great difficulty, and narrow because you have to count the cost of what it's going to mean to put yourself under the control of Jesus Christ; very narrow. People say, "Christians are narrow-minded." That's right, very narrow, totally narrow. And that's exactly what the Bible says. The Lord then comes to the invitation, the climax of the message, and He calls for a decision, a choice.

This is not unlike Him – He's done it elsewhere in the Scripture. The compassionate, loving, earnest, tender heart of Christ longs for men to enter into His right path. To forsake their sin and their self-will, and to come repentant over their sinfulness to the only source of true righteousness. In fact, in chapter 4, verse 17, of Matthew, He cried, "Be converted." Turn around and go the other way is what that means. In Matthew 11:28, He recognized the burdens that men bind on themselves by their sinfulness, and the impossible religious duties that they try to carry all alone, and He said, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you" – what – "rest." I'll take all those burdens away.

In John 7, He said, "If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink." He said, "If you're hungry, 'I am the bread of life.'" If you're lost, "I am a good shepherd." He said, "I am the way, the truth and the life." He said, "I am the resurrection." Over and over again, Jesus offered an invitation. In the book of Isaiah, we find the beginnings of such an invitation, in chapter 1, and verse 18; the prophet Isaiah,

foreshadowing the very message of Jesus Christ, said, "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; and though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." And then the next verse says, "If you be willing and obedient."

God has always wanted to wash men's sins, but men have always had to recognize the need before they sought the solution. And until a person realizes his sin, it doesn't become as snow, it doesn't become as wool. The invitation was repeated later in Isaiah, in the 55th chapter, in that wonderful and familiar text where Isaiah says, "Ho," calling out, "every one that thirsteth," in other words, when you recognize you have a need and you thirst, or when you see that your sins are scarlet, crimson, when you know you have a need, "Come to the waters, and he that has no money" – in other words, you have no resources on your own, you have no wherewithal to purchase it, you have nothing good in yourself.

"Come, buy, and eat; come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." In other words, you don't have anything to bring, you don't have anything to offer God; you come strictly and only on the merits of His good and gracious gift in Christ. And so you find it in the Old Testament, you find it in the New, and you find even the end of the Bible climaxes in a great final invitation in the book of Revelation, chapter 22, and verse 17, "And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth come, and let him that is athirst come." And then this lovely statement, "And whosoever will, let him take the water of life" – do you know the last word? "Freely – freely." All the way through, there is this invitation.

Enter the narrow gate, be converted, come unto Me, if any man thirst, come without money and buy, if your sins are as scarlet or as crimson, they'll be as white as snow or as wool, the Spirit and the bride say, Come. The loving heart of God constantly beats in a compassionate attitude toward men and their salvation, their transformation. In fact, in the Old Testament, you find, in Jeremiah, God crying; the tears of God are shed because men turn their back on Him. And so it is compassion that calls to man from the heart of God. But may I add very hastily that this compassion has some teeth in it also. God is not all love and nothing else. The fact of the matter is that if you don't hear the call and come the way God says to come, verse 13 says, you'll get on a road that'll lead you to damnation.

And so it is compassion with some teeth in it; it is love mingled with judgment. The final judgment of the ungodly is in view there. So the Lord is saying, "Look, love calls and judgment tarries, but the time will come when love is set aside and judgment is imminent." And so we are to come on the narrow way. Every man, then, every woman, every young person, stands at a crossroads. To the right is the narrow gate, the narrow way that leads to life; to the left is the broad way, broad road that leads to damnation. Both are marked "heaven." One is true and one is a lie. This is the religion of divine accomplishment done by God, this is the religion of human achievement done by man, and you make a choice.

And you know it's not an easy thing to get into that narrow gate? "Few there be who are able to find it." And once you've found it, you must agonize to enter into it. I think there's one reason, among several, why it's difficult, and that is because standing in front of those two gates as you stand at that crossroads are false prophets, doing everything they can in their power to push you the wrong way. They're there, obscuring the narrow gate, and waving people on, like some spiritual traffic cop, to the broad road that leads to damnation. And so Jesus says, "Having given you the invitation, I'm going to have to warn you too," and that's where you come to verse 15. He must warn us of false prophets, and it says then, "Beware of false prophets."

