

A WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING

18th November

BI: False teachers are deceptive and deadly but Jesus gives a sure-fire test to identify them from the true.

FCF: We are easily taken in by outward "appearances" of false teachers.

Readings: Deuteronomy 13:1-4; Matthew 7:15-23

Thinking of Youth Work, who do you think has been the most successful youth worker in the last 100 years or so. What dynamic leader has impacted more young people than any other - teenagers and young adults alike. This dynamic leader captured the imagination of not just hundreds but tens of thousands. And united them under a common cause. Well there is one clear winner. One that keeps rising to the surface. And what is this wonderful person's name? Where can we sign him up? Not likely. For it is Adolf Hitler. When it comes to numbers of youth, impact on them the Hitler Youth Movement wins hands down. No one else comes close. Yet we would hardly ask Kathleen to emulate him. For history shows Hitler as both deceptive and deadly dangerous. In his rise and even to the end, his evil was hard to detect by the majority of his followers. But the consequences were devastating beyond words.



And when it comes to deception and the dangerous we Christians are not immune to extremes. Jim Jones instructed over 900 of his followers to commit suicide in Jonestown in 1978 and in Waco Texas 87 lost their lives fighting for David Koresh against federal authorities.

Now false teaching to this extreme is the exception. But what is much more common is many false teachers quietly undermining the faith for their own ends - even within our own denomination. Now for those caught up in the moment, false teachers are compelling and appear genuine and yet in reality are deceptive and deadly dangerous.

Now Jesus knew false teachers would come after him and lead many astray. And looking the part these false teachers would difficult to spot until after the damage was done. So here in the Sermon on the Mount we are forewarned. Forewarned and given a sure-fire test to identify false teachers. So let's turn to Matthew 7:15...

Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. Matthew 7:15

"Watch out for false prophets". What do we know about false prophets. Now when it comes to the word "prophet" we easily call to mind wild, bearded men in the desert, like Moses with tablets of stone or John the Baptist with a diet of locusts and honey. Strong characters with equally strong words. However a New Testament understanding of a prophet broadens these images to include others.

Nicky Gumble puts it helpfully where he writes, “the word “prophet” is used to describe anyone claiming to “speak in the name of the Lord”¹. False prophets are not just those claiming a prophetic ministry in a narrow sense but anyone claiming to speak from God, including ministers, pastors, Christian teachers, evangelists or preachers. Their false teaching can be through any medium: live, books, TV, websites, blogs or youtube.” So a false prophet claims to speak in the name of the Lord but instead is a false teacher.

Next we learn that these prophets - these false teachers - are ferocious. Other translations use the word ravenous. In Palestine at that time wolves were a very real danger to sheep. Wolves were hungry, vicious and a constant worry to shepherds tending sheep in more isolated parts of the country. Many listening to Jesus had seen the effect of a mauled sheep and knew how cunning and ruthless they were. Judy and I experienced this in part. When in Dunedin our street had houses on one side and small farm, that dropped into a valley, on the other. One Saturday morning a couple of largish dogs poked their nose in our back door. I notice their muzzles discolored, didn't think anything of it and shooed them out. About 10 minutes later I was out the front and saw the farmer most agitated. Some dogs had worried his sheep early that morning, including ewes heavy with lamb. He had to put half a dozen down as a result. The discoloration I had seen I realized was blood. If this is how much trouble a couple of city dogs could do, how much more a pack of ravenous wolves.

This viciousness of false teachers is reflected in another New Testament passage; Paul's farewell speech to the Ephesian elders. Traveling to Jerusalem and expecting trouble he stops off knowing that is about to deliver his last words to these trustworthy church leaders. Notice the urgency when he says...

I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Acts 20: 29-31a

Not only are these false teachers savage wolves says Paul but they will arise from among you. This is the third attribute of a false prophet. Not only are they known for their false teaching, and being ferocious but they also they come from our own number. They were one of us until, at sometime, they crossed the line and now are out to destroy. Now this is one of the reasons they are so hard to spot. Yes, wolves in sheeps clothing bring false teaching, are ferocious and come from among us.

So how are we to spot the difference? How are we to discern false teachers amongst the true? There must be a test we can use.

I know! If a teacher says “Jesus is Lord” then surely they must be a true teacher. If they make a right profession surely what follows must be right. I will be safe following him.

To this Jesus says:

Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 7:21

¹ Nicky Gumble, Challenging Lifestyle, p.210

Because false teachers want to be heard they are well versed in saying what we want to hear. They are very good at professing their faith and mixing in all sorts of Christian jargon with their lies. They are masters at using words, images and stories from the Bible to suck believers in. They will look an audience in the eye claiming Jesus is their Lord, that they are following him and are putting him first. But we have been warned - we are not to accept every such claim at face value. No, the test of a correct profession of faith, in of itself, is not enough

So what else... I know! A teacher whose ministry involves supernatural signs- miracles, signs and wonders - surely these are signs of God's approval. I will be safe following him.

