

Sermon preached at Woodbury Community Church, Woodbury, MN on Sunday,
October 9, 2011, by Rev. Brian D. Schulenburg

MATTHEW 7:15-20

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.

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT: LIVING AS CITIZENS OF GOD’S KINGDOM #32 **DECEPTION IN THE CHURCH**

Kent Hughes begins his exposition of Matthew 7:15-20 with a story from Chuck Swindoll. He writes, “Chuck Swindoll tells the story about an unforgettable evening when a friend of his ate dog food. Contrary to what we might expect, he was not starving, nor was he being initiated into a fraternity. Rather, it happened at an elegant physician’s home near Miami. 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. Hors d’oeuvres a la Alpo! The deed was not perpetrated by an enemy but by a friend. (With friends like that, who needs enemies!) She had just graduated from a gourmet cooking course and decided she would put her skills to the ultimate test – and did she ever. After doctoring up those miserable 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. Evidently the woman’s friends were a pretty laid-back group because everyone had a good laugh when she told them what they had been eating. To each their own.

That is a perfect illustration of what goes on in another realm – namely, religious deception. Every day professional Christians, phony preachers, are marketing their wares on shiny platters decorated in such a way that people do not know what they are really getting. Their dishes are topped with the language of orthodoxy – pious religious clichés and buzzwords – and are eagerly being consumed by the tragically grateful. They even pay for it by the millions. That should never happen, and certainly the Lord does not want it to happen. That is why as he proceeds with the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, he gives advice to those who do not want to be lead astray. The lengthy, driving conclusion began in verses 13 and 14 with the Lord’s urging us to enter the narrow gate and to take the narrow road that the Sermon has prescribed. Now in verse 15 it is as if we can see our Lord Jesus Christ standing by the fork that separates the narrow and broad way saying as our text records, “15 Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.”¹

¹ Kent Hughes, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), p. 247.

Wolves are majestic animals. Strong and mighty, they travel in packs. They are incredibly smart hunters who love meat. And in the days that Jesus lived they were known as the natural enemy of all sheep. Shepherds who inhabited the hills of Israel knew much about these predatory animals. While attacks of humans by wolves are extremely rare, it was and remains very common for a wolf, or pack of wolves to work their way into a sheep pen and devour many of the sheep in the flock.

Jesus referred to Himself as the Good Shepherd on multiple occasions, so the imagery that Christ uses of a wolf coming to devour the flock of sheep should come to us as no surprise. A good shepherd was willing to risk his life to defend his sheep. In John 10:11, Jesus said, “11 I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” If you are a Christian, then one of the ways that Christ views you is as a sheep in His pasture. The Psalmist David viewed himself that way. In Psalm 100:3 he wrote, “3 Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.”

As our protective shepherd, Jesus wanted us to be aware of the fact that there would be many false prophets and teachers who would invade His church, seeking to deceive the Bride of Christ.

In teaching about the risk of deception in the church, Jesus showed the true character of false teachers in verse 15.

15 Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.

This would not be the only time that Jesus would warn His disciples about false teachers. In Matthew 24:10-11, when speaking about the signs of the End Times, Jesus said, “10 At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, 11 and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people.”

There is no question that before Jesus returns, apostasy, or false teaching will increase. And, one of the sad truths is that many who call themselves believers will turn away from the truth. John MacArthur has written a book that I think all Christians should read. It’s called, *The Truth War: Fighting for Certainty in an Age of Deception*. It was written in 2007, and in some ways it’s a bit prophetic. In his introduction he quotes many of the leaders of the “Emerging Church” movement. Some of them were just beginning their walk away from orthodox Christianity when the book was written. In the past few months some of those quoted in the book have taken such large steps away from the orthodox faith that what they are writing about and preaching about is almost unrecognizable when placed next to the lens of Scripture. Doctrines like heaven and hell, salvation by faith through the grace of Jesus alone, the existence of Satan, the God of creation, the sanctity of marriage and the sanctity of life have been stripped away from their theology; replaced with something that is often times the exact opposite of what Scripture teaches. The sad truth is that many of the books and videos that these teachers put out are at the top of the bestseller lists in our Christian bookstores. Many of the churches

pastored by these preachers are some of our nation's largest. It reminds me of something that the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:3.

In 2 Timothy 4:3, he wrote, "3 For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear."

Does any of this sound familiar?

When I was in college the pastor at my home church preached a message that I'll never forget. It was based upon 2 Timothy 4:3, and he called it, "Ministry in an Age of Itchy Ears." Perhaps its impact on my life lay in the fact that I was training for ministry and I didn't want to be a pastor who only preached the easy message. Pastors are called by God to teach the entire message of the Word of God, not just those parts that are popular.