They stand at the midst of the crossroads, trying their best to obscure the narrow way and to push men on the broad way, and they succeed, did you know that? Oh yes, they succeed, highly successful. In case you don't think so, go with me to the end of the broad way, when it all finally comes to an end, and you find that in verse 22. "Many" – and it's the same many in verse 13, "the many that go in the broad way" – the many who went in now come to the end, and they think they've arrived at heaven, and they say, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? And in thy name have cast out demons? And in thy name, done many wonderful works?" We're the religious. "And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you; depart from me, that work iniquity."

It's the wrong road folks, but many go in that way, many. Many, many. Because there are false prophets pushing them that way. Jesus, then, in effect is saying this: as you strive to enter that narrow gate, beware of those who would mislead you. Now, in order to understand what He's really saying and unfold this passage, I want you to notice two words in our outline; the first one is warning, and the second is watching. For this morning, we're going to look at warning; for the next session, watching. And I just feel badly that I didn't get to finish the whole thing in the first hour, so I'm not going to finish in this hour, because the second part is utterly, utterly essential, and you'll see as we go why I say that.

But let's look first of all at the key word, warning. Verse 15, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are rapacious or ravenous or ravening wolves." Now, the Lord is very clear here. He doesn't leave any doubt in our minds about whom He is speaking. We know He is talking about false prophets. Now, this is not an uncommon thing in the Bible. For example, you go way back to the Pentateuch, penned under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit by Moses, and Moses has for us, in Deuteronomy, for example, chapter 13, God's instruction about false prophets in the earliest times of His redemptive history. Listen to what Deuteronomy 13 says.

"If there arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and giveth thee a sign or a wonder, And the sign or the wonder come to pass, whereof he spoke unto thee" – even if what he says comes to pass – "and says, Let us go after other gods, which thou hast not known, and let us serve them; Thou shalt not harken unto the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams; for the LORD your God

testeth you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall walk after the LORD your God, and fear him, and keep his commandments, and obey his voice, you shall serve him, and cleave unto him.

“And that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams, shall be put to death; because he’s spoken to turn you away from the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed you.” In other words, Moses told the people, “When you find a false prophet, kill him.” They’re very serious, and they’re very deadly. In Isaiah, chapter 30, and verse 10, it says, verse 9, “This is a rebellious people, they are lying children, children who will not hear the word of the LORD: And they say to their prophets or seers, See not; and to the prophets, Prophecy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophecy deceits” – amazing. Isaiah says there will be people who want to prophesy these things, and there will be people who want them to do it.

There’s always a market for false prophets because people don’t want to hear the truth; they don’t, and so there’s always a hearing for the false prophets. Jeremiah repeatedly, again and again, starting in chapter 5 and running all the way to chapter 23, marks the false prophets; warning after warning after warning after warning. And you come to the New Testament, and in the New Testament, Matthew, chapter 24, for example, verse 11. “And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many.” There’s that many again. There are many false prophets, who deceive many people, and many go on that road, and many wind up saying, “Lord, Lord,” and He says, “I don’t know any of you many. I don’t know any of you.”

“But we have prophesied in thy name.” And you see the false prophets come to the same end that their dupes come to; they make their claim but their claim does not stand. There shall be many false prophets and they shall deceive many. Verse 24, of Matthew 24, “For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders, insomuch that, if it were possible, they would deceive the very elect.” False Christ, *pseudochristos*; they try to present themselves as if they were Christ, shams, phonies, and liars they are. Romans 16:17: “I beseech you, brethren, mark them who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which you have learned; and avoid them.

For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ but their own body, and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the innocent.” And Paul says to Timothy, “They speak doctrines of devils.” And to Peter the Spirit of God said, “They have damnable heresy.” And John says, “You’d better test the spirits” – 1 John 4:1. And so the Bible warns us over and over and over about false prophets. They’re going to be around, they always have been around. There have been many false prophets, and there shall be false prophets; as long as we live on this earth, till Jesus comes, they’re going to be here. Now, I want you to think this through with me, so I want to give you four words that’ll explain the warning in verse 15.

Number one is definition – definition. And by this, I simply want to define for you the term false prophet. What is a false prophet? Who are we really dealing with in this verse? Let me back up from that. Ever since the fall of man, it is apparent that man is hopelessly lost. Man turns his back on God, runs from God. No man seeks God, Romans 3. Men run from God, and they run to hell as fast as they can. And there is no one among them who can turn them around, for man does not have in himself such a resource. And so God has to pick out certain people, redeem them; send them to mankind to draw man's heart back to God. These are His prophets. And you find in the Old Testament and the New that a true prophet was known by two things: he had a divine commission, and he had a divine message.

