

## The Commands of Christ

### Sermon # 17

#### *"Beware of False Teachers"*

#### Matthew 7:15-20

In our last examination of the commands of Christ we looked at the command recorded in Matthew seven and verse 13. The imperative command is found when Jesus very directly and very strikingly says (*eiselthete*) *"enter by the narrow gate"* What is depicted here is life's greatest choice, the choice is between the way of life and the way of destruction.

After having given an invitation *"to enter by the narrow gate,"* to come to God by the only way he has provided, Jesus warns that not everyone who claims to speak for God actually does so.

*"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. (16) You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? (17) Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. (18) A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. (19) Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (20) Therefore by their fruits you will know them."*

*First, these false prophets are dangerous.*

The next imperative is found in verse fifteen where we are warned to *"beware (prosechete) of false prophets."* He says, *"Beware of (literally hold your minds away from false prophets."*

They are called either pseudo-prophets as here (they probably claimed divine inspiration) or pseudo-apostles (because they came be an apostle) or pseudo-teacher or even pseudo-Christ's.' But each was pseudo (*pseudos*) which is a Greek word for lie.

These false teachers are just as dangerous today as they were then. They come along and say, *"The God of love would never send anyone to Hell."* *"Satan is a myth."* *"Sin is a sickness. It has nothing to do with guilt. You just need to get rid of your guilt."* *"The Bible does not condemn Homosexuality."* *"There is no such thing as absolute right and wrong, we must judge every situation by its circumstances."* *"There is more than one way to heaven, you just need to be sincere."*

False teachers are guilty according to the prophet Jeremiah of *"filling the people with false hopes. Jeremiah 23: 16-17, "Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you. They make you worthless; They speak a vision of their own heart, Not from the mouth of the LORD. (17) They continually say to those who despise Me, "The*

*LORD has said, "You shall have peace"; And to everyone who walks according to the dictates of his own heart, they say, "No evil shall come upon you."*

*"The false prophet is always a very comforting preacher. As you listen to him he always gives you the impression that there is not very much wrong. He admits, of course, that there is a little; he is not fool enough to say that there is nothing wrong. But he says that all is well and will be well...Because he never disturbs you and never makes you feel uncomfortable. You carry on as you are, you are all right, you do not have to worry about the strait gate or the narrow way." [Dr. Martin Lloyd Jones]*

Another of the Old Biblical scholars, Arthur Pink says the one characteristic of false teacher is, *"There is nothing in their preaching which searches the conscience and renders the empty professor uneasy, nothing which humbles and causes hearers to mourn before God; but rather that which puffs up, makes them pleased with themselves and to rest content in false assurance".* [Arthur Pink. "An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount." (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969) p. 339. ]

These false prophets are dangerous!

*Secondly, these false teachers are deceptive.*

The danger is not only are there going to be wolves in the world, but that they are going to be wolves who have disguised themselves as sheep.

We not only have them in the pew we have them in the pulpit. Not content to pass merely as one of the sheep they would pass themselves off as a shepherd.

How could people be taken in by a Jim Jones? Some of you are too young to remember that in 1978 Jim Jones led over 900 of his followers into committing suicide in Jonestown, Guyana. John MacArthur in his commentary on Matthew observed, *"The greater tragedy of Jonestown was not that nearly a thousand people died, but that they died believing they were serving God."* [John MacArthur. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Matthew 1-7. (Chicago: Moody, 1985) p. 463]

In fact, in the case of Jim Jones we have a striking illustration of this truth. Mel White in his book "Deceived," gives us an interesting picture of Jones. "He knew how to inspire hope. He was committed to people in need; He counseled prisoners and juvenile delinquents. He started a job placement center; He opened rest homes and homes for the retarded; He had a health clinic; He organized a vocational training center; He provided free legal aid; He founded a community center; He preached about God. He even claimed to cast out demons, do miracles and heal."

The same can be said for David Koresh, the leader of the fiasco at Waco, Texas in 1993 in which numbers of his "Branch Davidian" followers died. Steven R. Reed writing for the

Houston Chronicle said, "The beginning was innocent enough. A charismatic young man named Vernon Howell embraced God's word, sought God's will and worshipped God's Son." This kind of an observation only reveals to us how hard it is to look at outward appearances and judge what is really going on in the heart. Reed goes on to conclude, "Called to serve Christ, Howell-Koresh instead had tried to supplant Him." Tragically for many, what appeared to be a man seeking to serve God was instead a man deceived and deceiving others.

