

# The Reality of False Teachers

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**Bible Text:** Matthew 7:15  
**Preached on:** Sunday, March 11, 2018

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I invite you to turn to Matthew 7 for the text. Matthew chapter 7, I'm going to read verses 15 through 20. We will deal with this today and also next week, a very crucial passage of Scripture that we want to handle carefully as we look forward to what the Lord has for us. Matthew 7:15 through 20 says,

15 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.

There are many important things in this passage and I think one of the most important things for you to grasp is why this passage is present here in this aspect at this time in the teaching of our Lord, and context is very crucial and vital for us to understand that. You know that in verses 13 and 14, Jesus had made a call for people to enter into his kingdom and he said to, "Enter through the narrow gate because the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction and there are many who enter in through it." He says in verse 14 but, "the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it." We spent a lot of time looking at those verses and realizing what they meant for us as we try to understand Scripture, the nature of salvation, and even assess the well-being of our own souls. We realize that there are multitudes that according to this text from the words of our Lord Jesus himself, that there are a far greater number of people that are going to hell than are going to heaven and, therefore, it is very important for us to know the right way and for us to know that we are entering through a narrow way because there is no safety in numbers. There is no safety in being with the multitudes if the multitudes are going to hell.

So we realize that this is an important, a sober, a defining text really for us to understand the nature of salvation, and we saw last time when we were in the Sermon on the Mount two weeks ago, why the way is narrow. We said three different things. We could probably have said more but fundamentally we said foundation is found only in Jesus Christ and only through faith alone, in Christ alone. We don't enter into heaven on the

work of Christ and also on our works, we enter on the sole grounds of his merit alone and we receive him by faith alone, not by earning him through anything that we do or going through any religious ceremonies. That, in itself, is a narrow message that excludes much of professing Christianity, even. You know, speaking and professing in the very broadest sense, salvation is found only in Jesus Christ. That's a narrow gate. That's a narrow way. We saw that salvation requires a deep repentance. There are people who are happy to name the name of Christ but they want nothing of the idea that says, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow after me." You know, people want – this is so very important, beloved – people want Christ, they are happy to have Christ on their own terms. And you know, if a man thinks that he can set the agenda and set the limits on which Christ will operate in his life, then he is happy to have Christ. Who wouldn't want someone who would help him when he is struggling? But that's not the terms on which Christ offers himself. Christ calls us to respond to him with a faith that is a faith that is a self-denying faith. There is a crucifixion of self. I come and I leave my old life behind. I leave the world behind in order to receive Christ and enter into his kingdom. Those are the terms on which the King offers himself. Not many people want him like that, do they? People want to say, "Oh, I know Christ as Savior but I don't want him as Lord." It doesn't work that way. Christ comes as Lord, he comes as Savior, he comes as a whole, as a unified person, and we don't get to divide and parcel him up and take the parts that we like and leave aside the ones that we don't; to say we will take the prosperity and peace that come with Christ but to leave aside and push aside any idea of affliction or suffering or self-denial or rejection or repentance from sin. Salvation doesn't work that way. It's part of the reason why it's a narrow way. We saw also that salvation often leads to affliction. The Bible says that those who desire to live godly lives in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, 2 Timothy 3:12.

So there is much that makes it a narrow way and yet we realize that we can't shrink from that narrow way, can we? You can't say, "Well, that's going to be, I want to be with the crowds." No, you can't think that way because to go with the crowds is to go to destruction, and Christ has led us in a way that helps us understand that there is, in one sense for the man who values the well-being of his eternal soul, there is only one way to go and that is through Christ even when that means self-denial, even when that means repentance from sin, even if that leads to affliction. We realize that Christ is a pearl of great price, worthy of everything that we have, that in a sense we would sell everything that we have in order that we might have Christ and that we would hold to nothing in this life that would keep us from entering through that narrow gate. All of those things are available in the messages and you can find them on the website or in the CDs that are out in the lobby. This was just by way of review to set up today's message.

