

AN URGENT WARNING

Matthew 7:15-20

Intro: Beware” is a word that most of it are well acquainted with. It is a word of warning. You see it many different places. People may have a sign on their fence, saying, “Beware of the dog.” That means that you better not go into that yard, or that dog might bite you, or do something even worse. I remember times when we would go out to swim in a river or a lake, and there would be sign which said, “Shallow water – Do not dive! If you go around any power substation in our city you will find a warning sign reminding you that the wires carry heavy voltage which might kill you if you come in contact with it. I don’t think pharmacists do this anymore, maybe they do in some instances, but there would often be a skull and cross bones warning you that a certain medicine could prove to be fatal. Even the traffic lights which we see every day has a yellow light which warns us that we should prepare to stop, and a red light indicating that it is not only against the law to go when the red light is before us, but that it could prove injurious to ourselves and possibly to others if we ignore the light and have a collision with another car.

I am sure that you can think of other illustrations of warnings that you have seen. Parent continually are warning their children of possible dangers that they will face in certain circumstances. The dictionary defines “beware” as a situation in which you are to be on guard because of some dangerous situation which we can face. “Beware” is a word which is designed to attract our attention immediately. It is a word designed to wake us up when we may be going along not thinking in particular about anything, and then we see this word: “Beware”! And if we are wise we will pay attention to what the warning says, and avoid whatever we are being warned against.

There are many warnings in the Bible. They don’t all use the word “beware,” but some of them do. Let me give you some illustrations.

When Abraham was sending his servant to get a bride for Isaac, the servant raised the question about what he should do if the woman he found would not be willing to come with him. (He was going to be visiting Abraham’s relatives in Mesopotamia where he expected to find the right lady.) But when the servant asked Abraham what he should do if the chosen lady would not come with him, this is what Abraham said, and you will find this answer in Gen. 24:6-8:

6 And Abraham said unto him, Beware thou that thou bring not my son thither again.

7 The LORD God of heaven, which took me from my father’s

house, and from the land of my kindred, and which spake unto me, and that sware unto me, saying, Unto thy seed will I give this land; he shall send his angel before thee, and thou shalt take a wife unto my son from thence.

8 And if the woman will not be willing to follow thee, then thou shalt be clear from this my oath: only bring not my son thither again.

The people of God were forbidden to marry the Canaanites, and this was because the Canaanites might, and probably would, draw the people away from the Lord to worship false gods.

Deuteronomy 6:12 and 8:11 say practically the same thing. These words were spoken by Moses just before he died and as the children of Israel were anticipating entering the land of Canaan. It is a most important warning because if the Israelites had obeyed what Moses told them then, the nation would never have gone into captivity, but they would have experienced continued blessing from the Lord. Let me read to you the passage in Deuteronomy 6. I am reading verses 10-15:

10 And it shall be, when the LORD thy God shall have brought thee into the land which he sware unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give thee great and goodly cities, which thou buildedst not,

11 And houses full of all good things, which thou filledst not, and wells digged, which thou diggedst not, vineyards and olive trees, which thou plantedst not; when thou shalt have eaten and be full;

12 Then beware lest thou forget the LORD, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.

13 Thou shalt fear the LORD thy God, and serve him, and shalt swear by his name.

14 Ye shall not go after other gods, of the gods of the people which are round about you;

15 (For the LORD thy God is a jealous God among you) lest the anger of the LORD thy God be kindled against thee, and destroy thee from off the face of the earth.

But that whole generation failed to heed the warning, and they paid a terrible price for their disobedience. What a lesson there is for us in this! How careful we should be that daily we are doing the will of the Lord.

But let us look into the New Testament.

Cf. Matt. 10:17 the Lord told His disciples to beware of *men* because they were only too glad to deliver them up to the councils, and have them persecuted by scourging. And then in Matthew 16:6 our Lord told His disciples, Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the

Sadducees.” They thought at first that He was speaking of bread, but then Matthew added this word of explanation in Matt. 16:12:

Then understood they how that he bade them not beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees.

This is very similar to our text in which the Lord warned His disciples against false prophets.

And there was that instance when a man came to the Lord and he wanted the Lord to force his brother to divide his inheritance with him. And then the Lord issued that man a warning:

And he said unto them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth (Luke 12:15).

This is consistent with the warning that Paul issued to Timothy in 1 Tim. 6:10,

For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.

The love of money is really the sin of America, and it breeds all other kinds of sin. When people put our economy ahead of morality, our nation is in big trouble, and it can lead only to more trouble. Let the politicians do what they like, sooner or later they are going to find out that the Lord is sovereign even here in America.

I am sure that most of you will remember Paul's words to the church at Philippi where he said,

1 Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you, to me indeed is not grievous, but for you it is safe.

2 Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the concision.

3 For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh (Phil. 3:1-3).

One last passage, the last two verses of Peter's second epistle – chapter 3, verses 17 and 18. He was discussing how false teachers twist the Scriptures to make them say what the false teachers want them to say. And so this is Peter's warning:

17 Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own stedfastness.

18 But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and for ever.

Amen (2 Pet. 3:17-18)

So it is very clear that if we want to be able to recognize false teachers and their false teaching, we need to be well ground in the Word of God.

There is a sense in which every negative commandment in Scripture, where we are told what not to do, is a warning, and could have the word “beware” introduce it.

But now that we have had a sample of these warnings, let us turn our attention to our text beginning with Matt. 7:15.

