

False Prophets and Popularity.

Text: Mat 7:15-23

Suggested Hymns:
519, 197, 260, 285, 273

- 1) An overview of our text
- 2) Examples of People Faithful To God,
But Unpopular To The Masses
- 3) The warning against false prophets

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Matthew 7:15-23, ¹⁵ *“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.”* ¹⁶ *“You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles?”* ¹⁷ *“Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.”* ¹⁸ *“A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.”* ¹⁹ *“Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”* ²⁰ *“Therefore by their fruits you will know them.”*

²¹ *“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.”* ²² *“Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’”* ²³ *“And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’”* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

There is an old Latin proverb which reads, *Vox populi, vox Dei*, meaning, “The voice of the people is the voice of God.” Is that saying true, or is it false? Jesus says it is false. He contradicts the idea that, when you are popular with people, you are popular with God.

Jesus calls popularity a cursed thing, for He distinctly says, in Luke 6:26, ²⁶ *“Woe to you when all men speak well of you, For so did their fathers to the false prophets.”*

False prophets have always been popular with the great masses of the people. They have been, and still are, held in high estimation by the crowd. Is the

crowd's voice God's voice, or is the true prophet's voice God's voice? The Bible gives us the correct answer to this question. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. An Overview Of Our Text

False prophets direct people through the wide gate and along the broad road that leads to eternal destruction, so Jesus tells us to watch out for them. This implies that we should be able to recognise them and to keep them from leading us astray. They will not be easy to recognise at first glance, because they come in sheep's clothing. In other words, they look harmless, as though they belong among us.

They may even be gentle and perfectly sincere. They may be convinced in their own minds that they are proclaiming God's truth on the basis of the Holy Scriptures. And there will be some who claim that they have received special revelations from the Lord in addition to the truths revealed in Scripture.

On the other hand, there will be those who are deliberate liars and deceivers. They know they are not being honest with their listeners. They are interested only in personal gain and getting rich, and they distort God's Word in order to deceive others rather than to enlighten them. There are many varieties and degrees of false prophets. What they all have in common is that they deceive their listeners.

That is why Jesus says that "*inwardly they are ravenous wolves.*" Regardless of their sincerity or their intentions, the final result of their teaching is that they harm and destroy people rather than save them. Instead of leading people along the narrow way to eternal life, they mislead them to walk along the broad road that leads to damnation.

No matter how kind and helpful and charitable they may be, no matter how many wonderful works they may accomplish, even if they feed the hungry and minister to the sick and provide shelter for the homeless — all this is of little value if those they serve end up in the eternal torments of hell.

We need to look at their fruits to distinguish false prophets from true messengers of the Lord. Their fruits are primarily the doctrines they proclaim, not the outward successes they might achieve. If someone prophesies in the sense of foretelling future events and his predictions do not come true, we know that person is a false prophet. God's promises never fail to come to pass.

If someone adds to the Word of God or subtracts from it, we can also identify such a person as a false prophet. And anyone who teaches anything contrary to God's Word is a false prophet. We need to evaluate a preacher's message on the basis of the Holy Scriptures. If his message contradicts what God says, we know who is right and who is wrong.

So anyone who denies that God created the heavens and the earth by the almighty power of His Word, or that Adam and Eve were created in God's image but lost that image when they fell into sin, or that there was a world-wide flood at the time of Noah, or that Jonah was swallowed by a great fish and lived to tell about it, or that Jesus was born of a virgin, or that Jesus performed miraculous works of healing and providing and even raising the dead, or that He Himself rose from the dead on the third day and ascended into heaven 40 days later, or that Jesus shed His blood to atone for the sins of the whole world — anyone who denies any of these clear teachings of the Bible thereby brands himself as a false prophet. So we need to heed Jesus' advice to "*Beware of false prophets.*"

After warning us not to let false prophets deceive us, Jesus warns us not to deceive ourselves either: "*Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven.*" Jesus is speaking about just going through the motions of being religious. He grants that some people will be very convincing to others and even to themselves. When they are summoned before the judgement seat of Christ on the Last Day, they will point to their religious works. They will claim that they have prophesied in Jesus' name, driven out demons in His name, and performed many other miracles.