Why does Jesus say here in verse 15, why does he go from there to saying, "Beware of the false prophets"? That's the question that we want to answer here today. Jesus has given us a call to himself and now here in verse 15, he is giving us a caution to realize that there are forces at work, there are teachers in human form, that would lead you away from the narrow gate. They would put up detour signs that would lead you someplace else. They would cover the narrow gate with black cloth so that you would not see it, speaking picturesquely, speaking metaphorically. There are teachers who by their

description of what spiritual life is, by their description of what God is, who God is and what his word says, would actually blind you to what the true nature of the narrow gate is. So because of that, you need to be able to know that there are false prophets, there are false teachers, so that – here's the purpose of it – so that you could discern them, turn away from them, and safely enter through the narrow gate and not let someone mislead you; not to let someone lead you in a false way that would lead to the destruction of your soul; that you would not be a blind man following another blind guide and both of you falling into the pit, as Scripture speaks of elsewhere. So the connection between verses 13 and 14 in this section of Scripture is this: Jesus had just said the gate was narrow and now he is warning you, warning his people, warning us against false teachers who would confuse the matter. That's the thing. It's a narrow gate. It's easy to miss. And part of the reason that it's narrow and easy to miss is that there are false teachers who will teach you false things about salvation. So this is what he is helping us with.

Now, we're only going to spend our time this morning in verse 15 and we'll deal with the rest of the passage hopefully next week. Look at verse 15 with me again here as we kind of set it and anchor it in our minds for this morning. Jesus says,

15 Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

Now, sometimes when people think about prophets, they think of them in too narrow of a way. They think of a prophet as somebody who in the Old Testament times merely predicted the future, and there is an aspect of truth to that, that was part of the Old Testament prophetic ministry, for sure, but the role of a prophet was broader than that. The role of a prophet was primarily to be a man who spoke God's words to the people. A prophet spoke from God and on the authority of God. They declared his truth and they applied the message to their hearers and that's broader than simply saying, "This is going to happen in the future." They are declaring and disclosing the mind of God, is what they were doing in the Old Testament, and giving people a word from God before the canon was completed. So even when they spoke of the future, they were making a present application to their hearers, often calling them to repent as they ministered amongst the nations of Israel and Judah. Well, with that brief understanding, beloved, what was a false prophet except that a false prophet was a man who falsely claimed to speak for God. A false prophet was someone who falsely claimed to speak for God. He said, "God has spoken to me and here is what he said," but it wasn't true. He was a deceiver. He was a liar. He was misleading the people and leading them astray, and as you read through the Old Testament, you find this as a repeated problem.

Well, here in this section of Scripture, Jesus uses the term false prophets to alert us to the danger of false teachers in the church, so we'll use false prophets as a way to referring to false teachers in the church, and the question is from this verse: what do we need to know about false teachers so that we could guard ourselves against them? How can we protect ourselves from the destructive words of false teachers? Well, he gives us three principles in this single verse that we want to draw out here this morning and there are times where you can speak on passages of Scripture that if you're talking about preaching on joy or

peace or heaven, those are all good themes to talk about because Scripture speaks to them, but sometimes we have to deal, if we are going to study the full counsel of God, we have to study themes that are more uncomfortable, more difficult, that speak to us about the dangers in spiritual life and responding to dangers rather than simply absorbing the hope and comfort that we also find in God's word. This is a time where we are dealing with the dangers in spiritual life and it is essential for us to embrace this. It's essential for us to heed this teaching from our Lord. It is part of having a healthy church. It is part of having a healthy spiritual life.

As I'm going to say later in the message, beloved, here's the thing: false teachers are able to prey on people like you because people are gullible, because people are too trusting, because they too automatically assume that when a man says, "I'm speaking for God," that he actually is. And so they don't test things by the Scriptures as the Bereans did in Acts 17:11, they just blindly, blithely follow men no matter what they are saying and just assume that everything is well because, after all, the man speaks well, he is persuasive in his words, he's got a large ministry, he's got a good smile, he's funny, he's suave, he's cool, and all of those earthly factors that make man persuasive in the human realm are not at all an indication to you that he is trustworthy in the spiritual realm. So we must take these words of our Lord seriously if we are going to guard the soul that has been entrusted to us and be confident that we have entered through the narrow gate, that we are on the narrow way that truly leads to life. Christ in his mercy speaks to his people and says, "I know that there are those who will try to deceive you, try to harm you, that will bring great danger to you." And therefore in the loving Shepherd that he is, he tells us, "Here's what you need to be careful of. Here's what you need to watch out for." And you don't go long in ministry before you realize that even people that are in a place like this under a ministry of God's word, will catch the scent of a false teacher and go after him. So we want to be careful about that and we want to protect each other from that as we rely on the words of our Lord to help us.

