

# **MEN MUST BEWARE OF FALSE PROPHETS**

## **(Matthew 7:15-20)**

*Bill Jackson*

In this great Sermon on the Mount, our Lord has introduced the entire New Testament system. Some have said that here is the Christian system in “capsule” form; so complete is this lesson that it can indeed be said also that in all of the New Testament no circumstance and no situation arises but that the Lord did not deal with it by command or by principle in this sermon. Herein is seen the most wonderful manner of life, producing the greatest blessing here, and providing blessings hereafter beyond anything we can imagine!

In the section preceding the verses requiring our attention, the Lord has discussed two manners of living, the two groups involved, and the two ends in store: the many who travel the broad way leading to destruction and few who find the narrow way leading to life (vs. 13-14). We note, then, that Jesus provides information having to do with a right way and a false way and, in our text verses, tells us of another permanent feature throughout the Christian age—the false teacher! He has already spoken of evil as it can be seen in man’s behavior toward the child of God (5:10-12, 39), evil as it works to make some men enemies of God’s children (5:43,44), evil as something for which we should pray for deliverance (6:13), and He warned of evil and the danger that it could possess and direct the whole man (6:23). And now, another aspect of evil: the man who comes to mislead men through teaching!

Later, in his explanation of the parable of the wheat and the tares (Mat. 13:36-43), He tells of the continual work and influence of the two great forces in this world, the Son of man sowing the good seed, the Word of God, and Satan sowing the tares, the corrupted word. The Lord’s work continues until the end of time, as does Satan’s. It is at the end of all earthly things that we see Satan then cast into the lake of fire and brimstone (Rev. 20:1). Until that time, he, along with his errors, will be a permanent part of this world and of the lives of men.

This point needs to be stressed in our time, particularly. For years we have very correctly condemned, in sectarianism, the attitude that says that “anything goes,” “we’re all going to the same place,” and “call nothing error—nothing is to be condemned as false doctrine,” etc. We were correct in condemning that spirit then, and we are correct in condemning it today, but it is said to our shame that much of that same spirit is in the church of the Lord now! The Lord, and then the apostles, gave warning of Satan’s work and of those who could come into our midst purposing to be workers for God, but who were really servants of Satan. We need to constantly be aware of the warnings given and of the warning now stressed in the verses before us.

### **THE LORD PUT US IN THE JUDGING BUSINESS**

By stating, “**Beware of false prophets,**” Jesus has put us into the business of judging. Very often men will respond to error being identified by saying, “Judge

not!" and thus misuse Matthew 7:1-5. The fact of the matter is that all accountable and responsible men are expected to judge and, indeed, **MUST JUDGE** in order to live pleasing to God. If one tried to never render judgment, then he would freely embrace all evil as well as all good—nothing would be rejected by him, and he would actually have no basis for rejection of anything!

Jesus Himself taught that men must judge and gave the Jews a good lesson in proper judgment when He said, **"Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment"** (John 7:24). This indicates that proper judgment is commanded, but that in order for it to be proper judgment, it must be righteous judgment. That means, then, a standard. The standard, we know, is the Word of God, the basis of eternal judgment (John 12:48) and the full, final, and complete guide for us in all spiritual matters (2 Tim. 3:16,17).

In warning here given, we need to be aware of the fact that Satan works through men. Jesus will later tell the disciples, **"...beware of men..."** (Mat. 10:17). The false prophet is a guaranteed thing, for Peter later in the New Testament warns:

**But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction** (2 Pet. 2:1).

Later, when Paul had his final meeting with the Ephesian elders, he focused on one particular area from which some false teachers would come. He tells them:

**For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them** (Acts 20:29-30).

History abundantly bears this out in citing that early deviation from the New Testament pattern of things centered on the corrupting of church organization.

Paul also gave warning to Timothy that **"...in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils"** (1 Tim. 4:1). The fact that there are items known as **"doctrines of devils,"** then, means that men will come and bring a message not from God and will thus be the false prophets of whom Jesus gives warning. By the very nature of the case here, Jesus indicates that: (1) There are false teachers; (2) They will enter in among the saints; (3) They can be recognized; (4) They can be tested, proven; and (5) They can be properly identified for what they are. It is obvious by our Lord calling them "false" that He desires that we abide by the "true" and this means dealing with the false teacher. In Revelation 2:2, it was to the credit of the Ephesian church that **"...thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars."** The Ephesian brethren put false teachers to the test and proved exactly what they were!

