

Title: Who are you listening to?
Text: Matthew 7.15-20
Theme: The danger of false prophets
Series: Matthew #42
Prop Stmtnt: If you listen to the wrong voice, you won't hear the right one.

Read Text:

A few weeks ago Jonathan Stevens was tailing another vehicle that appeared to be driving a bit recklessly near Tampa, FL. So he flipped on the blue and red flashing lights to pull this driver over in order to investigate. He informed the driver that he had a gun and that he was going to be making a report. Jonathan did have a gun. The problem was, he did not have a permit to carry the gun. Furthermore, Jonathan was not a police officer but the driver he pulled over, was. Impersonating a police officer can be a felony depending on the circumstances. Impersonating a Christian, and pretending to be a spiritual leader is far worse.

In this text Jesus is giving us a serious warning. He commands us to be constantly vigilant about the ever-present danger of false teachers. Jesus is addressing two related issues with this warning: 1) The problem of false teachers and 2) the problem of false professions of faith. The problem of false professions is what causes the problem of false teachers. So, in the introduction, I am going to address briefly the problem of false professions. Next week I will deal with it in more depth since Christ focuses on it more explicitly in verses 21-23. As I read this, it appears to me that Christ is warning about false teachers in verses 15-20. They are false teachers because fundamentally, they are not genuine followers of Christ. He then goes on in verses 21-23 to point out, that this is not just a problem for leaders and teachers; this is a problem for all.

But, once again, pay attention to where this statement is. Jesus is concluding his sermon and he is concluding it with a sense of urgency. There is an urgency of commitment. There is an urgency of authenticity. And there is an urgency of obedience. The bottom line again is this. Jesus is revealing the fact that there are two groups. You are either in Christ or you are not. If you are not really sure yet where you are and are keeping your options open, Jesus is helping you realize that you are not in. There is no "maybe" or "not sure yet" option. You are in or out. But, just because you say that you are in, does not mean that you are in. Romans 10 says that if you profess with your mouth and believe in your heart, you will be saved. You have to truly believe. Words can be cheap and fragile. But true belief endures.

The truth is, there are many people who not only claim to believe, but who are in positions of authority as pastors and teachers who are not genuine believers. Why is this the case and why has this plagued the church for hundreds of years?

- Genuine Christianity is the greatest treasure on the earth. You only imitate that which is precious. You can buy an imitation Rolex, but you cannot find an imitation Yugo.

- We are people of grace. People of grace are vulnerable. We are like sheep. We have hearts that operate on the basis of faith. We tend to be believers. We tend to be hopeful. We tend to be loving. We tend to be accepting. We tend to be trusting. We can be taken advantage of. It hurts when it happens and it happens. But, what is the alternative? Do we stop loving, believing, trusting, caring? Do we cross our arms and demand perfection and conformity to our scrutiny? That attitude and approach does not reflect the gospel. So, we are to be people who love AND are discerning. The truth is, they really go together as we will see.
- God's truth is true and will always be true. God's truth is powerful. God's truth is effective. God's Word changes people's lives. The Word of God impacts the way that we think, the way we believe, the way we view our world, the decisions that we make and everything about us. God's truth is not just powerful it is personal. Therefore, when someone is teaching and explaining this powerful and personal truth, and we are impacted by it, we naturally assume that the person who is doing the teaching has himself first been impacted by it. If we find out that this guy is a fraud, we are stunned. How can this be? In the moment we do not always distinguish between the message and the messenger. But seriously, this is really helpful. We can preach the perfect message of Jesus, but only Jesus is the perfect messenger. But, if the life of the messenger and/or the message of the messenger does not match the message of Jesus, then the messenger is a fraud and it is a loving thing to point it out and warn others, just like Jesus is doing.

So, how can the followers of Christ be meek (5.5), be merciful (5.7), love their enemies (5.44) and at the same time watch out for false prophets? Jesus obviously wants us to not be judgmental in a condemning and hypocritical sense (7.1-5) while at the same time being discerning and on guard for false prophets. How do we do that? It is not that complicated. In fact, it is amazing how often Jesus points out the obvious, which only makes it obvious that the obvious is obviously not very obvious. Obviously! So, here is an obvious point that people do not get. Fruit does not bear trees. Trees bear fruit. Before there was fruit, there was a tree. Trees come before fruit. If the fruit is bad, it is because the tree is bad. Fruit cannot make the tree good.

So, let me finish this introduction so that we can work through this text. This morning we sang about the glorious truth that Jesus can save. In fact, only Jesus can save. But, in order for people to be rescued by Christ, they have to hear Christ. They have to hear the message of Christ. If these people are listening to another gospel or to a fraud who happens to be preaching the right message, they are most likely going to be severely distracted from listening to Christ. Do you get what Jesus is doing here? He has arrived on the scene. He did not come to be just another voice, just another teacher. He is THE Voice. He is THE Word. He is THE Truth. Anything and anyone who is not in alignment with him is a fraud.