What's the first aspect of false teachers that we would see from this, this morning? 1. False teachers are real. They actually exist. They are out there. False teachers are real. That's point 1. The first key to avoiding a danger is to know that it exists, to know that there is a threat there. If you had a piece of property that had a big sinkhole on it but it was covered by weeds or something, people could walk and fall into that pit because they didn't know it was there. If you put a fence around it or put orange cones, they say, "Oh, there is something there for me to watch out and be careful of so that I don't fall into that trap, I don't fall into that hole and get hurt by it," metaphorically speaking. He's putting cones around the realm of false teachers so that you would say, "Oh, there is a danger there. There is really a problem here. I want to be careful so that I don't fall into that trap."

So the first aspect, you could say it from another perspective, we are talking about developing the basic skills of discernment here, the first aspect of developing the skill of discernment that will serve you throughout life is this: you first protect yourself from false teachers by recognizing that they exist. It's not first of all looking for specific doctrines. That's part of it but that comes later. You start with the most fundamental

general principle of them all: false teachers are a real danger to be avoided. And why is that so critical? Because it will do this for you, beloved: it will teach you to be on guard. As you hear teaching, as you encounter other teachers in other places, you say, "Okay, is what he's saying true or not?" And not simply assuming everything is okay. Christ warns us against that dangerous assumption.

Now, look there at verse 15 again. He says, "Beware of the false prophets." That word "beware" is a present tense imperative in the Greek language. I make a point of this often in these latter stages of the Sermon on the Mount because of this: the present tense imperative here is calling you to an ongoing watchfulness. This is to be a pattern of life for the disciple of Christ, the idea of beware and keep on watching. Be on guard throughout your time. Continually, repeatedly, come back to this principle. Be aware of the fact that false teachers exist. That's the idea of the command. It calls you to ongoing watchfulness. We're not able to let our guard down no more than a boxer in the ring, and I'm not a fan of boxing, I'm just making a point here, a boxer in the ring has to keep his hands up. He has to keep his guard up. If he lets them down, his opponent will strike him and knock him out, right? Well, we're boxers in a spiritual ring here and we need to keep our protection and our defenses up so that we are not struck by the wicked blows of false teachers who come from Satan in order to do his work.

So "beware" is a present tense imperative calling us to ongoing watchfulness and so, beloved, it's not discernment in this kind of protection as part of the responsibility of church leadership, to be sure, but it is also part of your individual responsibility before Christ that you would have a discerning spirit and that you would pay attention to the danger, and that you would be on guard against who you allow to bring spiritual influence into your life. When someone comes bringing a strange teaching to you, you should not just immediately follow it. When someone comes and calls you away from that which has saved you and that which has developed you in the spiritual life and you know and it's been based in Scripture and you've seen it and studied for yourself, you've had it taught to you, beloved, when you start to have those kinds of things embedded in your soul and someone says, "No, that's not right. No, come over here. No, there is a new revelation. No, you need a new understanding." Beware, there is danger there. And sometimes, I'm just going to be blunt and candid here, sometimes it can come from within your own family, it might come from close friends. We just have to be very careful here and not let ourselves be called away from the truth that has been given to us.

And for those of you perhaps visiting that are just new in the area of Bible study and all of that, you have to pay attention and read Scripture for yourself. Every one of you, beloved, I say this gently, I say it because I love you, not to wag a finger at you at all, the furthest thing from my heart to speak to you like that, every one of you needs to be a reader of God's word. You need to be reading God's word on your own because it is only in God's word where we find the truth, and a consistent faithful pattern of reading God's word is going to be one of the primary walls of protection that God builds in you life. And if you're not reading God's word faithfully, consistently over time, you are vulnerable. You are vulnerable. You have let your guard down. You are inviting the spiritual opponent to smack you in the jaw when you let your guard down like that. You

need God's word. This is part of where he protects us. So you pay attention to this danger and you turn your mind away from these false teachers that would lead you astray.