He was called by God, and he was given his content by God. He gave God's message, and he was God's man. God selected men for this very strategic function. A true prophet was God's voice. You go back to Exodus, for example, in chapter 4, and you'll find that the Lord says to Moses, "Moses, don't worry about what you're going to say." Moses was arguing with God about his speech problems, and God said, "Moses, I will put my words in your mouth." Prior to that, God had actually called Moses out of a burning bush into his prophetic office. And so there was the commission of God, and there was the content of God, and that consummated the role of a prophet. He was God's man who spoke God's message.

No sooner did God have His true prophets to speak the true message, to be the true shepherds drawing the wayward sheep back to God, than Satan began to counterfeit. And as you study the Old Testament, you find over and over and over and over the trouble of false prophets. They are everywhere. They are all over the Old Testament – just like they're every place today. In Jeremiah, for example, we could spend days just studying what Jeremiah alone says about false prophets, because he says more than anybody else. But in Jeremiah 14, verse 14, it says, "Then the LORD said unto me, The prophets prophesy lies" – here comes the subtlety – "in my name." Now, listen to me: false prophets prophesy lies in My name.

They wear the garment of God. They say they represent God, they say they speak God's Word, but they are lies, for he says, "I sent them not, neither have I commanded them, neither spoke unto them." I didn't commission them, and I didn't give them the message. False prophets, and they were sent to deceive the people, and boy, they did a great job. Jeremiah 5:31, Jeremiah says, "They prophesy falsely, and my people love to have it so." They eat it up, because false prophets tickle their ears. Just like in the future when men heap to themselves teachers to tickle their ears. So in the Old Testament the same thing, they say what people want to hear, nice little platitudes that everybody likes, they make you feel good, and it's lies.

In Jeremiah 23, verse 14, the prophet says, "I have seen also in the prophets of Jerusalem an horrible thing; they commit adultery, and walk in lies; they strengthen also the hands of evildoers, that none doth return from his wickedness; they are all of them like Sodom, and its inhabitants like

Gomorra. Therefore, thus saith the LORD of hosts concerning the prophets, Behold, I will feed them with wormwood, make them drink the water of gall; for of the prophets of Jerusalem is profaneness gone forth unto all the land. Thus saith the LORD of hosts, Hearken not to the words of the prophets that prophesy unto you. They make you vain; they speak a vision of their own heart, and not out of the mouth of the LORD.”

They make you proud, they appeal to your ego, they are evil, they are fleshly, they are adulterous, they strengthen the hands of evildoers, they're evil, but they say what you want to hear. Further, in the 23rd chapter, does he speak of them, verse 21. He says, “I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran; I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied.” And then in verse 28, he sort of sums it up by saying, “The prophet that has a dream, let him tell a dream; and he that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully.” He says, “I don't want to shut up the true prophets and the true seers – just the phonies.” And so the Old Testament has to constantly warn that there's going to be prophets who are false.

In Zechariah 11, there is a picture of a false shepherd that is so vivid I need to read it to you. Listen to this: “I will raise up a shepherd in the land, which shall not visit those that be cut off.” Can you imagine a shepherd that doesn't bother to go find the lamb that gets lost? Can you imagine what kind of shepherd he would be? Secondly, “neither shall he seek the young one.” He doesn't help at all with that stray little lamb; doesn't seek to do what is needed to care for him. “Nor heal that that is broken.” Does nothing for the wounded, broken sheep. “Nor does he feed the one that stands still, but he eats the flesh of the fat, and tears their hooves in pieces.” Now, what in the world kind of shepherd is that?

A shepherd who eats the fat of sheep, who is their enemy? And the idea of tearing their hooves to pieces means that he literally rips the hooves apart to get every little last morsel of meat on that frame. What kind of shepherd is that? And God says, “Woe to that idle shepherd.” Judgment. “The sword shall be on his arm, and on his right eye; his arm shall be dried up, and his right eye shall be utterly darkened.” In other words God is going to judge. Now, that is a picture in the future of the Antichrist, who is the prototype of all false prophets. He cares nothing for the sheep. He masquerades as if he were Christ and representing Christ, and the fact is he rips and tears and shreds the flock.