In a time of great apostasy from the faith, and much of it due to an abundance of false teachers at work among the churches, John said this: **"Beloved, believe**

**not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world”** (1 John 4:1). That examination is to be, of course, by the Word of God, which we have already seen as the complete and final standard.

### **THE FALSE TEACHER’S METHODS**

Of the false prophets Jesus said they “... **come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.**” The need for the warning, and the necessity for the examination, is in the fact that the false teacher will come using deceit. He does not approach men with the declaration that he is Satan’s servant, bringing a false message, and laboring to damn the souls of men. We note that Satan’s tactic in the very beginning was to approach Eve and to beguile her through his subtilty (2 Cor. 11:3). To the Corinthians, Paul had earlier made the point that the false teacher walked in dishonesty and craftiness and handled the word of God deceitfully (2 Cor. 4:2). He was there stating that the true servant of Christ did not use, and had no reason to use, any such tactics. It has ever been Satan’s method! Indeed, false men transformed “**themselves into the apostles of Christ, and no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light**” (2 Cor. 11:13,14).

Paul warned the Colossians of both such men and of their message in stating, “**Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ**” (Col. 2:8). The Ephesians were warned that every wind of doctrine blows, carried on “**by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive**” (Eph. 4:14). Of the false teachers of whom he gave warning, Peter spoke of their sinful motivation, covetousness, of their deceit in using feigned words, and of the real purpose they had in mind, making merchandise of the saints (2 Pet. 2:3). Very late in the New Testament period, Jude warned of the need for contending for the once-for-all-faith that had been delivered to the saints (v. 3) and showed that false teachers creep in unawares (v. 4), were men who despise all rule and authority (v. 8), and were really guided by the desire to fulfill their own lust (vs. 16, 18). It is evident that our Lord’s warning concerning the false teacher was, indeed, timely.

In these last several years in the church, we have seen many of these same tactics used among us as the problems of liberalism and modernism have increased. How many have been those individuals and congregations who have been led away from the truth, and into sectarianism, because of false teachers (be they preachers, elders, Bible class teachers, workers with youth, etc.) who approached them with a definite “air” of deep spirituality and godliness and who made very appealing speeches about church growth, evangelism, and saving of our youth. Being most anxious to hear these things, and then not even bothering to examine these teachers either Biblically or in terms of their tactics or motivation, brethren then have found that souls have been greatly misled and, often, the church splintered! What has thus happened repeatedly was earlier mentioned by the apostle Peter: “**While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the**

**servants of corruption: for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage”** (2 Pet. 2:19). The need for recognizing and marking the false teacher should be rooted in the determination that, having obtained freedom in Christ, we are not about to enter into bondage to any man (Gal. 4:9). Regarding the efforts of false teachers to place Paul into such bondage, he said, **“To whom we give place by subjection, NO, NOT FOR AN HOUR...”** (Gal. 2:5; Emphasis added).

In summary, our loyalty to Christ is seen in our loyalty to His will (John 14:15). Our loyalty to His will must be supreme, and of such nature that we dare not subject our wills and our souls to any man. We, therefore, using the Word of God as the standard, must subject men and doctrines to the test and reject them if found to be false!

### **WE ARE TO EXAMINE THE FRUITS**

Having promised that false teachers would come and having warned us of their pretense and of their real nature, Jesus then states this: **“Ye shall know them by their fruits.”** He first goes to nature to help us see His point.

He states that men would not go to a thorn bush and there expect to gather grapes, nor would they expect the briars to provide figs. If one sees the thorns or the briars, he knows that he’ll not find the grapes and figs there. His point is, then, that good fruit is born of a good tree, and evil fruit comes from a corrupt tree. The point to be emphasized is that men need look no further once the fruit has been examined. **“A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit”** (v. 18). Hence, as previously stated, the need for examination of men and message that is called for throughout the New Testament. If we see evil fruit produced, then we need go no further the man, the message is NOT sound!

It is not possible for us to over-emphasize the need for examination by the Bible. The point is still 1 John 4:1! If one only goes by what is heard and is unwilling to take the Bible and examine the fruits borne by teachers of religion, then the false teacher will not be marked. Claim and pretense will very often be used in deceiving men, for it’s an easy thing to feign a soft, benign spirit, and to use smooth words and demonstrate an inoffensive manner, and lead men away from the truth and into the worst forms of error. We must go further and examine the end product. Very often false teachers will present things very true in 90% of their content and will state those things found in general agreement among all the saints, and this is the very point wherein some brethren are misled—they do not look at the remaining 10% and do not bother to see the fruits forthcoming from what has been advocated.