Now, beloved, as you read through Scripture, you find that the Bible repeatedly makes these kinds of warnings. This is a real ongoing danger to the church of Christ. So, for example, look at 1 John 4. 1 John 4 says this in verse 1. Scripture is so abundantly clear on this. There is no missing it. The Apostle John said,

1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

The command is there, test the spirits, and notice what he says, he says, "You have to follow this command. You need to obey this." Why? "Because many false prophets have gone out in the world." There is one true message of Christ but there are many counterfeits. There are many false teachers peddling many false doctrines. You need to be aware. You need to be careful. You need to be on guard about that and don't simply believe something simply because somebody says it. Don't believe something simply because you find it on the internet. Don't believe it simply because somebody has got a million Twitter followers and say, "Well, he must be right then." Don't believe it simply because a guy has published books. That is not the measure by which you can protect your soul from this very real and present danger. You find the protection, verse 2,

2 By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; 3 and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist,

Verse 6, John writing as an apostle speaking about the apostolic circle, not something to be drawn upon by teachers today, in verse 6 says,

6 We are from God [we the apostles are from God]; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

Apostolic teaching, New Testament apostolic teaching is the measure by which we can tell true from false teachers.

In 2 Peter, turn a little further or actually just before, I should say. 2 Peter just before 1 John, in 2 Peter 2, you see this where the Apostle Peter says,

1 ... false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves.

Many false teachers. There will be false teachers among you and they are not going to be obvious. They are not going to be evident on first blush. They will introduce their destructive teachings secretly, under a guise, under a mask. It will look like the real thing when it is actually not, and so deceptive is it that they will even deny Christ, which seems unthinkable but the way that the devil is able to use men in order to distort truth is supernaturally wicked.

So we realize that what is said here is a great warning and here in this passage in 2 Peter, what I want you to see is it fits perfectly with the teaching of our Lord in Matthew 7. Notice what he says here in verse 2 when he says,

2 Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned;

What is that except a perfect echo of what Jesus said. The gate is broad that leads to destruction. There are many that will follow these false teachers. And the warning, the plea, the urgency of Scripture to each of you, speaking to you individually here this morning is: don't you be one of them. Don't you be sucked into the vortex of false teaching. Be aware. Be alert. Be on guard because false teachers are real. You must be aware of them. You must be on guard against them. Every Christian is to be discerning. Not every Christian has the same level of ability. This is part of the reason why God over time, over the centuries, over the course, over the breadth of geography, he gives teachers and pastors and elders to his church to help us in the discernment of truth and error, but every one of us has a responsibility to guard our hearts, to guard our souls, and to test what is being said to us by God's word.

Look at Acts 17:11. I alluded to it, we're going to turn there just to make the point. Acts 17:10 says,

10 The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. 11 Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.

They gladly received instruction. To be discerning does not mean that you are unteachable. Let me say that again: to be discerning does not mean you are unteachable. It does not mean that you are a law unto yourself. It does not mean that you know all of the answers to every question that might be asked. To be discerning simply means that you test what you hear and that you test it and you test it by examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things are so. You grow in the word yourself and you say, "Is what this man is saying, is what I am hearing consistent with what the word of God says?" It is amazing how few people will do that simple basic thing in discernment, to take the time to read Scripture for themselves.

You know, the truth is that false teachers count on people not doing that. That's the key to their success. Stated in the opposite way, taking it from the other direction, the key for you to protect your own soul, you men who have wives and children depending on you, who look to you for leadership, you men, it's all the more important for you to be a man like this and that you be someone who is an oak tree that can give shade to your children, that can give shade to your wife and not be careless spiritually in your own life and thus provide an open door for those under your care, those under your circle of love, to be influenced. You have a particular responsibility to step up to, and I ask you, are you doing that? Are you cultivating your own spiritual life? Are you growing in God's word yourself? This is serious. The Lord says, "The way is narrow. Beware of false prophets. Be on guard." The question is, men, you ladies too but speaking specifically to the men today, are you men being on guard and are you helping your families to be on guard? This is crucial. There are few things more important for us to be aware of than this.