The scribes and the Pharisees were classic examples of this. It's no wonder that they crucified Jesus, frankly; I mean He literally unmasked them so mercilessly. They were the ones who paraded themselves as if they were godly, as if they were righteous, and they were rapacious, and they were self-seeking, and self-serving, and they used the people to gain their own ends. And so the false prophets were there in Christ's time, Old Testament time, future time, present time. The New Testament calls them by many things – calls them pseudo prophets, pseudo brothers, 2 Corinthians 11:26, pseudo apostles, 2 Corinthians 11:13, pseudo teachers, 2 Peter 2:1, pseudo speakers, 1 Timothy 4:2, pseudo Christs in Matthew 24:24.

False – pseudo means sham, lie, false, phony. But there's always an audience, always, always, always an audience. Jesus said, in John 8:45, for example, "Because I speak the truth, you hear me not." You can't hear the truth, you listen for lies, "Because You're of your father the devil, who is the father of" – what – "lies." You hear lies, and you're open to lies, and Jeremiah 5:31, "My people love to have it so." Why? Because they are of their father the devil, who is the father of lies, they hear his lies well. They heap to themselves teachers who lie. Listen, there is an audience all over the place for false prophets, and they are just that, false prophets. If anybody needs to understand, we do.

In Ephesians 5:6, Paul says, "Let no man deceive you with vain words." Don't let anybody fool you with empty talk. In Colossians, chapter 2, and verse 8, "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy" – the wisdom of men – "and vain deceit." So the warning begins with a definition: a false prophet is one who does not have a commission from God, and he does not have a message from God. Let's go to a second word, danger. Verse 15 indicates to us not only who they are, but why we ought to beware, because they are very dangerous. They are very dangerous. Now, I want you to listen to me, people, because we can all become easy prey to these people. They are dangerous people.

So "Beware" it says – now, that word alone ought to let you know they're dangerous. "Beware." Whenever I see a sign that says beware, I stop. I'm afraid I'm going to see some gorilla, some huge dog, fall off something or get electrocuted. Beware, and I stop. I don't want to go any farther. It's a severe word. Literally, in the Greek it means, hold your mind back from. Don't ever expose your mind to the influence of a false prophet. Don't pay attention to, give heed to, follow, notice, devote yourself, don't even put your mind in his vicinity. They're dangerous, they pervert the mind, they poison the soul. You see, we see the results of what they do in 2 Peter: "Many people follow their pernicious ways."

Many people, suckered along the broad road, thinking they're religious, following this pied piper who leads them to damnation. And Peter calls them by these terms, and these terms speak of how dangerous they are. He calls them natural brute beasts, he calls them filth spots and scabs, he calls them beguilers of unstable souls, he says they allure through the lusts of the flesh. And Jude calls them brute beasts, spots or scars or scabs on your love feasts, and says that they are flatterers who flatter people to gain a personal advantage. They are dangerous, they are clever. You'd be better off to embrace a cobra. You'd be better off to crawl in bed with a hungry lion. You'd be better off to drink a bottle of poison than to come near a false prophet.

Those things touch the body; false prophets violate and pervert the mind. Now, why are they so dangerous? The end of verse 15. Because "inwardly" – that is, in reality, truthfully, on the inside, not what appears, but what is – "they are rapacious, ravenous wolves." In Ezekiel 22, verses 27 and 28, Ezekiel uses that same term, and so we see it not only in the New Testament, but in the Old



Testament. Let me talk about this for a minute. The number one enemy of the sheep in Palestine was the wolf, a natural enemy, roaming the hills, seeing a flock, and at the precise right moment as it trailed the flock coming out of its hidden place, and snatching that sheep and ripping it to shreds, and a sheep utterly, totally defenseless against a wolf – defenseless.

Now, a good shepherd, according to John 10, as Jesus delineates for us the pattern and principle of operating as a good shepherd, a good shepherd is always on the alert for the wolf. A good shepherd cares for his sheep, so he watches, he's awake, he's alert. Now, connected, in John 10, with the flock, you have three kinds of individuals. You have the good shepherd, cares for his sheep, he'll give his life for his sheep, he'll do anything he has to do to keep them from the wolf. Then you have the hired laborer, the hireling, as soon as he sees the wolf, what does he do? He runs. "Man, this is only a job to me. I'm getting out of here." As soon as the going gets tough, he is gone.

This is the paid Christian professional, who doesn't want any of the heat, just wants the glamour; just collects his check, and we've got those kind of people too. Hired laborers are bad, but there's something worse than them, and that's wolves. Hired laborers just run; wolves eat the sheep. The wolves are the worst enemies. The good shepherd protects the flock. The laborer, you might call him the time-serving professional, he just abandons the flock. But the false prophet tears and shreds and destroys the flock. Why are they the worst? Because they are ravenous, and that word means just what it says. The Greek word, literally the verb form means to snatch or to seize, and you can see the picture, as the wolf sinks its teeth into the sheep and is gone.

