

Danger of False Teaching

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[0 : 00] Now, we're continuing today in our studies in the Sermon on the Mount, reaching today Matthew chapter 7, verse 15, which you'll find on page 812 in the Bible.

So, it's a fairly short passage, page 812, and we'll read verses 15 to 23.

Where Jesus says, Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

On that day, many will say to me, Lord, Lord, do not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name.

And then will I declare to them, I never knew you. Depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.

This is the word of the Lord.

[1 : 41] And before we look at it, let's pray together. Lord God, as we read these words, we realize how painful and pointed they are.

We realize how easily we can talk the talk, say the right things, put on an appearance, and yet be a million miles away from our true relationship with the Lord.

And so we pray, Lord, that as we study these words together today, that you will speak to us. You will challenge us. You will also encourage us.

Because we know that ultimately these are gospel words. Ultimately, these are words which lead to life. And only their rejection leads to death.

So help us, Lord, to hear. Help us to obey. And help us to change those parts in our lives which need changing.

[2 : 42] And to become more the people that you died, that your son died, to make his own. And we ask that in his name. Amen.

If you will agree, one of the great preoccupations today is about healthy food. Program after program tells us what to eat.

And more often than not, what not to eat. Tells us how much sugar or how little sugar we should have. Tells us about calories and so on. Now, all that's good in itself.

But like most human activities, obviously it can go too far. One wonders sometimes how anybody ever survived in previous generations. And I'm sure many of you will agree that the things we are forbidden are usually the things we most want to eat.

But there you are. It is a genuine concern, though. And similarly, in the scriptures, the prophets and the apostles have a genuine concern that our spiritual food is healthy.

[3 : 51] That what we eat will help us to grow. And not destroy us. And not make us unhealthy. And not make us anemic. The word sound that's sometimes used in connection with teaching effectively means healthy.

This is the kind of food that will make Christians healthy. And this is the kind of food that will cause spiritual illness and ultimately death.

And that's what Jesus is talking about here in these verses. Now, the Bible is full of passages like this in both Testaments. The prophets in the Old Testament. The apostles in the New Testament. Conceantly warning us, eat a healthy diet. And it's no accident that, for example, in John chapter 6, Jesus says, whoever eats of me will live.

And that is, of course, parallel whoever believes in me. It's never just an intellectual assent. It's taking on board, making part of ourselves. Someone has said what we eat is what we are.

[4 : 57] Now, that's not exactly true, I'm sure. Nevertheless, there's enough truth in it to make the point. Well, what's the connection, first of all? Some people, when they read this sermon, think it's a series of disconnected ideas.

Edifying statements with no real connection. But in verses 13 and 14, which we read last week, we have the two choices. The narrow gate and the wide gate.

And that's the first connection. The false prophet, the false teacher, will never tell you to avoid the wide gate. The one thing a false prophet will never do is tell people they need to change.

And that is the mark of the false prophet. Everything is wonderful. Everything, you're all right, you're doing well. Now, of course, we need encouragement. But encouragement, as we know, since we're human, needs to be balanced by challenge.

And this is what's happening here. So, it connects with the earlier part of the sermon. And it connects also, it's still about inner integrity.

[6 : 03] Remember, this chapter has been particularly about relationships. About true relationships. And about hypocrisy and the way that poisons relationships.

Now, if a prophet and teacher is a hypocrite, then they're obviously going to have no real relationship with the people they're talking to. Because they are deceiving.

They're not engaging with reality. And it's very, very easy to be deceived. I mean, Jesus and the prophets and the apostles warned about this.

Because it's so easy to be deceived. Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing.

Wouldn't it be easy if a false teacher came into our fellowships wearing a t-shirt saying, I am a wolf?

Now, so far, I've not come across that. No. False teachers, you see, the problem is false teachers don't regard themselves usually as false teachers.

[7 : 03] They regard themselves as coming to give us new insights, fresh insights, different ways of looking at things. I'll come back to that towards the end. But it wouldn't be so easy if every false teacher smelt of brimstone and was a nasty, crooked individual who would deceive nobody.

That's not the point. The point is false teachers are so successful because they tend to be charming, amenable people, the kind of people whom you like to spend time with.

And, of course, if Satan then can also manage to get the truth taught by difficult, angular people, use a theological expression, he's done a double whammy, hasn't he? And, unfortunately, sadly, this happens.

What Jesus is telling us is that you cannot judge a teaching by the teacher because the kind of thing above an air said, oh, so-and-so is such a nice man.

I used to hear this said when I was studying theology, he's such a nice and kind man. He can't be wrong. Now, that is dangerous, and that's what Jesus is warning against.

[8 : 12] And just one more thing before we look at the passage in more detail. This also echoes what the earlier part of the chapter says about judging. Remember, we saw a few weeks ago, don't keep fault-finding, don't keep nitpicking, but do be discriminating.

