

Command #12: Beware of False Prophets

Matthew 7:15-23 & 16:6-12 // Scott Torres & Greg Singerle

¹⁵“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. ¹⁶ By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

²¹“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ ²³ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’

Condensed Version

Read Matthew 7:15-23 and discuss these questions with your disciple(s):

1. Who is Jesus talking to?
2. What does Jesus warning his followers to do?
3. How can Jesus’ followers detect false teachers? What illustrations does he use and why?
4. According to verse 21, who will and will not enter the kingdom of heaven?
5. What will false disciples say to Jesus on the day of judgement as to why they should enter into the kingdom of heaven?
6. What will Jesus tell false disciples in verse 23? Why?

Study (answers follow below)

1. Meditate on Matthew 7:15-23 and make several observations about the passage.
2. Who is Jesus talking to?
3. What is Jesus’s warning in verse 15?
4. What is the description of the false prophets in verse 15? What does Jesus mean by this?
5. How will God’s people recognize these false prophets?
6. What question does Jesus ask in verse 16? What does he mean?
7. What illustration does Jesus use in helping people recognize these false prophets?
8. What will eventually happen to a false prophet? How do you gather this from verse 19?
9. According to verse 21, who will and will not enter the kingdom of heaven?
10. What will false disciples say to Jesus on the day of judgement as to why they should enter into the kingdom of heaven?
11. What will Jesus tell false disciples in verse 23? Why?

Answers:

1. Own observations.
2. His disciples and the crowd that has gathered around him on the hill. (Matthew 5:1-2)
3. Watch out for or beware of false prophets.
4. They will come and look like sheep but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. These false prophets look normal...even like friends. However, inwardly they have come to scatter and devour God's people. Deception is their guise. They mask themselves as authorized spokesmen.
5. By their fruits or the way they live their lives. They will not live or teach in accordance to the kingdom way that Jesus has been teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.
6. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? Grapes and figs come from their perspective vines or trees. Thorn bushes and thistles are hurtful weeds. People pick grapes and figs to eat and be nourished. They would never intentionally pick a thorn bush or thistles. False prophets cannot speak God's message and display the kingdom righteousness that Jesus is speaking about in the Sermon on the Mount.
7. A tree that produces good or bad fruit. The idea here is that a false prophet may at first appear to be fruitful but will ultimately not produce good fruit in their lives and doctrine.
8. A false prophet will be thrown in the fire or banished from God's presence. Verse 19 states that a false prophet will be "cut down and thrown into the fire." This is probably a reference to be thrown into hell.
9. Those who says to Jesus "Lord, Lord" and did not do the will of the Father in Heaven will not. Those who do the will of the Father in heaven will enter the kingdom of heaven. Doing for God always follows right believing about Jesus. The disconnect with these people seem to be in how they were living outside of performing in Jesus' name.
10. False disciples will say 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' They will hold up their record of false sayings and counterfeit miracles they performed by a spirit other than the Holy Spirit.
11. Jesus will say 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!' These false disciples never knew Jesus personally and their lives were characterized by evil. They proclaimed one thing with their mouth but lived opposed to the will of the Father. Ultimately, they did not live respective kingdom lives spelled out in the Sermon on the Mount.

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Worship

These verses contain what I (Greg) feel are the most sobering words in all of Scripture – that Christ does not know many who claim to follow Him (i.e., they are not truly saved). We know that believing is the means to salvation but an equally critical component is the object of that belief. People can sincerely believe something that is not true and therefore has no power to save. This is the realm of the false teacher.

You might be surprised to learn that bankers are trained to identify counterfeit currency primarily by becoming intimately familiar with genuine currency so that when a counterfeit is presented, it is easily identified. God has given us a source of absolute truth – His Word – which is the standard by which something presented as truthful is to be evaluated. Each person must become intimately familiar with God's Word so that he or she will recognize that which is false. And the person who is not himself or herself intimately familiar with the truth contained in God's Word is at the mercy of the authenticity of the person presenting "truth." This is exact circumstance that Jesus warns against repeatedly when he states, "Take heed that no man deceive you!"

While knowing God's Word is something that must be accomplished on your own, let's examine a section of scripture that gives further insight into what false teachers look like, as well as some Scripture that gives a couple simple tests to determine whether or not a person truly represents Christ.