It is also used of a grasping extortioner, in the gospel of Luke and also in 1 Corinthians 5, someone who is grasping, snatching. They're ferocious, people, they are merciless, they are devouring, and thus they are extremely dangerous. That's what He's saying. Now, stay with me. They are so dangerous, false prophets, that we're to be wily and wary as we ever even come near their presence. For one thing, even if they didn't influence us, if we got involved with them, somebody might think we were condoning them, and somebody with less discernment than us would get eaten up. They are very, very dangerous. Let me show you why I say that. In Jude, that wonderful little book on apostasy, at the end of the book we have a section and I want to read it to you out of the NAS.

I think it really illustrates the point. Verse 21 of Jude says, "Keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting anxiously for the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life." Now, he says to Christians, "Get your life straightened out; get yourself in the circle where God blesses, in the circle where God's love is manifest. Be blessed, get your life straight. Then once you've gotten yourself taken care of, reach out." And verses 22 and 23 talk about winning people to Christ; and so there are three categories given of the people we're going to reach. Number one: "Have mercy on some who are doubting." That's what the proper text says. Now, when you find somebody who's doubting, go along with them, and put your arms around them, and love them, and be merciful to them.

Oh, they say, "I think I believe, and I think it's really true, but I don't know, and I just want to be sure," and be merciful to those. There's a second group, not just the doubters, but we call these the endangered disbelievers. Verse 23: "Save others, snatching them out of the fire." These are the ones who don't believe, and they're on their way to hell, and you just have to grab them out. These are just the unbelievers, the people who are indifferent, the outsider totally. Then there's a third category. I call these the confirmed false religions, and when you go to these people, it says in verse 23, "Have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh."

When you go after somebody to win them to Christ, and they are engulfed under the influence of a false prophet, you better go in the fear of God, lest your own garment be spotted by even getting in the influence of the false prophet. You see, what Jude is saying is this: "This is so serious that in you attempting to rescue somebody under them, you can be defiled by their influence." They are vile, dangerous, brute beasts, false prophets. That's pretty important stuff, folks. It's a leprosy. You don't want near it, because of its terrible influence. And when you even try to rescue somebody from under their influence, you'll find yourself near to being polluted with the evil, vile flesh.

So let me say this to you. Don't think false prophets are good, well-meaning, misguided folks. They are dangerous, devouring wolves, who endeavor to shove people onto the broad road to hell. Sometimes they know what they're doing, and sometimes they are duped just like the people who follow them. That brings me to the third word, and this is the key. Definition, danger and deception, and this is why they're so dangerous, because you don't see the truth. Inwardly they are rapacious wolves, but they come to you in what? Sheep's clothing. Now, in the Old Testament, and even in the New, in the case of John the Baptist, a prophet was known by what he wore.

Elijah, for example, wore a very rough, hairy, rugged, burlap, uncomfortable garment, and it was a statement; it was a statement to society that he was foregoing creature comforts for the cause of God calling His people to obedience. John the Baptist came as one in the wilderness; he had a camel's hair coat, and he ate locusts and wild honey. Again, he wore the garment of a prophet. The rough, raw, hair of a camel is not anything like you think of when you think of camel hair wool type things today – very rough, very uncomfortable, but again, a statement of coming aside from the system, from creature comforts. The rough garment designated the prophet, and when the prophet came, he came with no worldly goods, he came with no worldly wardrobe.

He came in rough, rugged fashion, as if he had come out of the wilderness of communing with God. Therefore, when anybody wanted to play the part of a prophet, he went out and got a prophet costume. He got a rough, rugged, burlap garment, and he played the role. In fact, in Zechariah 13:4, it says of the false prophets, "They wear a rough garment in order to deceive." They wear a rough garment in order to deceive. That was their whole approach. Now, listen to me. In the case of the sheep's clothing, what you have here is not some guy crawling on all fours into the flock with a

sheep's head hanging over his head. Shepherds, for the most part, wore cloaks made of the wool of the sheep, do you see?

The wool of the sheep, when it was sheared, was made into cloth for garments; the mark of a shepherd was he wore a wool cloak. Israel is much like California; the evenings are very cold, even in the summer it cools down, and they needed that. The idea is not that he comes dressed like a sheep; the idea is that he comes dressed like a what? Shepherd, wearing the garment made from the sheep. Sheep's clothing is just another term for wool. And so as the false prophet wore the garment of the prophet, the false shepherd wears the garment of the shepherd. It isn't that we're dealing with a sheep who's infiltrated, it is that we're dealing with a shepherd who has infiltrated.

