



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.

Reflection

As the Sermon on the Mount draws to a close Jesus is calling for a response. He does so by issuing four warnings directed to his disciples, the crowds and the Jewish religious leaders.

Yesterday Jesus taught us that there are just two gates, two paths and two destinations – heaven or hell. It's black or white, one or the other, there is no middle-ground. You're either a member of the kingdom of God following the narrow road that leads to eternal life; or you're a member of the

kingdom of this world, following the broad and easy road that leads to destruction.

In today's passage Jesus issues his second warning. It's a warning about false teachers. It turns out that the narrow road is not only hard, but it can also be treacherous as people seemingly walking alongside you try to lead you astray. When travelling it, you need to watch out for false teachers says Jesus. The term Jesus uses is false prophets which has rich Old Testament overtones. Here John Stott recalls the false prophets of the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah's day, by way of example. Stott says that one of the characteristics of false prophets in the Old Testament was their false positivity and optimism, their denial that God was a God of judgment as well as of a God of love and mercy.

They'd continually say 'It shall be well with you' and 'No evil shall come upon you' so much so that God complained, 'They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying "Peace, peace," when there is no peace.' This type of false teaching lulled the people into a false sense of security, it lulled them to sleep in their sins, and failed to warn them of the impending judgement of God or tell them how to escape it. In short, it was disastrous for God's people.

It's much the same today. False teaching often takes the form of overwhelming positivity and optimism which draws many people in. False teaching today is best understood not so much in terms of what is taught; but in terms of what is never taught and never mentioned. False teachers usually present a God of love and blessing

with little to no talk ever of sin or judgement or obedience. They speak like this, 'The narrow path isn't in fact all that hard or narrow. It's broad, there's room for everyone, God wants you to live your best life now, to have the best of both worlds, you can have it all, if you give him good gifts then he'll rain down his blessings on you.'

As usual, Jesus doesn't hold back in his illustrations. He firstly describes false teachers as ferocious wolves in sheep's clothing. Watch out for them! They'll come up out of your number. You'll think they're one of you and then all of a sudden you are being attacked from the inside, the flock scatters and is divided and terrorised. Some are mortally wounded, others leave and never to come back. The church left divid-

ed and in disarray and focussing almost exclusively inwards until their wounds are healed. Watch out for them!

We can't help here but also think back to the Pharisees and teachers of the Law with all their outward show. Jesus is including them here. Wolves in sheep's clothing, leading people astray with their outward displays of righteousness, all the while their hearts being far from God. Elsewhere Jesus accuses these wolves of making lengthy shows in public and then devouring widow's houses in private. Watch out for them!

Next its thorn bushes and fruit trees and a warning filled with wisdom. You might not know these false teachers to look at them. Sometimes you just can't be sure.

Many You may be fooled at first. But over time, Jesus assures us, you will know them by their fruit. Don't be quick to judge but don't be a fool either, don't let false teachers lead you off the narrow path to your destruction. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, so test the fruit of their ministry, test the fruit of their character. Is it all just outward show? Is their heart far from God and full of themselves? You'll recognise them by their fruit assures Jesus.

People, like a vine or a fruit tree, will only produce fruit consistent with their nature. Sometimes, it is a while before the fruit comes, but when it comes it can't be hidden. All that a person says and does reveals who he or she is and over time this becomes very clear. What fruit should we be on the lookout for in each other and

our Christian leaders and teachers? I think a basic starting point is Galatians 5:22 & 23. Here's the fruit. These character traits are tests of genuineness in the Christian faith. This is the type of fruit true teachers will display and false teachers will be unable to sustain:

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control.

One might easily add graciousness, humility, reverence, openness to rebuke, and a disposition to live loosely to the things of this world. Now of course no Christian leader is perfect, and every Christian is growing in maturity at their own pace, but Jesus assures us, he reassures us in this

passage: you will know a false teacher by their fruit. So watch out, in case they lead you away from the narrow path.

Think

Consider the warning in today's passage. Do you think much about false teaching? False teaching is extremely dangerous, damaging and divisive and is practically certain to arise within Christian communities. Are you watching out for it? What might it look like in your context? What would you do if you encountered it? False teaching is insidious; often it has less to do with what is actually taught, and mostly to do with what is never spoken of. How can you guard against falling victim to false teaching? The Bereans in Acts 17, when they heard Paul preach, they searched

the Scriptures every day to see if what he was saying is true. Do you do this? In 1 Timothy 4 Paul urges Timothy, as a leader of a church, to watch his life and doctrine closely. It would seem that this is a good test of Christian teachers, but like the Bereans the best place to start is right at home. Are you watching your life and doctrine closely so that you have the wisdom and experience and maturity in your faith to spot a wolf in sheep's clothing and save yourself and others?

Prayer

Close your time this morning in prayer. Pray for your church and your leaders. Pray for those who teach. Pray for unity and not division. Pray for wisdom and discernment. Pray that God would guard and keep your

local church. And pray for sound doctrine and an abundance of the fruits of the Spirit in your community as you walk the narrow path joyfully together towards glory.