

# **How to Discern False Prophets**

**Matthew 7:15-20**

**A sermon preached by Dr. Calvin Warpula  
at the West University Church of Christ,  
Houston, Texas on Sunday, September 18, 2011**

Yesterday I received this package in the newspaper delivery. [show it]. I thought it might be a new kind of cereal or something good to eat. The bag advertising says, “Make Every Meal Tasty and Exciting.” When I opened the sack, it had this box in it with these enticing words, “Moist and Meaty. Made with Real Beef.” Wow, sounds good, doesn’t it? I was ready to dig in when I saw the picture on the front of the package, a dog! And then these words, “Burger with Cheddar Cheese Flavor. 100% complete and balanced nutrition for adult dogs.” Dog food. Wow, they really know how to package this stuff, don’t they?

Dog food sounds almost good to eat, doesn’t it? Chuck Swindoll says that at a friend of his ate dog food unknowingly. It happened at an elegant physician’s home in Miami, FL. The dog food was served on delicate little crackers with a wedge of imported cheese, bacon chips, and an olive, topped with a sliver of pimento. It was hors d’ oeuvres a la Alpo! The deed was perpetuated by a friend who had just graduated from a gourmet cooking course and decided that she would put her skills to the ultimate test. After doctoring up those miserable little morsels, she placed them on a silver tray. With a sly grin she watched them disappear. Swindoll’s friend could not get enough. He kept coming back for more and more. Eventually the woman told everybody about the practical joke and they all had a good laugh. Hmmm. To each his own.

This is a good illustration of what goes on in another realm, namely religious deception. Every day professional Christians and phony preachers are marketing their wares on shiny platters decorated in such a way that people do not really know what they are getting.

Here at the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns us, “Beware of false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.” (Matt. 7:15). At this point in the sermon, Jesus is drawing everything to a conclusion. In the previous two verses, he has just told us that there are only two roads, one hard and one

easy, only two gates, one broad and one narrow, two crowds, one large and one small, and two destinations, one to death, and one to life. Hear Jesus: (reads 7:13-14).

Now Jesus cautions us against listening to everything that people will be saying in the name of God. Jesus tells us that not everybody talking about God, knows him; not everybody using religious vocabulary and buzzwords, is from Christ; and not everybody who looks good externally is teaching and/or living the truth. This is vitally and eternally important because Jesus talks about destruction, being cut down and cast into the fire, being condemned at judgment, and being washed away in the storm. These are pictures of judgment, a subject we don't like to discuss or hear about. However, if I am to be true to God and to his word, then I **must** discuss it.

### **Warnings against False Prophets in the Bible**

This warning against false prophets has been heard throughout the Bible. Fourteen hundred years before Jesus, Moses warned the people of his day (read Deut. 13:1-5). Note here the people could even do miracles and still not be from God. Moses saw that himself when at Pharaoh's court, Jannes and Jambres turned their rods into snakes. Moses says even if people can do great signs that do not mean they are God's prophets. The real test is in what they teach. Does it conform to what God has revealed about himself? Moses again speaks of false prophets in Deut. 18:20 (read it).

Seven hundred years before Jesus, Jeremiah warned of false teachers. Jeremiah was telling the people that the city of Jerusalem was doomed because of their sins and that they ought to surrender to the Babylonians and go into captivity as God has foretold would happen. But the false prophets preached a soothing, smoothing message that said, "Everything is going to be all right. Don't worry, be happy." Jeremiah says they preach, "Peace, peace," when there is no peace. These prophets claimed to be speaking from God. They claimed visions and revelations that said that this unpatriotic, traitor Jeremiah was a liar. Hear the words in Jeremiah. Listen to what he says about these people: (read Jer. 23:16, 21, 25-26, 28-32). Jeremiah says the people should trust God's words and not man's idle talk.

Both Old and New Testaments warn God's people about false prophets. Almost every NT book warns about false prophets. Jesus did it here in the Sermon on the Mount. At the end of his ministry, in Matthew chapter 24, Jesus warned again: (read 24:11, 23-24).