And we find out that though he looks to be a shepherd, he is a wolf, and he's very subtle. There are three kinds of false prophets I see in the Bible, three kinds, and this is a definitive statement that might help you in understanding it. Three kinds – number one is a heretic. This is somebody who comes along and says, "That's not true, that's a lie, I don't believe the Bible," and teaches heresy. Or even says, "I believe the Bible," but teaches a heretical doctrine by twisting it; somebody whose doctrine is obviously, openly heretical. Secondly is an apostate, who denies the faith, who denies Christianity, who apostatizes, departs from it. The first two aren't tough to spot; it's easy to spot false doctrine, isn't it? Just take your Bible and check it.

It's easy to spot apostasy, because they're denying it. And beloved, may I hasten to add to you that both of these are dealt with in verse 6, of chapter 7? They are the hogs and the dogs. It says, "Don't cast your pearls before swine or before dogs, giving that which is holy." It's easy to see the hogs and the dogs; they're in the vomit and the mire. You see the first two kinds of prophets, false prophets, the heretics and the apostates, are made manifest. It is the third kind of false prophet I call the deceiver that is the one Jesus is referring to here. This is the one you don't see. This is the one who comes with the cloak of the shepherd. This is not the cultist, this is not the Mormon, or the Jehovah's Witness.

Or somebody who belongs to Christian Science, who openly and flagrantly teaches false doctrine; those are apostates or heretics. This is the one who talks about Jesus, and he talks about the cross, and he talks about God, and he talks about the Bible, and he talks about the church, and the Holy Spirit, and he hangs around with people that are true Christians, and he mingles within the framework of evangelicalism. And he's on the radio, and he's on television, and he's in the pulpit, and he's on the platform, and he writes the books, and he always looks like a Christian. That's the one Jesus refers to. Not heretics; heretics are obvious. Apostates are obvious too, because they've denied the faith. But these are subtle.

The Lord is not warning us against heretics. He's not warning us against apostates. He's warning us against people who sound like they teach the gospel, who sound like Christians, who use the speech

of the Bible, the speech of the gospel, but it's only a guise. They express orthodox terminology. Now, we shouldn't be surprised by this, because in 2 Corinthians 11 it says – listen – “Satan comes masquerading as an angel of” – what – “of light.” He comes hidden, among us. And don't be surprised, he says in verse 15, if his ministers are angels of light. We're not talking about those other two kinds; we're talking about the subtle deceiver who is in our midst. Jude 4 says, “They creep in unawares.”

They're all over the place, folks. I don't know how you're doing on recognizing them, but they're everywhere. And I'll tell you, if I recognize them the best I can by the discernment of the Word of God and the Spirit of God, and point them out among other Christians, usually other Christians get very upset. They say, “Him? Why, no.” But all of the criteria need to be examined. Let me tell you what they look like. First of all, they're pleasant and they're nice. They smile a lot. They seem positive, they seem affirming, they seem Christian. They hang around with Christians. They appear to be thoroughly Christian, they talk Christian talk, they seem to say the right things. And you know what I've learned? It isn't what they say; it's what they don't ever say.

They talk about Jesus, and the cross, and heaven, and Christianity, not sin, and hell, and mourning, and meekness, and humility, and brokenness. They talk about how to be happy, and how to be healed, and how to be this, and how to be that. They're pleasant, they're nice, they seem thoroughly Christian, they say the right things, and their lives even appear clean.

Now, you say, “Well, if they're really false prophets, their lives couldn't really be clean.” Well, number one, it's possible that that's just a fraud; that underneath and behind the scenes, if you knew them, you'd know they were rotten. On the other hand, some of them do live superficially clean lives, and you know why?

I agree with Broadus, the great commentator, when he says that, “Many of the false prophets have come from traditional religious training, and because of the ingraining of early traditional Christian moral values they find it difficult to overtly overcome the restrictions on their minds by their early training.” And so they tend to kind of walk the walk without knowing the reality. Now, whether they're doing that, while all the time they're vile and churning on the inside, whether they're just pushing down their depravity for the sake of their reputation, or whether behind the scene they are as rotten as we would assume, since they're false prophets, nonetheless most people think they're doing fine.