And that's why you need to be discriminating when we listen to teachers. The group of people in Acts 16, the Bereans, are commended because they study the Scriptures daily to see what Paul was saying was true.

Now, that's hugely important. Judge your teachers by how faithful they are to Scripture, not how well you like them or how impressive they are or anything else, but how faithful they are to Scripture.

So, be discriminating. But then, ultimately, there is only one true judge. Remember, we saw this as well. There is only one true judge, and he will pronounce the verdict. So, two things.

First of all, verses 15 to 20, judge the prophets by the results. Now, that doesn't mean that's not success in drawing crowds.

[9 : 19] It's often related to other factors. After all, Jesus himself was a failure if drawing crowds is the criterion. We read, not long after this, after this, many of his disciples left and didn't follow him any longer.

It's related to other factors. But another question arises. A number of years ago, I went to a minister's conference where the late John Stott was giving a talk on truth and error.

And someone asked him, what is the difference between a wolf and an awkward sheep? The kind of question I'm sure many ministers often ask. And John Stott says, and I find this very helpful, a wolf in Scripture is usually about false teaching.

It's not particularly about personality, not particularly about other things. A wolf is someone who teaches and leads people astray by their teaching.

I've always found that very helpful. There are plenty of awkward sheep. Indeed, we're all awkward sheep at different times. I mean, that's the characteristic of sheep, isn't it? But I think what Stott said about the wolf being particularly related to leading people astray and destroying them is helpful. [10:40] So what kind of fruit are we going to have we to look for? Well, first of all, there is the kind of fruit that shows itself in character and behavior.

The word disease, verse 17, suggests a kind of character defect and lack of integrity. And then in verse 19, every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Now, it echoes in the earlier chapter, John the Baptist said in chapter 3, verse 10, he used these exact words, saying to the Pharisees, you say you repent, but there's no evidence of repentance. I think that's so important. We have to realize that ultimately it's related to character. Now, remember, of course, true teachers are not perfect.

It's not the difference between being perfect, blameless, and sinful. True teachers are sinful. True teachers have their feelings. True teachers struggle with temptations like everybody else.

[11:45] And indeed, that's one of the ways in which you can be a true teacher. If you stand above temptations and sinfulness, what have you got to say to people who are struggling? The Lord calls sinful people into his service.

This is true of all Christians. This is also true of teachers and prophets. And the point is, though, a true teacher will be open and honest. They won't be hypocrites.

It doesn't mean that you get everything right, either in behavior or in speaking. And it's related, I think, to what chapter 6 said about hypocrisy and sham.

Cherishing secret sins and refusing to repent of them. I think that's the point. Now, if this hypocrisy is persisted with, it will eventually come out.

You see, all of us lapse into hypocrisy and sham from time to time. The difference is between persisting in this, trying to cover it up, and realizing it and repenting of it.

[12:52] There have been some sad cases. Nearly 20 years ago, I'm not going to mention any names. One of the big names in evangelicalism, invited to every conference on every publicity list, turned out that for many years he had been living in a gay and acknowledged relationship.

He left his wife. He left his church. And caused great, great harm to the gospel cause. I remember at the time, when I was working in Durham at the time, a number of students who actually come from his church were at distress beyond measure.

I mention that, not in any sense to gloat, but to say, we need to be, all of us have to be, have to guard our hearts. This can happen to anyone.

It's not let the one who thinks they stand take heed, lest they fall. You see, that is the problem. For many, many years, this man had preached powerfully.

I benefited enormously from his ministry. But, and I think that's an important point as well, because that ministry actually came from God.

[14:11] Even though it came through an imperfect servant, it's still valuable. So, character and behavior. And then, obviously, the other type of fruit is true teaching.

True teaching, which produces faith and good character in those who listen. Okay, false teaching is destructive. False teaching leads people along the wide gate that leads to destruction.

So, how do, when, now Jesus does not specify heresies or errors here. Some other, Jude and Peter, in his second letter, does go into this.

Jeremiah, Isaiah and Ezekiel particularly go into this as well. Do the teachers love the Bible? Do they love the Lord?

Do they honor him? Are they building up people? These are the kind of questions we need to ask. And if these questions are not answered in the affirmative, then there's real danger.

[15:16] There's a very good balance if you read the two little letters of John. Second John is warning, don't be deceived by the fake. Don't be taken in.

Whereas third John is warning, don't reject the genuine. You see, there's difficulty. Some people are naive and gullible and listen to anything.

Other people have a nose for heresy and set out heresy hunting. Always reducing the number of acceptable speakers. There's only two sound people left.

I've heard that said. Or else, it's only slightly a caricature. There's only two of us left now, my wife and me, and I'm not very sure about her. Because, and the church in Ephesus, in the book of Revelation, the risen Lord says, I commend you because you have condemned the false teachers

and separated from them.