One of the clearest, and most recent, illustrations of that is the so-called “total-commitment” movement [also called the Boston Movement, which later became the International Church of Christ, Editor]. One of these men can present basic Bible points with which every child of God must agree, will point out the dangers currently facing the church and facing our young people, will demonstrate a polite and inoffensive spirit, and will speak of growth, prayer, personal evangelism, etc.,

and move a great host of brethren along with him toward the adopting of the “total-commitment” philosophy. How often has that happened, and it’s still happening all across this great brotherhood! The fruits are readily seen: divided congregations, and a great deal of unwarranted alienation within families, and involving those who are not members of the church. And that which is typical of the working of the “total-commitment” movement is also typical of actions of various kinds of liberalism and modernism now plaguing the congregations of the Lord’s people.

The Lord again returns to the natural realm and shows that when a tree has ceased to produce the proper fruit, its usefulness is ended, and it is cut down and cast into the fire. No vineyard keeper is going to tolerate the existence of a tree, taking up space, and drawing elements from soil and climate that can be used by productive trees. He will put the axe to it and bum it up! The application is so clear that no Bible student can miss it: The Lord expects us to bear proper fruit, or we’re serving no good purpose for Him. The purpose for which man was placed here is that we might show forth His praise (Isa. 43:21). As Solomon put it, **“Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man”** (Ecc. 12:13). If we fail to serve the purpose of God and fail to bear the proper fruit, the end is that eternal separation from God-eternal death.

Surely, all can be impressed with the matter of the doctrine of God, and how doctrine is involved in the matter under consideration. Teachers have something to present to men, and by their lesson they are making an appeal to men. Men, in responding to the teaching, are then resting their entire soul’s salvation on that teaching. If it is true to the Book, well and good. But if it is false doctrine then souls are lost forever! The person is responsible, for he should not have trusted his soul to another without a personal testing of the doctrine by the Word of God. More than that, the teacher is responsible, for he has misused the Word of God, thrown his own soul away, and through his teaching influence led other souls into error.

The final point in this text is the reminder, **“Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.”** It is not by accident that following this important part of the Lord’s message, He has the judgment scene pictured for us, with the stress on the essentiality of true obedience, and following that, the picture of the two lives and the two foundations, and the lesson that one whose life is built on disobedience will fall, and GREAT will be that fall!

### CONCLUSION

The Christian life is a life lived with caution. Peter says it well, **“Be sober, be vigilant, because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour”** (1 Pet. 5:8). As our Lord introduces the entire New Testament system, He repeatedly speaks of evil, and of the false way, and of destruction awaiting at the end of it. And He knows that if men are led in the false way, although Satan will be behind it all, He must nevertheless work through men. Men are influenced, by Satan, through the teaching of other men, and hence the warning given: **“Beware of false prophets!”** There are those who love darkness, who love error, just as surely as the child of God loves God and the truth. There

are those who are just as evangelistic and just as jealous in presenting error as some of God's children are in presenting the truth.

The danger to the souls of men is made all the greater because of the tactic used by false teachers - deception. It is pictured by the Lord as though wolves, bent on destroying a flock, draped themselves with the skin of previously slaughtered sheep and then were able to slip into the flock unawares. The Lord goes beyond the claims and beyond the pretense, and looks into the heart, intent and purpose of the false teacher, and declares him to be a ravening wolf!

Throughout the Word, we are told that it is the proper standard for us in all things, and if the Word furnishes us completely unto every good work, and it does (2 Tim. 3:16,17) , then the Word furnishes us as we examine the teacher whether he really comes from God. Jesus tells us to look beyond the outward appearance, and beyond a pretended spirituality, and beyond the speech, and to see the person and the teaching in the fruit borne. If the fruit that is borne is evil, then the tree cannot be good!

We trust that our present study will cause us all to be more diligent in our study and application of God's will in our lives, more faithful in our proclamation of that Word to the lost, more cautious in our daily Christian living, more zealous in our guarding of the faith, and more vigilant and cautious in what we hear and what we support. We know that our Lord and His kingdom and His Word must be loved above all else, and we must love the truth enough to examine the false teacher and expose him!~

*Deceased*