And even when they sin a great sin, and even – I've seen this – when something happens publicly, and it's apparent that they are very sinful, and the sin is manifest, the people in the church just say, “Oh well, everybody's got to forgive,” and they're right back in the saddle doing their thing sooner than you would believe – but they're false prophets. Therein lies the deception. In the year 100, the year of our Lord 100 A.D., we have the earliest of the Christian writings that we know about, and it's called the Didach. And by the year 100 the church had been formed, and it was beginning to try to help itself

to stay away from false prophets, and so in the Didach there's a section where the church instructed itself as to how to deal with false prophets.

It uses a term to describe them, and the term I think is interesting; it's *Christemporos*, and that Greek word means Christ merchants – Christ merchants. They use Christ, they trade in Christ, they sell Christ for personal gain, they pad their pockets, they build their empires. They are the happy Holy Spirit healers, and they are the positive thinkers, and they are the people who just wind up on the gravy train end of it, sucking it all up, the Christ merchants. And I'm telling you there are so many people in the world today, and even in our own country, who are using Jesus Christ as a product to pad their pockets, it's unbelievable – unbelievable. In every area from books to music to preaching in churches and television and radio, it's on and on, ad infinitum, ad nauseam.

But you know that the early church was so worried about this that they had in the Didach a few little rules to help them. Now, these are not written by God, but these are written by some folks at that time who wanted to have some criteria to judge a true prophet. So they said, "A true prophet is to be held in the highest honor; he is to be welcomed; and his word must never be disregarded, and his freedom must never be curtailed: but He shall remain in your house one day, and, if necessary, another day also; but if he remains three days, he is a false prophet." Benjamin Franklin, in *Poor Richard's Almanac*, said, "Fish and visitors smell in three days."

Now, we're not denying hospitality, and we're not saying that you shouldn't keep somebody, but when a man comes along and says he's a prophet of God, they assume that if he was a prophet, he was on a mission. And if he was really on a mission of God, he would be busy about getting onto his mission, not hanging around taking in all the freebies he could get at your house. Now it says, "He must never ask for anything but bread. If he asks for money, he is a false prophet." Ho-ho, how about that one? If he asks for money, he's a false prophet. Boy, with a category like that, you could sure stuff a lot of folks in. "False prophets claim to speak in the Spirit, but there's one acid test: By their character a true and a false prophet shall be known.

Every prophet that teaches the truth, if he does not what he teaches, is a false prophet." If he wants ease, staying around your house, if he wants money, or if he doesn't live up to his teaching. "If he claims to speak in the Spirit, but he sits down and orders a table and a meal to be set before him, he is a false prophet. Whosoever shall say in the Spirit: Give me money or any other things, don't hear him; but if he tell you to give in the matter of others who have need, then he's a true prophet. If a wanderer comes to a congregation, and wants to settle there, and if he has a trade, let him work and eat. If he has no trade, consider in your wisdom how he may not live with you as a Christian in idleness – And if he will not do this, he is a trafficker in Christ. Beware of him."

Well, a false prophet's always in it for himself – pad his own pocket, fill his own greed, prestige, power, importance, money, the whole thing. Be aware, because they're out there. And listen, people,

I'll say it again: they're not the apostates and the heretics. They're the ones that most people think are Christians. There's a fourth word, and that's the word damnation – damnation. The false prophets have an end, you know. You say, "What's their end?" Verse 22, they are going to say, "Have we not prophesied in your name?" We've been Your preachers, and by the way, the word prophet here is not used in a revelatory sense that they receive revelation from God. When you see the word prophet in the Bible, there were Old Testament prophets, that was a revelatory gift, God spoke directly.

There were New Testament prophets, that was a revelatory gift, God spoke directly. But the word prophet also has an extended meaning; it simply means to speak before someone. That's why I believe the gift of prophecy is still around in that sense. Sure, it had a revelatory aspect, but today it has a non-revelatory aspect as well, and in a sense I have the gift of prophecy. I stand before and proclaim the Word to you. I am a prophet with a small p in that sense. There will always be false prophets, there will always be true ones, and that's just basic. But when you come to the end, the false prophets are all going to pile up, and say, "We've been preaching in Your name" – doesn't mean getting revelations, it just means we've been declaring in Your name.

They may claim to have gotten revelations, I'm sure some of them will. "We've been proclaiming in Your name, and preaching in Your name, and doing all of these things," "And I'll profess unto them, I never knew you; depart." Depart, and you pick up the same word later on, and you're going to find that they departed into everlasting fire, destruction, damnation. The great tragedy is that they don't go alone, beloved; they don't go alone. It's tragic they go at all. It's infinitely more tragic that, according to verse 13, "Many there be who go with them." Many follow their pernicious ways. Many buy the lie. And where does it all end? It all ends in destruction and damnation. False prophets are going to be judged.