Questions:

Acts 20:28-32

1. Who specifically is Paul addressing with this warning?
2. What is Paul warning them about?
3. How are these false teachers described?
4. Where do these false teachers come from?
5. What do false teachers do?
6. What is the false teacher's goal?

1 John 4:1-6

7. What is the purpose of this section of Scripture?
8. John mentions several ways to identify false teachers. Can you put them in your own words? (It will take a little thinking and reading between the lines to do this.)
9. Do you actively employ all these defenses?

Answers:

1. He is addressing the leaders of the Ephesians church.
2. He is warning them about false teachers and their responsibility as leaders in the church to protect the flock from them.
3. They are described as "fierce wolves," no doubt picking up on Jesus' description. (Some interesting facts about wolves: They can smell prey over a mile away and hear prey 10 miles away; they are highly collaborative; they are opportunists – they can sense weakness through sight, hearing and smell; they are not ambush predators that rely on surprise but use their endurance to wear down their pray, relentlessly chasing their prey for miles until it is unable to escape; they can end up losing their own lives to kill their prey; they bring young wolves on the hunt to ensure the next generation is well trained.)

4. They arise from their own selves. It is not clear whether Paul was referring to the leaders only or the church in general (probably the latter) but the point is that false teachers attack from inside, not outside, the church. They are well disguised, just as Judas was so well disguised that each apostle questioned whether he would betray Christ before questioning Judas. (I don't think there is evidence that Judas taught false things but my point is that he seemed authentic to everyone...except Jesus.)
5. They speak twisted things. The word translated twisted means to distort or to misinterpret. Just as Satan before them distorted the Word of God to deceive Eve, so now false prophets today distort God's Word to deceive.
6. To draw away the disciples after them. This tells us that we are not above being deceived. In Galatians 2:11-14 Paul recounts an event where Peter, Barnabas and all the Jews in the church at Antioch were led astray by false teaching. Although we cannot lose salvation we can still be led astray by false teaching.
7. To present the Christian with the means by which to test teachers to determine whether or not they are from God.
8. There are several tests listed:
 - a. Do they confess Jesus as coming in the flesh (verses 2-3)? This has two main areas:
 - i. Do they profess Jesus as God (not a god or that he became god but that Jesus is the One True God of the Old Testament in the flesh)?
 - ii. Do they believe and profess all that Jesus accomplished in the flesh? These are those things that we as Christians believe as essential – virgin birth; sinless life; death on the cross; full atonement for all sin – past, present and future, resurrection from the dead; etc.
 - b. Do they live an overcoming life (verses 4-5)? We often hear the verse “greater is He who is in me...” out of context. It is actually one of the tests for a false teacher. Those who are indwelt by God's spirit outwardly manifest evidence that they have overcome the world. This means they do not seek worldly things (money, possessions, power, position, etc.); they do not accept the world's views or teachings; and their message is against the world (making them unpopular with the world).
 - c. Do they believe that the Bible is the Word of God (verse 6, “listen to us” referring to the writers of the New Testament)? Do they believe that God's Word is inspired, authoritative (in every matter), inerrant; etc.?
9. I hope you do because it is what God told us to do – to test every spirit. You will note that some of the tests above take intimate knowledge of a person. What are you to do when some of these items can't be verified? Never let your guard down and be very, very careful; pray for God's protection; utilize those in your life you are certain do pass the test; and examine everything they say against God's Word. What do you do if someone fails the test? Don't listen to them.

Obey

1. When it comes to being aware of false prophets and false believers, what can you do to help you WATCH OUT?
2. Take a moment to examine your heart and life to see if you know Christ. What can you do to ensure that you are not like the false believers in verses 21-23 who profess to know Christ and do works in his name, but don't truly know him?

Train (How to help disciple others)

1. Study Matthew 7:15-23 yourself, ask your disciples to study it, then discuss it and pray about it together.
2. Help your disciples to know Jesus through the Scriptures. In particular, know scriptures that speak of his deity, humanity, and redemptive work.
3. Study the false beliefs and prophets in Scripture. You can begin with: 1 John 2:18-23, 1 John 4:1-3, 2 John 7, Acts 13:6-8, John 10:30-33, Matthew 24:11, 26-27, 2 Peter 3:1-13.