

## **The Warrant Which Christ Has Issued Against False Prophets.**

Text: Matt 7:15-23

1) Their General Appearance

Suggested Hymns:

2) Their Special Marks

259, 262, 197, 260, 511

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, <sup>15</sup> *“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. <sup>16</sup> You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles?*

<sup>17</sup> *Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. <sup>18</sup> A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. <sup>19</sup> Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>20</sup> Therefore by their fruits you will know them.*

<sup>21</sup> *“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. <sup>22</sup> 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?’ <sup>23</sup> 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,

*“Beware of false prophets!”* This warning of our Lord does not suit most of the Christians in our days. Those who raise their voice against false prophets in our days are denounced as intolerant, and the tendency of the age is to be liberal, broad-hearted, to honour all religious opinions that are contrary to our own views, and not to call anyone a false prophet, or an errorist, or a heretic who bears the Christian name.

Lutherans, are especially, blamed for our stern refusal to extend the hand of Christian fellowship to other Protestant denominations, and when a Lutheran

pastor dares to call him a false prophet who disseminates error, and warns his hearers of seducers, he is charged with undue animosity and lack of Christian love.

But our Lord's warning stands: ***“Beware of false prophets!”*** and if a pastor does his duty, he must not only feed the sheep that are entrusted to him, but also drive the wolf away from the flock and warn against false prophets. For false prophets are very dangerous. Jesus calls them ***ravenous wolves***.

By their false doctrine they murder the souls. Every false doctrine misleads, and he who allows himself to be misled and remains on the wrong path will not arrive at the right destination. We should not make light of false doctrine, as is the general trend in our days.

We should not admire a preacher's ability, his popularity, his success in effecting conversions, and go to hear him, even though we know that in some points he deviates from the Word of God.

For what does St. Paul say about false doctrine? He says in Galatians 5:9, <sup>9</sup> ***A little leaven leavens the whole lump.*** The meaning is, that the smallest false doctrine, taking root in your soul while you hear a false prophet, will corrupt your soul and eventually overthrow the faith which is within you.

The Galatians, to whom St. Paul addressed these words, had listened to false prophets, and the apostle was compelled to tell them in Galatians 5:4, ***you have fallen from grace.***

O how necessary, therefore, for every Christian to know who are the false prophets, so as to be able to beware of them! Now in our Gospel the Lord Jesus has issued a warrant against all false prophets and has given such an exact description of these deceivers that no Christian should be misled.

Let us consider, with the help of God's Holy Spirit, *The Warrant Which Christ Has Issued Against False Prophets*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

### **1. Their General Appearance.**

When an offender is at large and is to be brought to justice a warrant is issued by the court, and that warrant is placed in the hands of an officer to secure the offender's apprehension.

This warrant generally contains an exact description of the person wanted. And so the Lord Jesus has issued in our Gospel a warrant against false prophets, and has given an exact description of their general appearance and of their special marks.

As to their general appearance He says, ***“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.”*** False prophets do not appear in the garb of wolves. They do not come to you and say, *“We are false prophets, we want to lead you astray, we want to devour you.”*

No; they generally appear in sheep’s clothing, that is to say, in outward appearance they cannot be distinguished from the true prophets. And they themselves may be sincere as to their teachings and consider themselves true prophets. But as they are false prophets, their sheep’s clothing is a deception, and every Christian should be on his guard.

And what is their sheep’s clothing? What is it upon them that is so deceptive? What is it that makes them so much like the true prophets in outward appearance? Jesus says in His description of false prophets, <sup>21</sup> ***“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.”***

So if you hear a pastor calling upon Jesus as the Lord, admitting in a certain sense the divinity of Jesus Christ, saying that Christ is the Son of God, you must not think that for this reason that he must surely be a true prophet. A true prophet, indeed, will always extol Christ’s divinity. He will say with St. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 2:2, <sup>2</sup> ***For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.***

But a man may have the name of Jesus in his mouth always, and speak of Jesus in the highest terms, and hold up Jesus as a model and example to his people in every sermon, and yet be a false prophet.

Another part of the sheep’s clothing that is so deceptive in the false prophets’ appearance is the fact that they make use of the Word of God. Jesus says, <sup>22</sup> ***Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name?’***

Every Christian preacher will prophesy in the Lord's name, that is, he will use the Holy Scriptures and base his sermon on a scriptural text. Now when you go into a church and see the minister take a text from the Bible for his sermon, you must not think that for that reason he must surely be a true prophet.

A true prophet will do the same thing, it is true. But a man may be talking Scripture, and yet be a false prophet, misinterpreting Scripture, and falsely quoting Scripture in defence of his error, just as the devil did when he tempted Christ in the wilderness.

Another part of the sheep's clothing that is so deceptive in the false prophets' appearance is the achievement of many great results obtained by them.

Christ says that many will say to Him 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?***"

When you find that a preacher meets with great success, that he draws large crowds, that many sinners come to repentance, that the conversions are numbered by the hundreds, or that he performs such deeds which border on the miraculous, performing faith cures, healing the sick without medicine, and the like, you must not think that for that reason he must surely be a true prophet.