Nevertheless, I have this against you. You don't love the way you did at first. So, we need to balance this. And also, you've got to remember that heresy doesn't mean somebody who slightly disagrees with me.

[16:31] That's the important thing. Nor does it mean everyone who talks the same way as I do. Sometimes you get this in some circles. If people express the same faith using different words, then the antennae are bristling.

Oh, unsound, unsound. So, there is genuine heresy. There is genuine false teaching. But don't write people off. And remember, every teacher, every effective, is going to have blind spots. We need to remember that. That's why we need to search the scriptures. So, that really corresponds, in a sense, to verse 6. Do not give to dogs what is holy.

Do not throw your perils before pigs, lest they trample you on their foot and turn to attack you. But the second part of the passage, 21 to 23, saying, leave the final judgment to the Lord.

Now, this applies, still applies to prophets and teachers, more broadly to everybody. Jesus is saying, I will ultimately make the decision.

[17:43] And he talks about the danger, two dangers. One is the danger of pious talk. Not everyone who says, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom.

Now, of course, it's right to say, Lord. Paul says in Romans 10, if we confess Jesus as Lord and believe in our hearts that God has raised him from the dead.

The trouble is, it's possible to use the words, Jesus is Lord, without meaning them in our hearts. It's possible to use pious talk, which is totally unrelated to anything we really believe.

And does not lead to a changed life. But the one who does the will of my Father, who is in heaven.

And surely that picks up from chapter 6. Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Someone who honors the Father and the Son. Someone through the Spirit. Someone who is praying for the coming of the kingdom. And asking for both daily bread.

[18:48] And also the forgiveness of sin. So, danger of pious talk. It's awfully easy to adopt the vocabulary, idioms of a particular group we happen to belong to.

And remember this. Particularly, remember when young people come to the Lord. Inevitably, the language they use is the language of the group among whom they've come to the Lord.

More sophisticated people might shudder at the kind of naivety. But what do you expect? When our child learns to talk, especially by listening to our parents.

Obviously, and others, but especially our parents. Then we must not, we must not too readily reject. Because after all, all of us have a lot to learn.

When I was converted, I asked Jesus into my heart. But, I would have some theological difficulties with that now. But the Lord knew my heart.

[19:49] That's the point. Why did I do that? Because that's what I've been brought up to do. My parents told me that. The people I met with told me that. What else was I going to say?

So, remember that. When we're dealing with, or indeed any new believers. They are not going to know everything. And they're going to use the vocabulary of the people whom they come to faith.

So, danger of pious thought. And then is the danger of trusting in our own works. Now, in 2424, later on, Jesus warns of false Christs and false prophets.

Who will arise and perform great signs and wonders. Did we not prophesy cast out demons? Now, this has got a wider application, obviously.

Not, I don't know how many people here would claim to have done mighty works or cast out demons in the name of the Lord. However, this is warning us not to trust in our work for the Lord.

[20:57] But to trust in him. Not to say, oh, well, I do this. I mean, after all, I turn out twice on a Sunday. I go to the prayer meeting. I do my bit.

And so on. And before we know where we are, the treasury of merit idea, the gospel of good works, is building up. It's our relationship with the Lord.

Not what we do for him, ultimately. Of course, what we do for him will be our evidence of that. Don't imagine for one minute I'm saying these things are wrong or bad.

Of course not. What I am saying is don't trust in them. And where this relates to prophets and teachers is especially a problem for you might call professional Christians.

That's to say people who engage daily in the work of the Lord. Now, we're all engaged in the work of the Lord. But people are particularly engaged, if you like, in the work of the Lord relating to

teaching, to pastoring and so on.

[21 : 59] It's terribly, terribly easy to become so absorbed with these things that we forget the Lord himself. And it's all a question of relationship, isn't it?

Obviously, those we love, we do things for. We do things together. It's all too easy for the works to come in between. And remember, none of our works are all that great.

A good number of years ago, when my daughter was five, she brought home to me a drawing she'd done at school and said, Daddy, I want you to put that in your study. Why? Of course, I put it in my study, not because it was Rembrandt, but because my daughter had done it and given it to me.

And those of you who are parents, I'm sure, have had that kind of experience as well, where you appreciate something, you enjoy something, because your child did it for you and has given it to you in love.

And that, it seems to me, is how we need to look at our work for the Lord, the child's drawing. He accepts it. He rejoices in it, because you did it.

[23 : 06] Amen. Let's pray. Lord, as we read these words, as we think about them, almost too painful to think about, we know, Lord, that we love doing things, we love your work, and that's good in itself.

But so often, we become so busy, so tied up in our multitude of activities, that we forget to love you. And so, Lord, change us day by day. Change our, deepen our relationship with you and with each other. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.