So false teachers are real. That's why we have to beware. Secondly, going back to Matthew 7 now, Matthew 7, going back to verse 15. Secondly, what we see from this is that false teachers are deceptive. False teachers are deceptive. Let's look at verse 15 again as we keep it fresh in our minds this morning. Jesus says, "Beware of the false prophets, who," this is what they're like, let me describe them for you, he says. What do these false prophets do? They "come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves." You know, at first it's the nature of things that you would never suspect a false prophet. You know, they might have lots of academic qualifications. They might have a PhD or a ThD after their name and you immediately say, "Oh, he's educated. I need to defer to him. He knows better than I do." Well, the simple man behind a plow in his field who reads God's word often knows much more about the Bible and biblical doctrine and truth than an academic who is fascinated with his latest theories rather than simply holding fast to the revealed word of God. The fact that a man has academic credentials does not necessarily make him a reliable teacher of truth. You need to anchor that in your mind. That's part of being on guard and the nature of what Christ says is that at first you would never suspect a man to be a false prophet.

Why is that? Well, Christ repeatedly and Scripture repeatedly refers to his people as sheep, doesn't he, and sheep have certain characteristics: they are woolly, they stand on their four legs, and you can kind of tell a sheep by what a sheep is, and you look at it by outward appearances and say, "Oh, that's a sheep. It walks like a duck. It quacks like a duck. What is it? It's a duck." A duck is not sheep but that's not my point. I know, sometimes it's hard to follow. Where did that come from? Now you have an idea of what it's like inside my mind. This is what I deal with 24/7, trying to follow some of the thoughts. False teachers will take on the outward appearance of being a true part of the flock of God and Christ describes God's people as sheep.

Let's look at John 10 for just a moment just to see this and the wickedness. When you see this, you start to see the wickedness of false teaching, its diabolical nature. And Christ, speaking about himself with echoes that go back to Psalm 23 says, "I am the good shepherd," John 10:11,



11 "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. 12 He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.

Notice what a wolf does. It comes and it attacks the sheep, snatches them. And Jesus speaking of those who in pretense act as though they have a concern for the people of God when they really don't, in verse 13 what does the hired hand do?

13 "He flees because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the sheep. 14 [Jesus says] I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me, 15 even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep.

He goes on and speaks about Gentiles in verse 16.

16 "I have other sheep, which are not of this fold [they are not Jews]; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd.

My point here being that Jesus in an extended crucial discourse, regards and describes his people as though they were sheep and that he was the shepherd responsible for the protection of their souls. Now, let's be really clear and definitive about something: Christ is the great Shepherd and so great is his love for us as his sheep, that he laid his life down for us. He sacrificed his own life ultimately as an atoning sacrifice pleasing to God, in order to take away our sins. How much he loves us. How much he cares for us, that that was no self-regard in his ministry on our behalf. He goes to the cross, he lays down his life, he voluntarily receives the nails, he voluntarily endures the taunts when he had earlier told his disciples, "If I wanted, I could call down legions of angels for my own protection." That's a shepherd, isn't it? That is the one who is the true protector of our souls and we are sheep and sheep are sometimes dumb and sometimes vulnerable and sometimes ignorant, sometimes unaware and certainly not able to defend themselves against a wolf who would come with fangs bared in order to devour them.

Now, sheep are safe when they are with other sheep, when they are under the care of a shepherd, but a wolf in the presence of a sheep is a mortal threat. There is a danger there. And how is it that false teachers implant themselves? How is it that they become available in order to attack the sheep? Well, the devil uses false teachers by making them seem to be something other than they actually are. They look like a teacher of God. They look like someone who is telling you the truth. So false teachers have the appearance, they are a counterfeit and what makes a counterfeit so effective in the realm of currency? Counterfeit money is effective because it looks so much like the real thing. A false teacher outwardly looks like, "Oh, he is one of us. He's one of ours. We can trust. We can let our guard down. We can let our defenses down." And we forget that we are in a ring where there is somebody, there is another guy on the other side who is trying to knock us out, and so we get careless. We say, "Oh, by appearance, this is obviously safe."