I. **There are False Prophets** – *“Beware of false prophets”*

What is a false prophet?

A. One who promotes error

1) Intentionally

There are people who know the truth and have rejected the truth and deliberately preach and teach things that are wrong. They may be pleasant. They may be personable. They may be winsome and have some very good communication skills. But if what they are teaching is contrary to the actual and intended message of God's Word, they are a fraud.

2) Unintentionally

Some people teach and preach the errors that they have been taught. They may not be as culpable as the one who intentionally preaches error, but every person who teaches must be certain that what he is preaching is true. There are many who only pick out the verses in the Bible that they are comfortable with, or that they think that people will like to hear. They will not deal with "controversial issues" because it is not their calling or their gift. That is so deceitful. In other words, I am not going to tell you what God has said because I do not think that you need to hear it. I will determine what is good for you, not God.

At the end of the message I am going to play a video clip of an interview that Larry King did with Joel Osteen. Joel will not say that Jesus Christ is the only to God. Joel is a prominent example of a major emphasis in Christianity that fundamentally looks at the Bible through the lens of the "happiness of man" instead of the "holiness of God." Therefore, everything is filtered through that lens. But the Bible does not start with man; it starts with God. And if you do not start in the right place you will not end up in the right place. Now, guy like Joel can claim ignorance, which he does. He can say, I never went to Bible College, I never went to seminary, I stay in my lane, I know what my gifting is, I am an encourager, not a theologian. But, when you presume the title of a pastor, and you hold up a Bible and you claim to believe this, and you are speaking, you are taking on the position of a pastor.

B. One who preaches truth but does not live like it.

1) For selfish gain.

We are grateful for the people that God uses to communicate his Word to us. We respect them. We pray for them. We encourage them. It is natural then for some people to observe that and think, "I want to do that for others. I want to encourage them, I want to be a blessing to them" and God can use that as part of the process of calling that person into ministry. However, some people have a selfish view of it. They think, "I want to be respected like that. I want to have influence in people's lives like that." That is a sinful motivation. What happens to a person like that when they do not get the respect that they think they deserve? They generally implode or explode. They looked at the position of

teaching and preaching as a position of respect and authority instead of a position of serving and washing feet.

2) But does not reflect it in life

I know way to many people who are very learned about theological matters, but whose lives do not reflect the very truth they claim to believe and are so capable of explaining. How do you know if a person is a genuine bible teacher? Well, one of the ways is to look at the person's life. How does he love his wife? How does he influence his home? Do his children love him? Do his friends and co-workers respect him? What is his credit like? Does he pay his bills on time? What is his reputation with those whom he does business with?

C. One who is deceived

1 John 1 tells us about the person who does not tell the truth to others and who ends up believing his own lies. A person who is truly deceived may think that he is telling you the truth, but in reality is incapable of discerning the truth from error. You cannot just a person's word for it because...

II. **There are False Prophets who appear to be good guys.** – *“who come to you in sheep's clothing”*

Sheep is a term that is used to describe people who are genuine followers of Christ. A person can learn to mimic the sheep around him and can put on a good act. This is one of the reasons why our life together as a church is not defined simply by the time that we spend together in a worship service. If this is all the more relationship that we have with one another, then we really do not know one another.

A. You cannot know people from a distance.

Paul told Timothy to watch his life and doctrine. This is why “religious” TV cannot replace the church. Shepherds have to smell like sheep. The guy who tells you how to live but whose life is not known to you because he is in another city may share some helpful information with you, but it is not church.

Look at how Jesus made disciples. His life was wide open to them. They spent days and nights, weeks and months, even years together. Jesus did not have a private life and a public life. It was all one life.

We had a guest speaker here whose content and delivery was wonderful. I really appreciated what he had to say. But he refused to talk to me. He was not someone that I really knew very well, but he had certainly been recommended and I knew of him, so I was glad to have him come here. But I could not get the guy to have a conversation with me. And after he was done speaking, he left. He never said good-bye, thank-you, or anything. He seriously, walked up the aisle, and out of the building. Now, what he had to

say was really good. But now, I have a very difficult time hearing anything from him without thinking about this experience because it makes me wonder. Is he always like this? Was this a fluke thing? What is his life really like? I seriously do not know.

But, this is why media can be a blessing and a curse. We can benefit from the teachings of some, but take it for what it is. It cannot replace your church family. Jesus did not send a video feed from heaven. He actually came here in person. Jesus actually looked at the people around him. Jesus actually touched the people around him. People actually looked at Jesus. People actually touched Jesus. The return of Christ will be in person. The church is called to look like Jesus.

This is one of the reasons why one of the qualifications of an elder is being hospitable. Does he have people in his home? Does the church have opportunity to observe his life outside of the pulpit? You cannot know people from a distance. Also...

B. Nice does not mean right.

I knew a man “in the ministry” and worked with him (not here) who appeared to be one of the most thoughtful, concerned and personable people you could meet. I knew him behind the scenes. He was an incredible manipulator. He knew the power of flattery and he used it skillfully. He never said anything in his public ministry that was heretical, but privately he used people. He was “in the ministry” in order to get out from it everything that he could.