The work of true prophets is also often marked with great outward success. Think of Luther's great success in converting thousands to Christ, in warding off war and healing the sick by prayer.

But in spite of a preacher's great accomplishments in the Lord's vineyard a man may be a false prophet. He may be numbered among those of whom Christ says, "***I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!***"

The general appearance of false prophets is thus clearly set forth by our Lord Jesus in the warrant which He has issued against them. They wear sheep's clothing, and that covers them entirely, so that, as to outward appearance, they cannot be distinguished from the true prophets.

They are not outside, but inside of the Christian Church. They use the name of Jesus; they deal with His divine Word and sacraments; they call sinners to repentance; their work often seems to be crowned with the greatest success: and

we would never know a true prophet from a false one, if the Lord Jesus had not told us of some special marks by which we must know them.

## 2. Their Special Marks.

What are these special marks? Christ says, “***Beware of false prophets, who come to you.***” They come to you. Has any prophet a right to come to us of his own accord? No; a prophet must invariably be sent by the Lord. He must have his commission from heaven. If he cannot show that commission, he is a false prophet, even though he could be the bearer of the best of tidings.

Now in olden times the prophets and apostles were commissioned directly by God and sent by Him, and they were enabled to prove their divine mission by miracles. But how are prophets or pastors commissioned in our days? Are they still sent directly by God and enabled to prove their divine mission by a miracle? Are they sent with special messages from heaven?

No; after God’s revelation has been closed, all that men should know that their salvation is made known in the Bible. Prophets are no more commissioned by such an immediate call. They are called through the medium of the Christian congregation. To be a true prophet a man must be legitimately called and made a pastor by a Christian congregation.

If a man has no call issued to him by the Church, and yet forces himself on the people, and conducts revivals, or holds forth in the streets, he may be admired by some people for his courage and cleverness, but the fact that he comes of his own accord, not being sent, and the consequent lack of a legitimate call, places upon him the stamp of a false prophet. These are false prophets of whom God says, “***I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran.***”<sup>17</sup>

But the lack of a legitimate call is not the only mark by which false prophets are to be known. In fact, a pastor may be properly called and yet be a false prophet. Jesus adds another remark. He says, “<sup>16</sup>***You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles?***

<sup>17</sup>***Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.***

<sup>18</sup>***A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.*** <sup>19</sup>***Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.***

<sup>20</sup>***Therefore by their fruits you will know them.***”

As a thorn-bush will bring forth thorns, and a thistle thistles, and a corrupt tree evil fruit, so a false prophet will bring forth such fruit as may be expected of him. And what is that fruit?

The common explanation is: it is the false prophet's ungodly life. He does not make his life correspond to his preaching. He does things unbecoming to a Christian. He does not set a good example to the flock. He brings shame upon the ministerial office. If a minister so far forgets himself as to commit some gross offence, he is evidently a false prophet.

But this explanation is utterly wrong. True, ministers must lead a godly and holy life, and be deposed from office if they fail to do so. That must be the fruit of their Christianity. But what has that to do with the fruit of their prophecy or teaching?

As the fruit of the apple tree is the apple, so is the fruit of a prophet his prophecy, and of a teacher his teaching. If he is a true prophet his prophecy will be true. If he is a false prophet his prophecy will be false.

The special mark of a false prophet, therefore, is his false teaching, his erroneous doctrine. The Lord's commandment for pastors is: *Preach My Word; proclaim My will! Speak My Word faithfully.*<sup>2</sup>

The minister's special charge is to proclaim the Law and the Gospel, to let all people, even the best of their members, know that they are damnable sinners, and to hold up to them Jesus Christ as the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole world. He is to urge them not to despair because of their sins, but to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, who bled and died for us all on the cross, and thus to seek salvation in Jesus Christ alone.

If a preacher deviates from the Word of God, if he either adds something to it, claiming that God had commanded or forbidden things that are not found in the Bible, or if he takes from it, saying that God did not mean this or that which is clearly set forth in the Scriptures, he is a false prophet.

He also deviates from the Word of God if he distorts the Word to make it conform to the dictates of human reason; if he makes any alteration in the Law or in the Gospel; or if he sets aside Christ's merits and teaches that by your own righteousness and good deeds you must seek to gain heaven.

So in short, if in the least point his doctrine stands in opposition to the divine Word, which as a minister of Christ he is charged to deliver unimpaired, he is a false prophet.

We must therefore class with the false prophets, not only all the propagators of rank unfaithfulness, but also all those Christian ministers who do not strictly abide by the divine Word, no matter what church they represent, even if they should style themselves as Lutherans. They are false prophets in every point in which they are wrong.

May the Lord, then, grant us His grace to diligently search the Scriptures, so that we may know the false prophets by their fruits and beware of them, and that we always abide by His clear and express words. For Jesus says in John 8:31–32, ***“If you continue in My word, you are My disciples indeed. <sup>32</sup> And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”*** Amen.

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

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah 23:21

<sup>2</sup> Jer 23:28