Martin Luther knew a thing or two about preaching an unpopular truth. The great reformer once wrote about the conviction that undergirded his passion for the truth. He wrote, "If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at the moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages there the loyalty of the soldier is proved; and to be steady on all the battlefield besides, is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point."²

In other words, we have got to guard ourselves against preachers and teachers who only want to preach that which will not be offensive.

In Matthew 15:9, Jesus spoke about the false teachers of His day and age.

9 They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.

The Apostle Paul modeled much of his ministry after Jesus. As he planted churches across the Ancient Near East, Paul saw it as part of his duty to shepherd the flock that God had given him. Part of that shepherding involved warning the young churches about false teachers.

To the church at Galatia, Paul wrote:

Galatians 1:6-9 – 6 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— 7 which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! 9 As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!

² John MacArthur, *The Truth War* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), p. 26.

To the church at Colossi, Paul wrote:

Colossians 2:4-8 - 4 I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. 5 For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how orderly you are and how firm your faith in Christ is. 6 So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, 7 rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. 8 See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.

To the Ephesian church, Paul wrote about the benefits of spiritual maturity. He wrote in Ephesians 4:14, "14 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming."

And, to his young protégée, Timothy, Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 4:1, 2, "1 The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. 2 Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron."

A common denominator in all of these passages of Scripture is that these false teachers will come from within the church. One of the most powerful tools that Satan has at his disposal is wolves in sheep's clothing. These false teachers look and sound like us. They dress like us. They use religious sounding language. They attend lots of religious services. They read lots of the same books. Like I alluded to earlier they even preach at some of our nation's largest churches and write some of the bestselling books for the Christian market.

Martyn Lloyd Jones wrote, "The picture we need to have in our minds, therefore, should be rather this. The false prophet is a man who comes to us, and who at first has the appearance of being everything that could be desired. He is nice and pleasing and pleasant; he appears to be thoroughly Christian, and seems to say the right things. His teaching in general is quite all right and he uses many terms that should be used and employed by a true Christian teacher. He talks about God, he seems to be saying everything that a Christian should say. He is obviously in sheep's clothing, and his way of living seems to correspond. So, you do not suspect that there is anything wrong at all; there is nothing that at once attracts your attention or arouses your suspicions, nothing glaringly wrong."³

Deitrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "There is someone standing by my side, who looks just like a member of the Church. He is a prophet and a preacher. He looks like a Christian, he talks and acts like one. But, dark powers are mysteriously at work; it was those who sent him into our midst . . . He may even be unconscious himself of what he is doing.

³ D. Martin Lloyd Jones, *The Sermon on the Mount*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960), p. 243.

The devil can give him every encouragement and at the same time keeps him in the dark about his own motives.”⁴

Kent Hughes writes, “The result of such preachers’ work is disastrous. Jesus says they are ‘ferocious wolves’ – a horrific title! They are a shepherd’s – and *the* Shepherd’s – nightmare. They would destroy every sheep in the flock if undetected.

If false preachers came into most evangelical churches as blatant heretics, they would be banged over the head with Bibles and sent packing. But when they come with the right language, credentials, and culture, they deceive the unwary elect.”⁵

So, how are we to recognize false teaching when we come upon it? How do we distinguish between someone who is truly preaching the Word of God and someone who is distorting it, either intentionally or unintentionally?

We test the preachers and that which is taught.

This is something that the church at Berea was commended for. In Acts 17:10, Paul and Silas arrive in Berea and begin to teach the Jewish people gathered in the Synagogue about Jesus, the Messiah.

Listen to verse 11 of Acts 17:

11 Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

Jesus told those listening to the Sermon on the Mount that we can distinguish between a false teacher and a true messenger of the Gospel by looking at their fruit. Look at verses 16-20 of Matthew 7.

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.

So let me give you some of the fruit that will help you recognize false prophets or preachers. These four doctrinal tests come from Kent Hughes’ book, “The Sermon on the Mount.”

Four Doctrinal Tests Necessary for Discerning False Prophets – From Kent Hughes’ Chapter “Discerning False Preachers,” in his book “The Sermon on the Mount”⁶

⁴ Deitrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), pp. 212, 213.

⁵ Hughes, p. 249.

- 1) The false prophet avoids preaching on such things as holiness, righteousness, justice, and wrath of God.

