

Introduction

Do you suppose that Jesus’s disciples smiled, maybe even laughed, at some of the things he said? “Herod is a fox.” You are less than whitewashed tombs.” “A camel going through the eye of a needle.” And in today’s gospel, false prophets being wolves in sheep’s clothing.” I don’t know about you, but some of the things Jesus said would have brought a smile to my face or made me laugh. But as Jesus emphasized in today’s gospel:

FALSE PROPHETS ARE NO LAUGHING MATTER!

Danger

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

PROPHETS In this setting a prophet is someone who claims to speak for God. In today’s world they are people who preach and teach God’s word in public and share it in private. God wants prophets to speak and teach his word faithfully, not adding to it or subtracting from it. He wants them to teach it in its context or setting and taking into account all of Scripture when making applications. When people do this, they are true prophets.

FALSE PROPHETS False prophets don’t do that. There are several kinds of false prophets. One kind is made up of deliberate liars and deceivers. They don’t really care about being faithful to God or really care for the welfare and salvation of his people. They are interested in personal power, popularity, and/or gaining possessions. They are in it for themselves.

Then there are those who want to be faithful to some concept of God and have a desire to lead people to worship and be blessed by their concept of God. These prophets may even claim to have received some revelation that basically establishes a whole new religion – Islam, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Church of the Latter-Day Saints, and more.

Then there are those false prophets who are Christian. They believe in the Trinity. They believe and teach Jesus as the Savior. They teach portions of God’s Word faithfully – enough to make them Christian. But there are some things in their teaching that are not in keeping with God’s word. They may teach a mixture of creation and evolution. They may avoid baptism or teach that baptism is only a rite of submission and obedience to God that one experiences in one’s teen years or older. The Lord’s Supper is simply representative of Jesus’ body and blood and not a miraculous real presence. They may explain away Jesus miracles or teach that marriage is for man and woman, woman and woman, and man and man. They may teach that Jesus will set up a 1000-year reign on earth yet in time with Jerusalem as his center. But all these teachings are not biblical and true. They are false teachings.

WOLVES IN SHEEP’S CLOTHING Jesus says that these false teachers or prophets are wolves in sheep’s clothing. When I see wolves at the zoo they look lazy, cuddly, and like big dogs. But they are relentless, vicious hunters capable of killing moose, elk, and bison, even holding brown bears at bay who threaten a wolf’s den. A male wolf can weigh up to 180 lbs. and deliver bites measuring 400 lbs. per square inch – enough to crush a skull or break bones. They are dangerous.

JESUS’ POINT Jesus’ point is that false prophets are dangerous. Their dangerous because either their teachings never put people on the way that brings them into the family of God and gives eternal life. Or, even though they teach things that are at the heart of the Christian faith and that bring people into the family of God and eternal life, they undermine forgiveness and salvation by the things they take away from God’s Word or add to it.

The second thing Jesus points out about false prophets is that they come in sheep’s clothing. Those who are deliberate liars and deceivers give the impression that they are nice, caring, and godly when they are not. The false teachers who deliver a made-up religion come across as being sincere, committed, and caring. The false teachers who are Christian teach enough of God’s word to seem godly and faithful. They may be nice people. They may do all kinds of caring, charitable, and community-oriented things.

But by their false teaching they are false prophets and can lead people astray. I think of the young Pentecostal missionary I met years ago who even though he believe in the Trinity and in Jesus as his Savior, thought he was going to hell because he could no longer speak in tongues – foreign languages never learned. I think of people lying on their deathbeds who believe in Jesus but don't think they are going to heaven because they have been taught they haven't done enough to earn the right. I think of babies born to Christian families who never get baptized; the people who take communion but don't believe they are receiving Christ's body and blood. This what their prophets taught them. False teachers are not a laughing matter. They are dangerous. But Jesus also says they are identifiable.

Identifiable

“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.”

FRUIT Sometimes when the Bible talks about fruit it's referring to fruits of faith, good works. But here Jesus is using the term fruit to refer to their teaching. Certainly Jesus wants those who are his prophets to be kind, loving, and caring. But he wants them to be faithful in living and teaching his Word from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22, taking the words for what they mean, putting things rightly into their context, and rightly applying law and gospel. He wants prophets to help people see their sin and need for a Savior, to see Jesus as their Savior who saved them, and then guide them in thankful, godly living.

OUR RESPONSIBILITY **“Watch out for false prophets...”** For us to do so we need to know and be clear on God's Word. Our Christian education as youths gave us a foundation for doing this. Our weekly worship strengthens this. Our reading the Bible, reviewing our catechism, or reading other material reinforcing Christian teaching fortifies this. Bible classes equip people for this. At the same time praying for knowledge and understanding will result in the Holy Spirit working through all these things to help us watch out for false prophets.

LAW The problem is that many of use have forgotten more than we learned from our youth instruction. Many Christians do not worship on a frequent basis whether in church, on-line, or via TV. Many Christians seldom, if ever, read their Bible, review their Catechism, or attend a Bible class. The result is that we may not be ready to assume the responsibility Jesus gives to us to watch out for false prophets by checking their teaching in comparison to God's Word even though its very identifiable. They are deadly – spiritually and eternally.

Deadly

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!’”

UNCHRISTIAN PROPHETS & THEIR FOLLOWERS Those false prophets and their followers who don't believe and teach in the God who is three and yet one God, and who don't believe in Jesus as their Savior, right now are outside of the family of God. They will be outside the kingdom of God forever in spite of all their passion, the prayers they prayed to their gods, or the good things they did – maybe even miracles which the devil and demons can enable them to perform.

CHRISTIAN FALSE TEACHERS & THEIR FOLLOWERS Those false teachers and their followers who are Christian, even if the devil isn't successful in leading them away from their Savior, they are saved but the teachings they taught and believed that are false will be exposed. St. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 3: **“¹¹For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹²If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, or straw, ¹³their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. ¹⁴If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. ¹⁵If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss yet will be saved-even though only as one escaping through the flames.”** While these

Christian false teachers and their followers end up in heaven. God is not glorified, and his people are not fed through this false teaching.

False prophets and false teaching are not a laughing matter. So is failing to apply true teaching. So, Jesus tells us to know and apply true teaching.

Know and Apply God's Word

²⁴ "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. ²⁶ But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷ The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash." ²⁸ When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, ²⁹ because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law."

HOUSE ON SAND The person building the house on sand is the person who received Christian education, came to church, was confirmed and didn't apply what was learned maybe never or seldom returning to church. It's the person who comes to worship hearing of God's faithfulness, love, and holy will, and then turns round and does just the opposite – doubts God's love, doesn't believe he or she is save, doesn't find peace in God's presence, and doesn't live to God's glory. When the temptations, troubles, and end of life comes, they aren't equipped through faith in what they learned to handle them.

HOUSE ON ROCK On the other hand, those who reinforced what they learned and apply in their lives are like the person who built their house on rock. It has solid foundation and can't be washed away. They see and acknowledge their sin. They trust in Jesus as their Savior. They find peace in the forgiveness of sins. They trust that God is with them and working for them. They see God's commandments not only as God's will, but good and guidance for thanking God. When the temptations, trials, and even end of life come, they are not afraid but cope with God's help.

In a day and age when we hear messages of panic, anarchy, hatred, justification of immorality, and gloom and doom, remember Jesus said that this would happen. Don't be shocked. Be wise. Be safe. Build on the rock of Jesus and his Word. Hear it. Read it! Trust it! Live it! Share it!