

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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Don't Be Misled

by Dan Trygg

“Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? ¹⁷ So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ So then, you will know them by their fruits.”

Matthew 7:15-20

In the previous couple of verses, Jesus described two gates: the **wide gate**, which leads to the broad way where multitudes are traveling to their ruin; and the **narrow gate**, which leads to the constrictive path going *away from* the broad road the others are taking. This narrow way leads to life, but few are those who journey this pathway. **Jesus pressed His listeners to make a decision, to take the narrow gateway that leads to life.** The journey may be *difficult*, but in the end it will bring health, vitality and fulfillment.

In our verses for today’s study, Jesus warns of the danger of religious deception. There are “narrow ways” out there which are not God’s *true* way. **These paths may have the appearance of leading to God, but in reality they are deceptive paths that lead only to becoming entrapped in religious bondage.** While they may have an *appearance* of serving God, they actually lead to ruination *just as much* as the other, more obviously sinful, paths do. Jesus had already addressed some of the errors and excesses of the religious practices of His day (Matt. 5,6), but now He more directly confronts the very real *danger* of *religious deception*.

The word Jesus used to describe the religious deceivers in this context is “false-prophets”, one word in Greek. It is a compound word, from “*pseudo*”, meaning “phony, fake or false” and “*prophet*”, referring to one who speaks forth the Word of God, ...usually someone claiming to have heard from God as the basis of his or her authority. Interestingly, the “*pseudo*” prefix is used for a variety of religious impersonators. We are warned of *false-apostles* (II Cor. 11:1-15; Rev. 2:2), *fake-christs* (messiahs) (Matt. 24:4,5,21-27), *phony-prophets* (Matt. 24:11; II Pet. 2:1; Col. 2:16-19) and *deceptive-teachers* (II Pet. 2:1; Gal. 1:6-9; Col. 2:4-8; I Tim. 1:3-7; 4:1-3; II Tim. 3:1-8; I Jn. 2:18-24; II Jn. 7-11; Jude 3,4). These are all “*pseudo*”, or *counterfeits*, of the genuine gift. They make the *claim* to be the real gift, but they are *not* receiving or communicating *from God*. They speak *from themselves* (Jer. 23:16,25-30), or get their inspiration from some *other* source, which is evil. Some can even do miraculous signs and wonders, but they are *by the activity of Satan*, not of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 24:23-26; II Thess. 2:9). Because all of these gifts are *leadership gifts*, not only are these people *self-deceived*, they also hijack *other people’s* faith, and lead *them* off the true path in a direction that diverges from God’s will. Usually those who follow such people end up in some form of *bondage* or *become useless* to the true Kingdom of God. Even worse, they can actually *distort the gospel message* (Gal. 1:6-9) and/or *drive honest seekers away* by virtue of their errors and inconsistencies. Sometimes *outsiders* can see what is going on more clearly than some believers, because they look at the *fruit*, while *we* tend to be taken in *by the religious speech and trappings of spirituality*.

Not everything that looks good, or sounds good, is good!

We are plainly told that there will be “*many false prophets*” (Matt. 24:11). They will “*secretly come in among us*” and they will “*arise from within us*” (Acts 20:29,30). In other words, **they come from the outside in, and they also will come from within our own group.** We need to be watchful in *both* directions. Furthermore, **they will lead “many” astray. This is a very real and serious issue.** That is why we are warned about this *so often* in the NT. What is important is that **we must learn to detect these phonies, and discern what the truth is**, so that we are not taken in by their smooth arguments, but **be able to refute them.**

How do we detect them? Our first line of defense is to study the Scriptures thoroughly, so that we know what the true way really *is*. When training people to recognize counterfeit money, the treasury department has them study genuine money very well. They look at it, they smell it, they feel it, they study its characteristics. Then, if someone hands them a counterfeit, they can immediately tell *something* is wrong. In the same way, **the best way to protect ourselves is to study and obey the Word of God.** If we do that diligently, the Holy Spirit will **show us when we are being misled.** (It is important to take note of the significance of walking in obedience. If we are living in habitual sin, we learn to disregard the convicting nudges of the Holy Spirit. If we get used to doing *that*, how will we be sensitive to His warning us of *other* dangers?)

There are several telltale signs to look for which will expose these phonies for what they are. Before going there, however, as an introduction let’s ponder for a moment the description Jesus had for them. **They “come to**

you in sheep's clothing". What does *that* mean? What do sheep *wear*? Sheep don't *have* clothing that they change in and out of. They have their own sheepskin and wool. Sheep are sheep, inside and out. Jesus says of these false prophets, however, they "come in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves". In other words, *they are really are not sheep at all!!* They are *wolves!* But, they *smell like* sheep, and in many ways *look like* sheep, *sound like* sheep, *act like* sheep, at least at first, ...although **there is something different about them.** "What is that *other* smell?" **Often, we can pick up on something not being quite right, before we are able to put our finger on what it is.**

Unfortunately, with delay comes the growing danger of entrapment. Note that **Jesus describes them as "ravenous wolves".** The word translated as "ravenous" means "greedy, violent, rapacious". The word is used also of "extortioner, robber, or swindler" (e.g., Lk. 18:11; I Cor. 5:10,11; 6:10). They are those who take from others by violence, force, manipulation or deception. In Jesus' word picture, they were clothed in "sheep stuff". Where did they get *that*? They are *living off of the sheep* (Zech. 11:16). The picture of "ravenous wolves" narrows the interpretation. They have stolen *more* than a little wool!! They are as destructive, greedy, violent and dangerous as a wolf in the sheep pen!