The apostle Paul warned against false prophets. He told the elders from the church in Ephesus (read Acts 20:29-31). These false teachers would arise from within the leadership of the church. The greatest danger to the church has always been from the inside, not the outside. The answer Paul said is for the leaders and all believers to cling to the word of God. Note in v. 32 (read it).

Two books of our NT were especially written to warn against false teachers. They are 2 Peter and Jude. Hear what Peter says (read 2 Pet. 2:1-3). Peter says that just like false prophets appeared in the OT so they will in the age of Christ. Jude writes (read vs. 3-4).

John, who is known as the apostle of love because he talked about love so much, also warned about false teachers. In his first letter, chapter four, he wrote (read I John 4:1-2,). He tells us to test or try the prophets. Compare what they say with what God says. Maybe that's why the Bible says in the book of Acts that we ought to carefully discern what we hear and to study and research the Scriptures to see if the things being taught are true (Acts 17:11). In his second letter, John said that these false teachers denied Jesus by their doctrines and that we should not encourage or support them in any way. Hear him (read 2 John 7-9).

The last book of the NT, the last one written at the close of the first century, warns of false teachers. In the seven letters to the churches, there are several references to false teachers. In chapter two, in the letter to Ephesus, the Lord Jesus spoke, (read 2:2, 6). Then in the letter to the church in Pergamum, the Lord said (read 2:14-16). Again, in the letter to the church at Thyatira, the Lord said (read 2:20-25). At the conclusion of the book of Revelation, the Lord says that the false prophets and Satan and all their followers will be cast into hell (19:20). We, the readers of this book, are given a warning in chapter 22, vs. 18-19, that we must not add to or subtract from the word of God. We are to listen to God and to no one else.

So what Jesus says in Matthew 7:15 is indicative of what is found throughout the Bible from beginning to end.

### **False Prophets Are Wolves in Sheep's Clothing**

Jesus says that false prophets "dress in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravening wolves." They appear so innocent. They look so good on the outside. The apostle Paul said they even appear as an "angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:13-15). They appear as sheep: sweet, innocent, adorable, and even lovable. They may be famous authors, preach for big, big churches, appear

on television and the talk shows, write books, and be generous, articulate and successful, but inwardly they are wolves that snip, bite, and devour. They are soul killers. Someone then that looks like a sheep, walks like a sheep, and talks like a sheep may not be a sheep but instead a wolf in sheep's clothing.

A wolf in sheep's clothing claims to be from God. People are so gullible. Today, many assume that if a person is religious, talks about God, mentions Jesus or the cross occasionally, and smiles a lot and is friendly and kind that they must be from God. Wrong. Not necessarily.

Jesus clearly tells us that not everything taught in religion is true. Not even everything taught in religion with honesty and sincerity, with great enthusiasm, with great commitment, and that many people believe and follow is true. A teacher may have a Ph.D. or a D. D. (Doctor of Divinity), may be a professor in a Christian university, may use religious words, and maybe popular and yet still be a false teacher.

### **The Teaching Test for All Prophets**

Well, how do you discern a false teacher from a true teacher of God? Jesus tells us. Notice that two times in our reading today that Jesus says, "By their fruit you will recognize them" (vs. 18, 20). What does Jesus mean by "fruit"? Two things: (1) The teacher's teaching or his words, his doctrine, and (2) His life.

**First, let's look at his teaching.** I know that Jesus includes a person's teaching because that is what a prophet is, he is one who teaches. We think that the word prophet means someone who "foretells" the future, but that is a false limitation. A prophet in the Bible is one who "forth-tells", that is he proclaims a message before people. The primary meaning of prophet throughout the bible is one who proclaims, teachers or preaches a message, not someone who necessarily forecasts future events. In another passage where Jesus talks about fruit, he makes it clear that teaching or words are involved. Notice in Matthew, chapter 12, verse 33 beginning: (read 12:33-37). Notice here that Jesus speaks of words coming out of the mouth as fruit. It is words that are stored up in the heart. It is words that men will give an account for. It is words that will either acquit or condemn. Peter spoke of those who bring in destructive heresies (2 Pet. 2:1). Paul warned against those who teach the doctrines of demons. Hear him in I Tim. 4:1-2: (read). The apostle Paul warned us strongly that if anyone teaches any other gospel than that of grace and faith that he would be irrevocably