In other words, this is a preacher who emphasizes God's love but fails to ever mention sin and God's response to it. This is a pastor who doesn't want to point out that the life of a follower of Jesus ought to look markedly different than the world. This pastor is content to preach a theology that looks remarkably similar to the wide road that leads to destruction, not the narrow way of Jesus.

I know pastors who refuse to preach about sin because they don't want to offend anyone. They say, "People come to church because they want to be encouraged. They have been beat up all week long. The last thing they need to hear about is how God views their sin. And besides," they say, "how can I preach on sin when I am a sinner too?"

- 2) He avoids preaching on the doctrine of the final judgment

Francis Chan has written a phenomenal new book entitled, *Erasing Hell*, which debunks the current teaching that is so popular that would strip the Bible of any reference to eternal punishment. Jesus spoke more about the doctrine of Hell than He did the doctrine of heaven. Pastors who ignore this do the church an incredible disservice at best and will have culpability in the eternal destination of those who never knew better at worst.

Two of the largest cults in America, the Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses reject the doctrine of Hell. They have whitewashed Hell and replaced it with a less offensive doctrine.

- 3) False prophets fail to emphasize the fallenness and depravity of mankind

False teachers begin with the premise that man is basically good. This kind of teaching is diametrically opposed to what Christ says at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. A failure to recognize our spiritual fallenness and our total depravity apart from the grace of God means that we will not enter the Kingdom of God.

- 4) False prophets de-emphasize the substitutionary death and atonement of Christ

Some of these pastors reject preaching about the cross at all. "It's a brutal symbol from a time long ago. Images of crucifixion are too graphic for modern society. And, the idea that Christ went to the cross to suffer for our sins? Well that's just a little too dramatic. Christ didn't need to die so that we could be redeemed," these pastors might say. Or, maybe they just choose not to talk about the cross at all.

⁶ Hughes, pp. 250, 251.

Hughes gave a great example. He writes, “A prime example is Sir John Bowring, author of the magnificent hymn, *In The Cross of Christ I Glory*. He was an English Unitarian and Utilitarian. He was hardly a believer in the Atonement.

False prophets talk about God. They wax eloquent about Jesus and even talk about his death on the cross. Many do not see them as heretics. They are likable – truly nice people – pleasant to be around. Sometimes churches grow under their ministries, but the following years are tragic, bringing a sea of unbelieving children and empty pews.”⁷

How important is truth to you?

Is truth worth fighting for? Is it worth defending? Listen, we can know and understand truth. Jesus referred to himself as the Way, the *Truth* and the Life. Want to be a discerner of truth? Then go to the source of truth. God’s Word, the Bible is our source. The more you are in it, the more you recognize false doctrine when you hear it. The more you are in the Word, the more apparent it will be to you when you are reading false doctrine. Again, so many of today’s best selling Christian books are teaching something doctrine that is the exact opposite of what the Bible teaches.

MacArthur writes, “Controversy and conflict in the church are never to be relished or engaged in without sufficient cause. But in every generation, the battle for truth has proved ultimately unavoidable , because the enemies of truth are relentless. Truth is *always* under assault. And it is actually a sin *not* to fight when vital truths are under attack.

That is true even though fighting sometimes results in conflict within the visible community of professing Christians. In fact, whenever the enemies of gospel truth succeed in infiltrating the church, faithful believers are obliged to take the battle to them even there. That is certainly the case today, as it has been since apostolic times.”⁸

In his book, *The Truth War*, MacArthur spent 30 pages in his Appendix talking about why discernment is out of fashion. I want to quickly share those with you here.

Why Discernment is Out of Fashion – From the Appendix of John MacArthur’s book “The Truth War”⁹

1) The Exposure to More Religious Ideas than Any People in History

MacArthur told a story about stopping at a shop in rural Arkansas to purchase a quilt for his wife. While in the shop, MacArthur noticed that the husband of the woman who ran the shop had a lot of Christian books. Mixed in with the Christian books were books by Scientologists, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses and many other religions. MacArthur asked the man, who had already told him that he was a believer, “You read from quite

⁷ Hughes, p. 251.

⁸ MacArthur, pp. xxiii-xxiv.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 185-215.

an assortment of material. These all represent different beliefs. Do you accept any one of them?"

"I find there's good in all of it," he said. "I read it all and just look for the good."

Like his wife's quilts, the man had patched together his faith, picking and choosing that which he liked from a lot of different religions. In a sense he created God in his own image and was on the wide road that leads to destruction.¹⁰

I know so many people like this man. I have close friends who call themselves Christians and yet dabble in Eastern mysticism, horoscopes, or spend great amounts of time reading the teachings of New Age authors in book clubs under the guise of trying to understand the world, all the while adopting the mindset of the authors.