But at least part of the deception of false teachers is their desire to look just like any other believer. For example, at one time, the cover on the Jehovah Witness Bible called "The New World Translation" was green. But lately, it's been changed to black. Why? Jehovah Witnesses want to look like you. When they come to your door, they'll quote from KJV. Why? Because they want to sound like you.

Mormons spend millions each year on magazine, radio and TV ads to convince you they are just like you. In fact they grow offended to be accused of NOT being Christians. They refer to the "*Book of Mormon*" as "ANOTHER Testament of Jesus Christ."

Religious vocabulary is not a reliable test of true prophets either. One way that false teachers bring heretical ideas into the church is by using orthodox words but filling them with different meaning. For example when the Moonies use some of the same terminology as we do, but it does not mean the same thing at all.

We cannot tell them by the clothes they wear, the ministry they perform, the words they speak, or even their sincerity.

So if a false prophet appears to be a true prophet and a true prophet appears to be a false prophet, how are we to know the difference? If we cannot rely upon outward appearances, upon what should we rely? The key is looking deeper. The key is seeing past the outward appearance.

These false prophets are descriptive!

*Third, there are those who are especially vulnerable to false teachers.*

The first group that is especially vulnerable to false teachers are those who are spiritually weak or immature. One of the most frightening findings about those who followed and died with Jim Jones, was that a large majority of them had been raised in Christian homes of one type or another. The wolves that devoured the flock in and around the area where Jesus told this story did so by looking for the stray sheep or those lagging behind. When a lion chases a herd of zebras, he will pick the weakest one or the straggler and pursue it until he overtakes it. The false teachers operate in the same fashion, they infiltrate a group of believers and look for the weak or straggling members, those who are disgruntled and alone.

Peter in describing the false teachers says, (2 Peter 2:14-15) *"... enticing unstable souls. They have a heart trained in covetous practices, and are accursed children. (15) They have forsaken the right way and gone astray..."*

A second group that is especially vulnerable to false teachers are those who have unresolved guilt issues. Unresolved guilt always leaves a person open to spiritual danger. Guilt brings self-condemnation and there is no repentance and forgiveness, there is a readiness to distort the truth in order to accommodate the sin that produced the guilt. Paul describes this group when he says in (2 Timothy 3:6-7), *"For of this sort are those who creep into households and make captives of gullible women loaded down with sins, led away by various lusts,(7) always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth."*

Another group that is especially vulnerable are those who have heard the truth but rejected it.

Also susceptible to false teachers are those who have at some point be exposed to the truth and have either rejected it immediately or they tried to follow it for a while and then turned from it. These people are in extreme danger. I believe that these are who are being written about by Peter in (2 Peter 2:20-22) *"For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning. (21) For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. (22) But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: "A dog returns to his own vomit," and, "a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire."*

There are those who are especially vulnerable!

*Fourth, these false teachers can be detected.*

There is the test of Fruit. Beginning in verse sixteen Jesus uses his second word picture, he contrast the good tree and its good fruit with the bad tree and its evil fruit. He says of the false teachers, *"you will know them by their fruits."*

Since it is an impossibility for an evil tree to produce good fruit – we never mistake a tree when we see its fruit. He says a good tree consistently brings forth good fruit and a corrupt tree continually brings forth evil or bad fruit.

One area in which the Lord expects us to bear good fruit is the area of character. (Gal 5:22-23) *"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, (23) gentleness, self-control..."* So when we see a teacher consistently exhibiting these traits we have reason to believe them to be true, not false teachers. However, when these qualities are missing and 'works of the flesh' are more apparent than "fruit of the spirit" we are justified in looking further.

Another kind of fruit that Jesus emphasizes we may call the fruit of good works or action fruit. Col 1:10. *“that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.”*

A true prophet will be involved in carrying out the ministry in a selfless way. He will not be in it for his own glory. He will not be in it for his own profit. He will be a servant of God seeking to serve others.

Another area of good fruit has to do with sound doctrine. Since a person’s heart is revealed by his words, as a tree is revealed by its fruit we are responsible to test and teach by their words.

What does this person actually teach? One way to test whether someone is a false teacher especially concerns, *“What do they teach about the person of Jesus?”* Is Jesus proclaimed as the one way to God? With the false teachers there is no straight gate or narrow way.

*“The problem is that there has always been a large market for false teachers, because most people do not want to hear the truth. They prefer to hear what is pleasant and flattering, even if it is false and dangerous, over what is unpleasant and unflattering, even if it is true and helpful.”* [John MacArthur]

In 2 Timothy 4:3-4 Paul tells us, *“For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; (4) and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.”*