III. There are False Prophets who look like good guys who will destroy you. – *“but inwardly are ravenous wolves”*

I have found that with many people (not all, but in my experience, most) who claim to be atheists, that they have had a very bad experience with someone who claimed to represent God, or be in a position of trust in the church and turned out to be a hypocrite. The person who trusted was hurt so deeply that he/she said, I will never trust again. It is like being eaten by a wolf. One of the ways that we protect our children from being atheists is by guarding the church from false teachers and by helping them learn discernment with grace and humility.

The church is an easy target. As I said, we are people of grace. We are people of hope. We are people of love. Our instinct and default response is to believe your story and take you at face value. But, we also know that over time, what a person really is, is most likely going to be revealed. There are many different reasons why people come to church. (hit on girls, get customers, get attention, get pity, get money) We are called to love and to be on guard. We cannot pick the one over the other. In fact, it is because we love that we are on guard.

This is particularly true if you have a superstar for a leader/pastor. Now, you do not have that problem. I am not in high demand. I have about 200 Twitter followers, which is less than half of most junior high girls. But, Christianity is susceptible to superstars. But,

when a group is built on a personality, you either have a cult or it is cultish, even if the personality is speaking the truth. When a group is built on the Word, you have a church. A church is built by the Word from the ground up. A cult is built by a personality from the top down. I am not discounting the fact that God uses certain persons in unique ways, but that gifting can be a danger that both the speaker and the listener must be aware of.

IV. **Jesus is warning us about false prophets who only appear to be good guys.**

They are not good guys, but they look like it. So, do not just take their word for it. Examine their lives. Jesus is warning us...

A. **So you do not share their fate.** (19)

A false prophet, like a rotten tree is only good for burning.

B. **So you can warn others.**

This is not fun. I do not enjoy addressing problems, but I (and the elders) have to. I do not want you to be led astray. This is what the book of Galatians is about. This is what Paul warned Timothy about in 1 and 2 Timothy and what he warned the elders at Ephesus about in Acts 20. Peter addressed this in his epistles as did John in his and as did Jesus again in Revelation. "Beware" means to be always on your guard.

C. **So you can be discerning.**

The gospel is so precious and the church is so important, that we have to guard her. Therefore,

- 1) I am responsible to warn you about false prophets.
- 2) You are responsible to know about false prophets.
- 3) You are responsible to warn others about false prophets.

Note the relationship between false prophets and the previous passage. False prophets will tell you that you do not have to walk the narrow road, but can live on the easy road and be just fine.

V. **How do you know who the False Prophets are?**

A. **What do they believe?**

B. **How do they live?**

- 1) What is their reputation at home?

- 2) What is their reputation with outsiders?
- 3) What is their reputation with those who know them best?

Let me give you two examples and I will wrap this up. A man in the church expressed a lot of interest in being a teacher. He was rather quick to inform me of his qualifications, background, and experience and was not very appreciative of the teachers here since he believed that he could do a much better job than they. He was constantly critical. That in and of itself told me that he was not qualified to teach. But he was rather new to the church, so I just watched. Perhaps I misread him. But, over time it became clear. His own family did not respect him. They did not respect him because he did not live a respectful life. But, he craved respect. He craved being thought of as being smart, insightful, and theologically savvy. It was clear to me that he saw the opportunity of teaching as a means to getting the respect that he failed to earn with the people who really knew him. It was sad. We could not let him be a teacher and feed that idol. We could not let him be a teacher and therefore teach his family that it does not matter how a man lives in his home, as long as he presents an intelligent sounding lesson in a bible class. He caused enough problems in their lives as it was. They needed clarity with grace. They needed discernment with humility. His profession of faith was fine. The words that he chose to use to describe the truth were accurate, but his life did not support it. His life blew up the words that he used. That, according to Jesus is a false prophet. Why? The fruit is rotten. The fruit of his life revealed that the tree was diseased.

Example #2. Joel Osteen – video (Larry King Show)

John 14.6 – “This works for me, but may not work (apply) to everyone.” But is that what Jesus said? Did Jesus say that this may not work for everyone? Did he say that as long as you are sincere that you can get to God through another means? So, if Jesus did not say that (and he didn’t) then who does Joel think he is to trump the Word? Even if he pretends to be humble by saying, I don’t know, I’m not sure, I cannot judge, etc., The bottom line is this. Joel has taken away a period in God’s grammar and has replaced it with a question mark. What I am about to say is going to sound harsh, but I need to say this. Do you realize what you are doing when you take away a period and replace it with a question mark? You are doing exactly what Satan did in Genesis 3.

In this sermon Jesus is establishing a new community. We are that new community, only if we hear his voice and follow him. If we hear the voice of pretenders and follow them, we will be deceived into thinking that we are part of the kingdom of Christ, when we are simply pretenders.