and eternally cut off from God (Gal. 1:6-9). Paul also warned us to mark those who do not teach the true gospel of salvation by grace through faith in the sacrificial death of Jesus (Rom. 16:17-18). The apostle John said that we are to “Test the Spirits” meaning that we are to check out their teachings. He says that if they do not teach the true gospel on the humanity and deity of Jesus that they have neither the father or the son and that they are “antichrist.”

### **Modern Examples of False Teachings**

Do we have people who teach false teachings today? Absolutely. Let me give you some examples.

An obvious example was David Koresh of the Branch Davidian sect who along with 86 of his followers was killed at Waco. Another example was Jim Jones who in November, 1978 led 913 people to die in a mass suicide in Jonestown, Guyana, South America. Two hundred of these were children and another 200 were people over 65 years old. The babies had cyanide squirted into their mouths while adults lined up to drink the poisoned Kool-Aid. Both Jones and Koresh picked sexual partners at will from their flocks. Koresh told his followers that because his seed was divine that only he had the right to procreate. Another example was the Children of God movement led by David Borg who used to recruit through what they called “flirty fishing” meaning sexual seduction. They practiced group promiscuity.

But some examples of false teaching may not be so evident. I remember visiting Concord, MA where the first shots of the American Revolution were fired. I noticed a big, white, church building with a manicured lawn and a tall steeple in the center of town. The sign out front said that it was a Unitarian church. The church that meets here now believes nothing that the original founders of this congregation believed. The original founders believed in God, Jesus, the Bible, atonement by Christ, the resurrection, and the miracles of the Bible. It was originally a Congregational church. The church that meets here now two hundred years later denies the deity and humanity of Jesus and one can doubt the existence of God and the eternal world and still be a good Unitarian. Since the front door was unlocked, I went inside the building and looked around. I opened their hymnal. There was not one song in that five-hundred page hymnal about Jesus, the cross of Jesus, the blood of Jesus, the resurrection of Jesus, the second coming of Jesus. The faith that is preached and practiced here is

all human centered and human thinking. The devout among them believe that you can believe in any God or no God –it makes no difference—and that all humanity will be in blissful glory in the world to come, if there is one.

Another example that is not obvious to some is the gospel according to Oprah Winfrey. I like Oprah. She is a very successful African-American woman who is worth hundreds of millions of dollars. For years she had one of the most watched daily shows on television and now owns her own television network. She has her own magazine that features a picture of her on the front cover of every issue. Oprah is down to earth, she connects well with people, she's college degreed, she is smart and savvy, and she is an experienced and expert communicator. Oprah's television programs featured family issues, marriage counseling, and personal counseling, helping people with handicaps, and helping the underdog wing in a tough world. There is much to like about Oprah. But there's one problem: she is a false teacher according to Jesus.

Oprah grew up in a southern Baptist home where her father was a deacon in the church. But Oprah strayed far from her roots. Oprah wandered into new ageism, spiritualism, and contacting the dead. She featured people on her show that are pantheists—they believe that God is the universe and the universe is God. Oprah believes that one ought to have the freedom to do his or her own thing without the moral inhibitions of the Scriptures. She lives with a man and feels no pressure to get married. She says that there are many ways to God and that Jesus Christ is a good man but that he is only one of many saviors on the way to heaven. She preaches the gospel of whatever floats your boat—the gospel of self fulfillment. She teaches universalism—that we will all end up in glory after death. All roads lead to the same paradise and no way is better than another. According to the teachings of Jesus, Oprah is a false teacher, though she is wealthy, wise, prominent, respected, believable, popular and influential.