In many cases such persons may have performed only apparent miracles, such as bogus healings. They may have deceived many people, but they will not be able to deceive Christ. We must also admit the possibility that in some cases they have actually performed mighty works. They may have possessed special gifts of the Holy Spirit that made these things possible. But they used these gifts to glorify themselves rather than to point to the Lord Jesus Christ as the real miracle worker and as the only Saviour of sinners.

Their basic problem was that they never recognised their own sinfulness and unworthiness and did not humbly look to Jesus for forgiveness and salvation. So,

in spite of all the amazing things they have done, Jesus' final verdict is to brand them as those *who practice lawlessness!*

It is significant that those whom Christ rejects in the judgement call attention to their own works and expect to be received into heaven on that basis. On the other hand, those who are saved are surprised to hear Jesus call attention to good works of theirs that they themselves had forgotten. Works that God regards as good are evidence of saving faith and fruits of that faith. But salvation is by faith alone, and the meritorious, saving works were all performed by Jesus our Redeemer. Watch out for anybody who tries to tell you anything different!

2. Examples Of People Who Were Faithful To God, But Unpopular To The Masses

Let us begin with **Enoch**, the seventh from Adam.¹ The Bible does not only say that Enoch walked with God, — which in itself is a significant thing in that ungodly age, — but it also says that Enoch reproved the ungodly masses for their ungodly deeds, their hard speeches and great swelling words, because they had more respect of persons than of God.

Their hard speeches were undoubtedly directed against Enoch, who took them to task for their false teachings and their ungodly life. We can safely say that Enoch was not popular with the masses, since we know that he was popular with God. We also know that *“He pleased God”* as we read in Hebrews 11:5,⁵ *By faith Enoch was taken away so that he did not see death, “and was not found, because God had taken him”; for before he was taken he had this testimony, that he pleased God.*

There were also false prophets in the days of **Noah**, who denied the fact proclaimed by Noah that God would bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh.² The masses, like the false prophets said, let us eat and drink, marry and give in marriage,³ for there never will be a flood, not in one hundred and twenty years nor in a thousand years.

Noah lifted a solitary protest against the life of the world and stood there as a solitary figure against the multitude. We can imagine how unpopular Noah was with the masses during the time when the ark was being prepared, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith.⁴

Not the voice of the people, but Noah's voice was God's voice; for the flood came, and the masses with the false prophets, who misled them, were destroyed.

Lot, the nephew of Abraham, is usually regarded as a rather weak child of God, but one thing must be said about him: He bore witness of the true God in the city of Sodom. Peter calls Lot *“that righteous man”* and says that he was tormented with the filthy conversation of the wicked and with their unlawful deeds. What Lot saw and heard from day to day tormented his righteous soul.⁵ “Heard” from the false prophets of the people.

Lot rebuked the Sodomites for their wickedness. This fact becomes evident from Gen. 19:9,⁹ *“And they said, “Stand back!” Then they said, “This one came in to stay here, and he keeps acting as a judge; now we will deal worse with you than with them.” So they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near to break down the door.*

They did not like his reproof, his preaching of righteousness, because in it they were confronted with the word and the will of God. Loving darkness, they hated the light, because their works were evil. Lot begged them not to be so wicked, and that they should desist from pandering to their sinful lusts, but all to no avail.

Nor did he fare any better with his sons-in-law, to whom the prediction that the city was to be destroyed seemed like a mockery. And when the city was destroyed, was the voice of the people the voice of God?

Moses was a true prophet of God who admonished his people to walk in the ways of the Lord. Again and again the people rebelled against him, thinking that he was too strict. When he went up to Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments from the hand of God, Moses left the people under the charge of his brother Aaron.

It did not take the Israelites long to find out that they had an easy-going leader, whose main ambition was to be popular with the masses.

When Moses was delayed in returning, the people clamoured for a god they could see, Aaron ordered them to bring their gold and made a golden calf for them. We do not need to read between the lines to know that Aaron was the hero of the day, the most popular man in the camp. Moses was practically forgotten.