In 2 Peter 2 – it would be a fitting place to close, I think – "There were false prophets among the people, and there shall be false teachers among you, secretly bringing in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them" – doesn't mean overtly and openly doing it, although some will. Some will be apostate, heretical false teachers, but the others will deny Him in truth, though not in verb or voice, and when they do, "they bring upon themselves swift destruction." And they're not alone for "many" – there's that many again, many on the broad road, many will say, and "many will follow," many will be deceived, and many will follow them to the same terrible destruction. And then he goes to give an illustration in verse 4.

He says, "If God didn't spare the angels that sinned, but cast them to hell, and God didn't spare the old world, the world of Noah, but drowned them, and God didn't spare Sodom and Gomorrah" – then what makes you think God is going to spare the false prophets of this particular sort? He'll not spare them at all, and that's why verse 9 says, "They are reserved to the day of judgment to be punished." And verse 12 says, "They will utterly perish in their own corruption." And verse 14 says, at the end, "They are cursed children, or children of a curse, devoted to destruction." And it says at the end of

verse 17, “The mist of darkness is reserved forever for them.”

And if you look in the end of the book of Revelation, you’ll see that the primary false prophet, the false prophet of the Antichrist in the end time, is taken with the Antichrist and thrown into the lake of fire, which burneth forever and ever. So we stand warned, beloved. That’s the first word in Matthew 7:15 – warning, “Beware.” You understand the definition, you understand the danger, and the deception, and the damnation, then you ought to be on the lookout for these people. They come and they are dangerous, and they are doubly dangerous because they are deceptive, and their deception leads to damnation. Now, how do you recognize them, how do you know who they are?

That’s in verses 16 to 20, and that’s for next time. And it is very clear, and I just feel so badly in one sense that I can’t give it to you now, ’cause I want you to know who they are between now and next week, but I’ll wait. And I’ll promise you after next week you’ll have right out of the mouth of the Lord Himself the criteria to know who is a true and a false prophet. And if ever there was anything we need today in the church of Jesus Christ, it’s the ability to separate the true from the false. I have never seen a time in my life when Christian people have been so vague doctrinally, so utterly gullible to everybody that comes down the pike talking about Jesus.

We have a myriad of these pied pipers, and we need to understand how to determine who is of God and who is not, and we’ll do that next Lord’s Day. Let’s pray. Whenever we think, our Father, that Jesus purchased the church with His own blood, whenever we think that He went to the cross to die for the sins of men, we are reminded of the preciousness of human souls. When we hear that God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, or that God is not willing that any should perish, or that God so loved the world that He gave, we know how it must break Your heart to know that the false prophets shove people onto the broad road that leads to destruction, the road of human achievement, self-righteousness.

Father, may we be discerning; may we act as front line troops, guarding and protecting the church. May we speak the truth in love. Help us to unmask the false, help us to protect Your church. We think of the words of the apostle Paul, who said, “After my departure I know that grievous wolves shall enter in” – Acts 20:29 – “not sparing the flock.” Father, I know that if I were to leave here, that would be my message. I’ve seen it happen again and again and again. Paul said, “After my departing shall grievous wolves enter in, not sparing the flock.” Lord, we know they wait in the wings, and even as he said, “Of your own selves shall men arise, teaching perverse things to draw away disciples to themselves.”

We know the false prophets are in the wings, and they want the souls of men. I guess they don’t even know why, but they’re energized by the enemy, Satan. May we like Paul be able to say, “I ceased not to warn night and day with tears for three years.” May it be that we are vigilant, faithful, on the lookout to protect the flock. And then as Paul said, “I commend you to the word of His grace, which is able to

build you up.” We know the only safeguard and the only protection is the Word of God, and by it, we test the spirits. So give us discernment, Father. May we not be afraid to discern, may we not be like children tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine, and the slight of men, and the cunning craftiness of those that lie in wait to deceive us.

May we be undeceived, pure-minded, bringing all things to the test of Scripture, and unmasking the false, that Your church may be protected. Thank You for speaking to us this morning. We await the principles next time to help us do that, and we’ll look forward to that with anticipation. In Christ’s name, amen.

Available online at: <http://www.gty.org>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2015 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright>).