What does this teach us, beloved? We're talking in broad general principles here and matters of importance. False teachers often are not outrageous in their conduct. Often they are not blatant in their deception. You would know, those of you that have been under a ministry of God's word for any length of time, you would know to turn away from a teacher that told you that Jesus never really existed. You would know to turn away from a teacher who said the Bible is only a book of man, it is not the book of God, it is not the word of God. You would know that that's a wolf out in the open, and there are men like that. But the false teachers that we especially guard ourselves, we have to realize that it's not always that clear, it's not always that distinct. Sometimes the key to discernment is knowing what is true over against what is almost true; what is 90% accurate as opposed to the 10% of poison that would undermine everything else in it.

You see, beloved, false teachers are more than happy to talk about God, talk about love, talk about the love of God, even to talk about Christ. They might even talk about the cross and talk about grace. They look safe, in other words, but appearances are not all that you can go on. False teachers thrive on, oh they thrive on it and it is so desperately wicked when they do, they thrive on using the same words but using them with different meanings. They present a counterfeit instead of actual truth and they will talk about the cross of Jesus and say, "And what was he doing? He was giving us an example of self-denying love," and that's all they say about it. You say, "Oh, that's nice." And what have they done by their silence? They have denied the substitutionary atonement; that Christ was on that cross not as an example of love, it was that, but preeminently it was a substitutionary sacrifice on behalf of sinners. They don't go there. They won't talk about that. That's just by way of example.

They'll talk about grace and we have an understanding of grace here, but what they'll mean by grace is that in God's grace, everyone will eventually make it to heaven. God in love would never turn someone away. Everybody will be saved in the end. Maybe they'll have to pass through the fires of purgatory to clean them up a bit, but eventually most everybody is saved in the end. That's not true, and the fact that it appeals, "Oh, I would like it to be that way," you say, "I would like to know that everybody but Hitler and Stalin go to heaven." The fact that you'd like it to be that way is no indication of truth, and the fact that a man is telling you that is no indication that he's telling you the truth, by way of example.

These men are deceptive, these women are deceptive and so we have to be on guard even though they look safe. To get an example from what Scripture tells us about how extreme this can be, look at 2 Corinthians 11:13, speaking about the false teachers, the false apostles that had wreaked such destructive influence on the church at Corinth, the Apostle Paul unmasks them and says,

13 ... such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. 14 No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. 15 Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also

disguise themselves as servants of righteousness, whose end will be according to their deeds.

Satan disguising himself as an angel of light, false teachers disguising themselves as servants of Christ. Scripture warns us again and again and again about this danger, and it's not a surprise to know that this is the case and we have to be on continual guard. Beloved, we have to be on continual guard both individually in our personal lives, the influences that we allow to direct us, to teach us, and we have to be on guard corporately as well.

Go back to verse 15. I want to show you something else here. Matthew 7:15, "Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing." The English word "come" there, again in Greek, a present tense, the idea being that they come in waves, they come continually, they come repeatedly. It's not a one time thing, you deal with it and then the problem goes away never to be dealt with again. This is something that we expect to happen over time. Jesus says, "They come and they come again and again," and that's why the command "beware" is to be on guard continually because this is something that is a nature, it's a feature of spiritual life. The devil is real and the devil has his workers and they are out sowing destructive seeds in the field of God, trying to confuse matters, trying to lead people astray. So we have to be on continual guard because these false teachers are real and these false teachers are deceptive. They are not immediately available to the spiritual eye on first glance. It takes study. It takes time. It takes patience.

And beloved, God help me as I say this, beloved, it takes resolve. It takes resolve. It takes leaders in churches who are willing to say, "No, that can't be taught here." It takes leaders in churches, it takes a collective will of a congregation to say, "We're going to be on guard as a congregation," and to realize that sometimes that means that people get sent away because they are known to be a destructive influence. That's not being unkind. That's not being unloving. This is part of the responsibility that Christ has given to his church and to its leadership, to say that we are going to have a fence around where inside the sheep can be safe and the people who are the wolves stay outside. And it's not pleasant to deal with, it's not fun to deal with. It's not fun, I'll tell you the truth, it's not fun to be questioned when that happens but we don't stop being discerning, stop being protective because of that. There is a higher authority that we are responding to collectively as a church, we are responding to a command of Christ that says, "You beware and you be on guard. These things are real. These things are deceptive." It's a real battle, in other words, and there are real casualties that happen if you don't man the post. There are real casualties, real lives that get torn apart when churches aren't careful and aren't protective and aren't obedient to this command.