Another example of false teaching is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, commonly known as Mormons. The Mormons are doing everything they can to gain respectability and acceptance as a Christian faith. They are now the third largest religious group in America among so-called “Christian” groups. Their membership includes prominent celebrities, congressmen, coaches, business leaders, and even a Republican candidate for President. To make themselves more acceptable, the church is dropping the name “Latter Day Saints” and is becoming known as “The Church of Jesus Christ.” The Mormons have several good influences: they have a well-known university named after one of their prophets, they promote good

benevolent works, they emphasize strong family and moral values, and their people are industrious and moral. The problem is that the Mormon doctrine is based on extra-biblical teachings and books totally unknown for the first eighteen centuries of the Christian faith. They claim miracles and inspiration for their prophets and leaders on a par with the biblical apostles. They teach that God was once a man like you and me and that some day true believers will be gods and inhabit the stars and multiply and populate the universe. Their doctrine is totally without historical validation. It is anti-God, anti-Christ, and anti-biblical. In spite of all the good they teach and do, their core, fundamental teachings make them false prophets according to Jesus. They are wolves in sheep's clothing.

Another example is the Jehovah Witnesses. They say that Jesus was a created being—that he is not the eternal word, God the Son, who became flesh. They teach that he is only a mighty god, the angel Michael. They deny the doctrine of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They have translated their own Bible to teach their peculiar doctrines.

If time permitted today, I could go on and on and speak about the Unity School of Christianity, the Church of Christ Scientist, and even the Seventh Day Adventists.

Please understand that I love these people. Some of them have been in my Bible classes. I have nothing against them personally. I mention them for the purpose of letting you be aware of false teachers today about which that Jesus and the apostles warned us. I want to be careful in labeling false teachers and in working with those captivated by them that I myself am never unloving. I do not want to judge and condemn any persons except as they stand judged and condemned by the word of God itself.

### **The Lifestyle Test for All Prophets**

Quickly let me mention that the second type of fruit by which false teachers can be known is their lives. Are the people living lives that are bearing the fruit that Jesus speaks of in the Beatitudes: poor in spirit, meek and gentle, merciful, peacemaking, hungering and thirsting after more of God, pure in heart, and grieving over their sins?

When any of us sets up a rule of faith and practice not found in the Bible and demands that others submit to it, we have created a sect, and maybe even a cult. This happened among some Churches of Christ back in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. There was a growing movement that was baptizing thousands but it crashed in on itself because it was so legalistic, judgmental,

demanding, and self-ruled. It was cultic in spirit and attitude and crammed many new converts through the strait and narrow cracks their leaders devised. The leaders produced clones of themselves that went everywhere preaching their gospel. The head leader finally upped his power so much that he took the term “apostle.” This movement was right on many things doctrinally but its methods, attitudes, demands and pride ultimately wrecked it. Now many of the leaders have repented and are seeking God in a more righteous way and wanting fellowship with other Churches of Christ.

### **The Challenge for All of Us**

A true prophet of God knows Jesus Christ, listens to him, speaks his word and lives it in his life. These are the type of prophets we are to follow. All others are false. The two questions to ask of any prophet are these: (1) Does he stay true to the Word? And (2) Does the word produce results in his life?

But let’s not just evaluate prophets this way. Let’s evaluate our own lives. Is that sheep’s fleece you are wearing really yours? Did you grow it, did it come from Christ, or is it just a uniform that you put on in public? What kind of fruit are you bearing? Is the fruit really genuine? Does your fruit come from deep within you or is it just like artificial ornaments attached to you? It’s plastic, it looks good, but it is not edible. Ask yourself the same two questions that we ask of others: (1) Are you true to the word of God, and (2) Is the word producing fruit in your life?

I want to be true to God in every way. I believe that you do, too. It is not enough to preach against error but we must live the Christian life ourselves. If I were able to condemn and renounce all the error of others but did not listen to Christ myself, I would be eternally lost. I want to be a good tree producing good fruit. I believe that you do, too.

Today, you can surrender to the call and claims of Jesus Christ as he is revealed in the word of God. We want to help you follow Christ. Come now, while we stand and sing.

-calvinwarpula@yahoo.com