To this Jesus says:

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 perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!' Matthew 7:22-23

Just because a ministry lays claims to the supernatural, or even has miracles verified, does not make it true. No, the test of the supernatural, in of itself, is not enough.

Now lets apply these two faulty tests - professions of faith and the supernatural - to Jim Jones and see how he got through. A few months ago Ryan and I happened to sit down as documentary on Jim Jones was just starting. Footage of his early ministry showed Jones professing Jesus as Lord and preaching up a storm. Tick - clear profession of faith. There was also footage of him praying for the sick and the demon possessed, with testimonies extolling their success. Second tick. Profession and miracles. He must be a true prophet. I will follow him. Big mistake!. Moving his whole church out of the States to the jungle of Guyana he founded a self-contained, isolated community called Jonestown. But in November '78 he ordered all 903 members to take cyanide - including 200 children. They did and it was as bad as it sounds - more awful than we can imagine.

See how easy it is for false teachers to slip through. If a teacher professes his faith alongside the miraculous we stop asking questions and we accept everything "as from the Lord". Judging the outside, all we see is the sheep's clothing while failing to notice the ferocious and savage wolf underneath. No wonder Jesus warns us against only looking at the outside and being taken in by false teachers.

So what is the true test that can help us to weed out true prophets from the false? Well Jesus turns from agricultural to horticultural; from tending flocks to the vineyard and orchard.

By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. Matthew 7:16-20

The test of a true prophet is not based on profession of faith or the miraculous but by their fruit - their character, their teaching, their followers.

So to character. How are we to judge the character of those who teach. Well the Beatitudes at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount are a great place to start.

Blessed are the poor in spirit: is the teacher humble, knowing they stand by grace not their giftings, powerful ministry or forceful teaching?

Blessed are those who mourn: do they know how to mourn for their sins, to confess and repent?

Blessed are the meek: Are they arrogant, full of themselves?

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness: Are they living a pure life?

Blessed are the merciful: Are they quick to forgive those that fail them?

Blessed are the pure in heart: Many cult leaders sexually exploit their members? Moral failings are bad fruit.

Blessed are the peacemakers: is there peace between amongst the teacher's followers or are their factions and jealousies?

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness: How does the teacher respond when they are criticized or confronted?

Yes character is a key indicator an important fruit. Another is the teaching itself. How does their teaching line up with God's Word. In this the people of Berea are our example. Paul, after escaping a rioting mob in Thessalonica, arrived in Berea. As was his custom he started teaching in the local synagogue. Then we read in Acts 17:11

Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. Acts 17:11

The onus is on us to check the teaching we receive. Whether it be from this pulpit, a TV program, radio teacher, a conference speaker, a website or book - we are to go back to the Word asking sure what is spoken lines up with Scripture. In this the Bereans are a marvelous example.

After checking their character and their teaching the next fruit we look for is in the teachers followers. A true teacher will have a congregation who are united in love, full of joy, living in kindness to others, doing good and showing themselves to be faithful, gentle and self-controlled. In other words not only will the fruit of the Spirit be evident in the teacher but also in the lives of those following. The test of any preaching is the effect it is having on people.

Now we must not judge a ministry on any individual, as we are all at different levels of maturity and obedience. But if we look at the congregation as a whole we should notice a positive, Godly effect on people. As Nicky Gumble says: "The main question to ask about sermons and teaching is not, "Are they intellectually stimulating?" or "Are the stories funny or headings memorable?" Rather we should be asking, "Are they bringing people closer to God?" If they - are then this is good fruit. If not - we need be very wary.

Yes, the sure-fire test for a false prophet is the fruit of their minister - revealed in their character, their teaching and followers.

Listen – we are coming to the close of the Sermon in the Mount and Jesus is putting another choice before us. Last week we had to choose from the broad and the narrow road. To following the easy way of the world and meet our destruction, or entering the narrow gate and following Jesus on the narrow road, leading to abundant life.

Today we who are on the narrow road are being warned. There are false teachers along the way, wolves in disguise that are happy to lead us off the narrow path, to our peril. Jesus is warning us. "You shall know them by their fruit" he says. "Words and miracles, in themselves, are not enough. Look at their character, measure their words against Scripture and looking to see if their followers are growing close to God. By these checks you will keep yourself safe from the many savage wolves waiting to devour. Walk close to me. Put my words into practice."

Let us pray.