You know, you go on the internet and from time to time I do this and you see what other churches say about themselves and, "Everybody is welcome. No matter where you're at, everybody is welcome." There is a sense in which that's true. We welcome anybody to come that would sit under the teaching of God's word, absolutely, but then they'll go further and say, "You won't find any judging going on here." Well, wait a minute, then how are you going to possibly discern sheep from wolves? How are you possibly going

to protect people if predators come into your midst looking for someone to devour, if you've said and announced in advance, "Our principle of ministry is no discernment, no judgment. The fold is wide open. There are no gates. Everybody come in and we won't judge you." Wow, really? That sounds so loving to the carnal ear. To the biblical ear, that sounds so dangerous. Jesus says to be on guard, to beware, and sometimes that will have consequences. This isn't abstract, this becomes real.

Look over at 2 Timothy, for example. I nearly turned there a little while ago but now I have the opportunity. Paul as he is writing to Timothy, Paul writing his apostolic swansong, he will die soon after these words, Paul calls out somebody by name and in 2 Timothy 4:14, I may have said chapter 2, I meant chapter 4. Paul tells Timothy,

14 Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. 15 Be on guard against him yourself, for he vigorously opposed our teaching.

"Timothy, I have experience with this particular wolf. He opposed us and he caused as much harm. Timothy, it's time for me to go. As I go, I'm telling you, you be on guard against him too. He'll come back. He'll try again, Timothy. Be on guard so that he does not have a destructive influence. Let's protect the flock together on this," he says.

So they are real, they are deceptive. All around this we have been pointing to our third point this morning: false teachers are dangerous. False teachers are dangerous. Look at verse 15 with me again, Matthew 7:15 as we are almost finished for this morning. Matthew 7:15, Jesus says, "Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves." Beloved, if you knew it was a wolf, if you are a sheep and you knew it was a wolf, you'd hide. You would go and find shelter. But because he looks like a sheep, you say, "Oh, I can belly up to this one. I can bring him in. After all, look at the wool. Nice, soft wool." And you drop your guard and you leave yourself vulnerable. And as I said earlier, that carelessness, that spiritual carelessness whether it's in an individual life or, beloved, if it's in the corporate life of a local church, that carelessness is the most significant key to the success of a false teacher. That willingness not to be on guard or that refusal, that disobedience, that sinful refusal to obey Christ in this area gives the false teacher the room he needs to operate, and that's why Christ says to us, "Be on guard."

"Ravenous," that word translated "ravenous" in the New American Standard, comes from a word group that describes the act of robbery. False teachers maintain an outward concern for truth and righteousness but inwardly what they are really like is they are seeking to use you to gratify their own sensual lusts, their own greed, or their own ambition.

If I were on an elder board in a church where I was not a pastor, for example, and I had a man who made it obvious that his goal was simply to use our smaller church in order to be a launching pad to a greater ministry, I would be looking to get rid of him ASAP. Why? Because he's not there as a shepherd for the flock that's there, he simply has his

eyes on a greater prize, a greater prominence, greater publishing contracts, greater conference opportunities because that comes with the bigger ministries. And Christian ministries, so-called, America is filled with guys like that. I think that a local church elder board has the prerogative and the responsibility and the privilege of saying, "Not here. Your job is not to fulfill your ambition at our expense."

But that's what false teachers do, and eventually false teachers will drop the mask and they will strike. If I can be so bold as to change the imagery, they lift their head out of the pit like a snake and they strike with their venom. Pastors, spiritual leaders who rule a church with intimidation and threats. Pastors who have split church after church after church. Oh, church splits happen but when that's the mark of a man's ministry, something's wrong. You will know them by their fruit. Pastors who lead women into sin. Pastors who violate their marital covenant, run off with someone else and then try to reestablish themselves in ministry in the name of grace. No. Pastors who speak to entertain and to get laughs rather than teaching people substance that will sustain them, that will lead them truly into the kingdom of God through faith alone, in Christ alone, based on the Scriptures alone, to the glory of God alone. Pastors who teach you by so-called things that God has said to them personally, new revelation that God has given to them. We could go on and on.

