

Reading: 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 recognise them. Do people pick grapes from thorn-bushes, 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 recognise them.

New International Version (UK)

Preaching notes:

A warning from the very mouth of God is a warning to be taken seriously. Jesus begins by telling us -and it is us who are included in those he is speaking to- "watch out" or in some translations "beware", we are to be on our guard. This warning is intricately linked with what has come before it in our earlier passages from chapter 7: hypocrisy, finding God by asking, seeking and knocking with all of our hearts, two alternative paths to take (and the deceptiveness of ease) and now the danger of false teaching coming from within the church itself. This is why it is so important for us to seek understanding to these words of Jesus from Matthew 7 as a complete teaching linked to chapters 5 and 6 (the complete "Sermon on the Mount") and not to take them out of their original context. Charles Spurgeon, the great 19th Century preacher writes "in reading this chapter (7) one is led to feel that it is not, after all an easy thing to be a sincere Christian". Indeed it is not, which is why it is so important that we are active participants in our relationship with God and with one another.

Sheep and shepherds, wolves, and the need to make the very best productive use of the land are terms that we hear but unless we are actively involved with agriculture for our daily living may not speak to us as strongly as they did for the first hearers. We are meant to hear these words as imagining ourselves sheep -not of course in a derogatory or literal sense – but in exactly the same manner as in Matthew 9:36 when Jesus is describing the leaderless and demoralised state of people: "they are **like** sheep without a shepherd". Psalm 23, Ezekiel 34 and John 10 are amongst the best-known Bible passages which use similar pictures of sheep and shepherds.

Jesus is emphasising, as do many of the New Testament letter writers (Paul, John, Peter and Jude) to the early churches, that false teaching creeps deceptively into the church -as a wolf dressed like a sheep. It is worth remembering that most false teaching has at its root what may begin as a small corruption which develops into a false set of ideas. From this we can understand that most of the stated creeds we may say together (Apostles, Nicaea, Nicene, Chalcedonian) were written and agreed upon to counter false teaching which arose at various times.

J. C. Ryle, the 19th century evangelical Anglican bishop of Liverpool adds another important dimension to our understanding of Jesus' words: "This is a warning which is much needed. There are (many) thousands who seem ready to believe anything in religion if they hear it from an ordained minister. They forget that clergymen may err as much as laymen. They are not infallible".

It is for this very reason that I would suggest, as faithful Christians, we need to do two things:

1. Develop a love and desire to engage with our Bible, read for yourself the passages, pray for insight and revelation.
2. Be prepared to test, measure and discuss with others (perhaps in a group) what is being said from the pulpit or from these pages or online sermons against what the Bible actually says.

“By their fruit you will recognise them”, it is said twice by Jesus. It is about how someone lives and what they say that matters (see also Matthew 12:33-37). However, we must recognise that just because someone may not agree with a particular interpretation it does not automatically make them a false prophet or a wolf. The Bible is written as a “love letter” not as a “note of condemnation”.

Verse 19 can appear at first unsettling as it makes clear the consequences for “not bearing good fruit”, but take heart from two important truths: firstly the story told by Jesus of the fig tree which has not given fruit and the owner wants to cut it down (Luke 13:8), the gardener says: “give it one more chance. Leave it another year, and I’ll give it special attention and plenty of fertilizer”. And secondly, good fruit may not be immediately recognisable by you but can be seen by others – pray to God for insight.

In summary: truth, for a Christian is an absolute not a relative concept. God’s Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (119:105), it must be the foundation for all that we do. False teaching is not something that just happens in other places or in the past, we must guard against it in the here and now and contend earnestly for our faith (Jude v3).

Amen.