2) The Rise of Extreme Tolerance

Our children are taught from a young age that tolerance is the ultimate ideal. But tolerating that which is not true, or calling that which is false, true isn't love.

MacArthur writes, "Anyone who cites religious beliefs as a reason to reject another person's way of life is automatically viewed with the same contempt that used to be reserved for out-and-out religious heretics. The culture around us has declared war on biblical standards.

Some Christians unwittingly began following suit several years ago. That has opened the door for a whole generation in the church to embrace postmodern relativism openly and deliberately. They don't want the truth presented with stark black-and-white clarity anymore. They prefer having issues of right and wrong, true and false, good and bad deliberately painted in shades of gray. We have reached a point where the typical churchgoer today assumes that is the proper way of understanding truth. Any degree of certainty has begun to sound offensive to people's postmodernized ears."¹¹

3) A Refusal to Shun the World

I said it last week and I'll say it again. I'm afraid the church has become a place that wants enough of Jesus to get into heaven and enough of the world to keep life interesting. We want to be as much like the rest of the world as possible, forgetting that God has called us to live as aliens and strangers in the world. Discernment goes out the window when we spend our days entertaining ourselves with the world's buffet table instead of feasting on God's offerings.

4) A Failure to Interpret Scripture Carefully

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 186-188.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 189-190.

We spend so little time in God's Word that we don't recognize when Scripture is interpreted correctly and when a teacher is distorting God's Word to drive home his or her point.

A few years ago one of my best friend's was part of the search committee for the new pastor at their church. This guy was a phenomenal communicator and really quite an entertainer. He would have his congregation laughing all the time. My friend became concerned about the direction that the interview process with this candidate was going when the candidate said, "I don't use any commentaries or outside sources in preparing my sermons. I just figure it out all by myself." The guy had ignored years of biblical interpretation, every rule of hermeneutics, which is the science of interpreting Scripture properly, and depended solely upon himself to figure out what Scripture means. Many of us are guilty of the same things. We are lazy in our handling of the Word, if we handle it at all. The preacher was called by the church, split the church in a few month's time, and was later arrested for something related to the arrogance with which he lived his life.

5) The Neglect of Church Discipline

When it comes to dealing with sin in the church, so very few churches take Jesus' instructions in Matthew 18 seriously. When a brother or sister is actively living a life of sin, we are to confront that person and urge them to repent. We don't just look the other way when someone that we love is actively pursuing a life of sin.

6) A Lack of Spiritual Maturity

I have read you statistics on multiple occasions about the growing level of spiritual immaturity in the church of Jesus Christ. The church is at a point of crisis when it comes her level of spiritual maturity. MacArthur writes, "The brand of Christianity prevalent in this generation may be shallower than at any other time in history."¹²

So what is the solution? I love what MacArthur says, "The path to discernment is the way of spiritual maturity. And the only means to spiritual maturity is mastery of the Word of God."¹³

Someone once asked, "If you were arrested for being a Christian would there be enough evidence to convict you of the crime?"

That's essentially what Jesus is demanding of us in Matthew 7:20.

20 Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 211.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

Deception in the church is ultimately recognized by the fruit that the deceiver produces. Genuine disciples are also recognized by their fruit. What is the fruit of your life? When people see you do they see Christ in you?

I read a great story about the 1952 Nobel Peace Prize winner this week. "Reporters and city officials gathered at a Chicago railroad station one afternoon in 1953. The person they were meeting was the 1952 Nobel Peace Prize winner. A few minutes after the train came to a stop, a giant of a man - six feet four inches with bushy hair and a large mustache stepped from the train. Cameras flashed. City officials approached him with hands outstretched. Various people began telling him how honored they were to meet him.

The man politely thanked them and then, looking over their heads, asked if he could be excused for a moment. He quickly walked through the crowd until he reached the side of an elderly black woman who was struggling with two large suitcases. He picked up the bags and with a smile, escorted the woman to a bus. After helping her aboard, he wished her a safe journey. As he returned to the greeting party he apologized, "Sorry to have kept you waiting."

The man was Dr. Albert Schweitzer, the famous missionary doctor who had spent his life helping the poor in Africa. In response to Schweitzer's action, one member of the reception committee said with great admiration to the reporter standing next to him, "That's the first time I ever saw a sermon walking."¹⁴

May you be walking sermons, teaching the truth wherever God takes you!

¹⁴ http://www.sermoncentral.com/print_friendly.asp?ContributorID=&SermonID=45275