How glad the people were that he did not come back to spoil the eating and drinking and the dancing! Aaron followed the voice of the people. Was it the voice of God? No; Aaron played the false prophet.

The prophets of Baal were popular in the days of **Elijah**.⁶ The masses, with the exception of the seven thousand, bowed the knee to Baal. Their prophets ate at Jezebel's table and were honoured by the king, while Elijah was regarded as an outcast and a fugitive. Was the voice of the people the voice of God?

3. The Warning Against False Prophets

The Sadducees in Christ's day, who occupied the chief places in the Jewish Church, were popular with the people. Their motto was: *Let us eat, drink, and be merry; for tomorrow we may be dead.*

'Plucking the roses while they are in bloom' was a very comfortable creed, very pleasing to the sinful flesh, and the crowds took to it like ducks take to water.

But when **Christ** exposed these false prophets, saying, "***Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees,***"⁷ He touched a hornets' nest that buzzed with hatred and revenge.

Furthermore, when Christ pointed out that the Pharisees were teaching for doctrine the commandments of men,⁸ both classes joined hands to rid themselves of this Teacher come from God.

Arrayed in the sheep's clothing of innocence, they tempted Jesus with intriguing questions in order that they might have a cause against Him sufficient to satisfy their wolfish nature. At last they succeeded, and the voice of the people prevailed, crying, "***Crucify Him! Crucify Him!***" Was the voice of the people the voice of God?

St. Paul, who preached Christ Crucified, had to listen to the roaring masses at Ephesus, "***Great is Diana of the Ephesians,***"⁹ the Diana "***whom all Asia and the world worship.***"¹⁰ Was that voice to him the voice of God?

Martin Luther said of his time: "*Sectarianism is rampant, and few there are who contend against it and preserve the true doctrine; their names could all be written on a little card.*"

Think of that stupendous scene where Luther faced the combined powers of Church and State. The central doctrine of Scripture, justification by faith, without the deeds of the Law, was regarded as an insult to the wisdom of men.

Fearing to be ridiculed by the classes and hissed by the masses, Erasmus and others preferred to be popular and to let truth take care of itself. They forgot what others have forgotten since that day. The Bible says in Exodus 23:2, ² ***“You shall not follow a crowd to do evil.”***

Christ couples popularity with falseness. Then unpopularity must be due to the proclamation of the truth. Christ warns all His disciples against false prophets. So do the apostles. This warning is still necessary because false doctrine always coincides with man’s depraved reason, appeals to the Old Adam, and tickles his vanity.

Mr. Seton Thompson, who spent years in watching the lives of wild animals, declares that the instinct of danger which some of them possess is so extraordinary that it really seems as if there must be an angel who warns and protects them.

Defended by this instinct only, they will not touch the poisonous grasses, and unerringly they avoid the presence of their foes.

But mankind is not like that. They open their doors and their hearts to false prophets, who hide the hook of falsehood with a bait of truth. As we learn in 2 Timothy 3:2-5, they have *a form of godliness* *but deny its power. From such people turn away!*

There is hardly a person in the world so mean as to lie to another person in answer to a question about the right road to the next town.

But how many people mislead others about the right road to heaven! Popular or not, let us keep on doing our duty warning against error as the servants of Christ.

The seriousness of error is pointed out in Galatians 1:6-12, ⁶ ***I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, ⁷ which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.***

⁸ *But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed.* ⁹ *As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.* ¹⁰ *For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.*

¹¹ *But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man.* ¹² *For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ.*

Let us close with the words of the hymnist,¹¹

In these last days of sore distress
Grant us, O Lord, true steadfastness,
That pure we keep, till life is spent,
Thy holy Word and sacrament. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Jude 14-15

² Gen. 6 and 7

³ Luke 17:26-27

⁴ Hebrews 11:7

⁵ 2 Peter 2:7

⁶ 1 Kings 18:25-31

⁷ Matthew 16:6

⁸ Matthew 15:9

⁹ Acts 19:28

¹⁰ Acts 19:27

¹¹ Hymn 260