Jesus says that we will know them by their fruits. He then states a very important Kingdom principle.

Everyone and everything produces according to its inner nature. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. So, *watch* what comes from people's lives! Now, Jesus is not saying that Christians will suddenly become sinless. No. It is clear that there is a *process of maturing* that takes place *over time* (II Pet. 3:17,18; Eph. 4:22-24; Col. 3:1-17; Rom. 12:1,2), **BUT** there should be a *definite turning away from sin*, a *desire* to live in a manner that is honoring to God, and *clear evidence of progress* in one's life (Rom. 6:8-23; 13:11-14; Prov. 4:18,19; I Pet. 2:11,12; 4:1-6).

What is clear is that if someone is walking in the Holy Spirit, they will not be sinning or teaching things that are wrong.

This is why it is so critical to be born from above (Jn. 3:1-15). **Unless we are born again by the Spirit of God, we remain a "bad tree".** As Jesus said, "Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor figs from thistles, are they?" **God's whole plan of salvation is to radically change our inner being so that we can produce something different.** It is not difficult for a grapevine to produce grapes, is it, ...or a fig tree to produce figs? No. As long as that plant is *healthy* (i.e., gets proper nourishment and is in healthy surroundings) it *will* produce its good fruit *naturally*. What Jesus is talking about here is that if someone is consistently putting out bad fruit, then that indicates *something is wrong inside*. Don't let them lead you down whatever road *they* are travelling. Don't automatically do what they are suggesting, because it "ain't workin' for them" (II Pet. 2:17-19).

What are some telltale signs of a false prophet (or false leaders in general). **(1.) They preach or proclaim something different than the simple gospel message.** Usually it is "Jesus +". Jesus + some good works, or Jesus + some religious activities, or Jesus + keeping the Law (or, "the rules"), or Jesus + some experience, or Jesus + prosperity, or Jesus + dressing a certain way, or Jesus + attending my church, etc. They teach that, in order to be OK with God, you must believe in Jesus and *perform* in some certain way. Paul says that if anyone comes and preaches a gospel (good news message) contrary to (or, *more* than) what he preached, let that person be *accursed* (Gal. 1:6-9). Why? Because **a gospel that is different from the gospel is no longer the gospel!!** (cf. II Cor. 11:3,4) **(2.) They are out to get people to be dependent upon them.** This is especially true with a false *prophet*, because they claim to have an inside track with God. They claim to be getting words, visions, dreams or revelations from God. God will never lead one of His prophets to say or teach that we ought to do anything contrary to His revealed Word. We are to *judge* what prophets have to say based upon the Scriptures, ...not the other way around (Isa. 8:19,20; I Cor. 14:29; e.g., Acts 17:11). *Teachers can abuse this* by continually telling others that they can't *possibly* interpret the Scriptures, because "they do not have enough education". *Healthy teachers* will encourage people to study and interpret the Scriptures well, and will give them the tools to do so. If the truth *can* be known *objectively*, then it should be discoverable by virtually *anyone*, who applies sound study methodology. *Unhealthy teachers* will always be "pulling rank" on other people, claiming inside knowledge that is all but *unattainable* to others (Matt. 23:13; Gal. 4:17; 6:12,13; Col. 2:16-18). They can even *get disrespectful* and downright *abusive* to those who cross them (II Cor. 11:20; e.g., Jn. 9). *That* kind of behavior is *not* the Spirit of Jesus! **(3.) Their lives are in some way contradictory to the teachings of Scripture.** This can be evident in many different ways but there are two common directions. **Typically, a false prophet or false teacher will be either too legalistic and severely self-disciplined** (Gal. 2:15-3:14; 4:21-5:8; Col. 2:20-23; I Tim. 4:1-4), **or they will be too sensual and lax toward morality**, often even leading people into sinful behavior (II Pet. 2:1-3,9-22; Jude 4,8-13; Rev. 2:20-23). **(4.) They are out to get power, wealth and prestige for themselves.** This is contradictory to the teachings of Christ and His apostles (Matt. 20:25-28; 23:1-14). Christian workers can expect to be supported, but they should not be "greedy for gain" (I Cor. 9:1-14; Gal. 6:6; I Tim. 3:1-9; 6:3-10; I Pet. 5:1-3; II Pet. 2:15,16). **(5.) They do not walk in love and unity, but self-interest and divisiveness** (Jn. 13:34,35; I Cor. 13:4-7; Rom. 16:17,18; Tit. 3:9-11; Love is supposed to be the *goal* – I Tim. 1:5.)

Jesus put the responsibility for *finding*, and *staying on*, the right path squarely on *us*. We cannot blame anybody else for the outcome of our journey. *Beware* of false religious people. *Watch* the fruit, and *don't be misled!*