They are wolves, beloved, manifesting their wolfness, if I can make up a word, manifesting their wolfness in different ways. I'm going to get a trademark on that word, wolfness. I like that. Pastors and leaders who manifest their wolfness, they manifest it in different ways but all pointing back to the same thing: they are not who they appear to be. They are not a true shepherd. They are a wolf. They are a wolf in sheep's clothing and the threat is real and, beloved, sometimes the threat comes from within.

The Apostle Paul understood this and this is the last text we're going to look at, look finally here at Acts 20:25. Paul is about to depart from them. His ministry at Ephesus is finished and he is reminding them and he is warning them and he is charging them upon his departure. He says,

25 And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face. 26 Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. 27 For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.

Verse 28, again the echoes of Christ coming through what his apostles say later on. He says,

28 Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. 29 I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; 30 and from among your own selves [from within] men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. 31 Therefore be on the alert,

remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.

Paul says, "This threat is real. I know what's going to happen after I leave. When the shepherd leaves, the wolves come in." He says, "I know that's going to happen and so I charge you to be on guard. I charge you. I charge you to be on the alert. I charge you to protect the flock of God which Christ purchased with his own blood," he said to the men.

Then he says what we were saying earlier in verse 32. What is the key to protection? How do we guard ourselves from these demonic wolves in the clothing of men? He says in verse 32,

32 And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

Beloved, if we as a church will be a student of God's word, if you as a believing Christian will be a student of God's word, you can avoid this threat. You do not have to end up in the teeth of wolves. While false teachers are subtle, we do not have to be afraid. We can recognize them. God's word is sufficient to protect us. God's word is sufficient to help us. And as Christ goes on in his teaching, you can, you absolutely can know how to recognize false teachers when you know the signs to look for.

How do we protect ourselves as we continue as students of God's word? We'll see that next time as we continue on in the Sermon on the Mount. I hope you'll be with us.

Let's pray.

*Dear Father, what a sober warning to realize that there are men who would come to us in the name of God even in the name of Christ, who would actually not have our spiritual welfare in mind, but would actually be a wolf in sheep's clothing. This is reality, this is dangerous, and there is a lot of deception and it's easy to fall along the way. We come to you as the one Lord Jesus who is the Good Shepherd of the sheep and we ask you to be the one who protects us from that, protects us from the wolves, protects us from Satan. You yourself taught us, "Deliver us from evil," and so, Lord, as we realize this darker reality found in the truth of your word, we ask you to not only help us but to be the one ultimately who protects us as we go forward. We thank you for the sufficiency of your word which is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. We thank you for the sufficiency of the word which is sufficient for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness. We thank you for the word that is sufficient in season and out of season, to exhort us, to rebuke us, to comfort us, to help us.*

*Lord, we take this threat seriously and yet we take it seriously from a position of strength and not from fear because you are with us always, even to the end of the age. You are able to build your church. You said that you would. We trust you to do just that in this local body that is a microcosm of a greater reality. Father, I pray for these loved ones in*

*front of me, listening over the live stream, hearing it on subsequent media. Father, protect them individually as well. Help us all to rise to the challenge and to rise to the obedience to which you have called us here. Be on guard. Be on the alert. Beware.*

*And Father, I would pray a special prayer for the men in this congregation, young single men on the front end of life. Father, develop these skills in them now and raise up lions for the truth from their midst. Father, for the men with wives, men with children, Father, may they take seriously their responsibility and for some to repent of their spiritual carelessness and come back to your word. Father, for all of us, to embrace the beauty, the sufficiency, the inerrancy of your word. To believe it. To study it. To understand it. To teach it to those that you give to us, Father, that we might be able to stand firm in a day of deception, in a day of error, in a day when threats come from outside and from within. Father, help us collectively and within our own families and within our own marriages to be a lighthouse, to be bulwark, to be a fortress by your grace to those that look to us for love and care and protection. Father, help us to see, to know, to understand, to live in a way that says, "My provision for those that depend on me is far more than material goods, it's far more than a home, it's far more than a bank account." The ultimate provision, Father, is to be someone that would teach and lead and protect those that look to us for that. So help us all to that end and may we embrace it with joy, Father, knowing that success is not only possible, it is provided for in Christ. It's to him we look. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

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