I. A WARNING AGAINST “FALSE PROPHETS” (Matt. 7:15).

Remember that a prophet is primarily a preacher, but he usually claims to speak on behalf of God. But the big question most of the time is, what god does he represent. Our Lord was speaking of men who were prominent in those days who claimed to speak for God, the living God, but they were liars! They come to us as one of us; they “come to you in sheep’s clothing.” They appear to be true prophets outwardly, but inwardly they have the nature of wolves. False teaching never permanently helps or blesses anyone; it destroys people. And that is what makes the work of the false prophets such a danger, even to the people of God. And this is why we all need to heed the warning to “beware” of them. They may be very friendly, and sound rather convincing in what they have to say, but the world today is full of false teaching. I would assume that the false teachers the Lord was speaking of primarily were the scribes and the Pharisees. They claim to be the spiritual leaders of the Jews, but we see their true nature when they sought so unrelentingly to have the Lord Jesus killed. Not all false teachers are violent like that, but the Lord had every reason to say that “inwardly,” that is, in their hearts, “they are ravening wolves.” They preyed upon people, to devour them and all that they have.

Now our Lord’s words should make us realize at the outset that false teachers thrive on deception. Their master, the Devil, is a master deceiver. We learn that from Gen. 3 where he deceived Eve into thinking that she could be like God if she would only do what God told her not to do. And so much of the OT is given over to the history of telling us how the children of Israel worshiped other gods, and following those who were false prophets.

When the Lord gave the message which we call *the Olivet Discourse* (Matt. 24-25) because He gave that message on the Mount of Olives, He said this (and I am going to read some selected verses from chapter 24:

4 And Jesus answered and said unto them, Take heed that no man deceive you.

5 For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many (Matt. 24:4-5).

In Matt 24:11 the Lord said, “And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many.” And then on down in Matt. 24:24 we read that our Lord said this:

For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.

So this is no minor issue. It was a major problem in OT times. It was a great problem when our Lord was here on earth. And, you can see from the epistles of the NT, how the apostles were continually correcting false ideas that were coming in among the Lord’s people. And today false teaching is running rampant both in the professing church and outside of the church in the world. How we need this teaching! “Beware of false prophets.”

So this urgent warning is given in verse 15 – and remember that it is very necessary that all of us pay attention constantly to the warning. And we need to keep false teaching out of our fellowship

But from this warning the Lord went on to tell:

II. HOW TO IDENTIFY FALSE TEACHERS (Matt. 7:16-20).

He tells us at the beginning of verse 16, “Ye shall know them by their fruits.” And then He practically repeated himself in verse 20 where it is recorded that He said, “Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.” So it is not by their looks, nor by their friendliness, nor by the clothing they wear, nor by the numbers who follow them; *it is by their fruits*. Therefore, it is very important that we learn what the Lord had in mind when He spoke of “their fruits.”

Let me read to you verses 16 through 20. (Read.)

I mentioned a moment ago that if we are to be able to spot error, we need to know the truth of the Word of God. But the fact that Bible teaching is not really wanted, nor sought out by many of the Lord’s people, shows why we have so many false doctrines in the church. So the better you know the Word, the more sensitive you will be to false teachers and their false teaching.

When the Lord spoke of a “good tree,” He was speaking of a “good person,” a person who is truly saved through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and is therefore good in the sight of God.

On the other hand, when He spoke of a “bad tree,” He was speaking of a person who was “corrupt,” and who brought forth “evil fruit.” This term describes what we are by nature – corrupt and unregenerate.

Furthermore, He said that “a good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.”

Do you remember that when we were considering verses 13 and 14 last week, that the Lord emphasized that there were only two ways for people to go, *and only two*? It seems that here the Lord was saying that there are only two kinds of trees when you are speaking of fruit. There are good trees, and there are corrupt trees – good people, and corrupt people. And just as it is certain that a good tree will bring forth good fruit, and that a corrupt tree will bring forth evil fruit, so it is equally true that a good tree cannot bring forth corrupt fruit, nor can a corrupt tree ever bring forth good fruit.

But what did the Lord mean by fruit? This is a major subject in Scripture.

He was speaking of the effect which salvation has had in our lives. Fruit has to do with our character, and it has to do with our works. It actually has to do with all that we are. The Bible makes it clear that no person can be saved, can know the Lord Jesus Christ in salvation, and remain the same. But let us look at just a few specific verses.

One difference between a Christian and one who is not a Christian is that the Christian is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, the non-Christian is not! The Holy Spirit is the One Who brings us to Christ. We are born again by the Spirit of God.. And the Holy Spirit begins to work in our hearts the moment we are saved to make us like the Lord Jesus Christ. Even after knowing the Lord for many years, we are still far from perfect, but God is changing us by His Holy Spirit, and this is what we need to look for in our lives as well as in the lives of others, especially with those teachers who claim to have the message of God for us. The verses which should always come to our minds when we think of character, are Gal. 5:22-23:

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith,

23 Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.

Paul had been speaking of “the works of the flesh” (which would be the corrupt tree), and then he went on to speak of “the fruit of the Spirit.”

These qualities identify one who is a good tree. Note that the word “fruit” in this case is singular (“the fruit of the Spirit”), and notice, too, that these characteristics are not produced by us, but by the Holy Spirit who lives in us.

The Apostle Paul was speaking of the change which the Lord makes in our lives when he was writing to the church at Rome, and wrote these words:

- 20 For when ye were the servants of sin, ye were free from righteousness.
- 21 What fruit had ye then in those things whereof ye are now ashamed? for the end of those things is death.
- 22 But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life.
- 23 For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom. 6:20-23).

Now we know that this miraculous change, which is called being born again, has taken place in our lives through the Lord Jesus Christ – His perfect life, His substitutionary death, and His triumphant resurrection. We have heard this message from the Bible, which is the Word of God. And it is ours, not by works, not by any way in which we deserve to be saved, but by faith in Christ.

And so in determining if a person is a true servant of the Lord, or a “false prophet,” find out what he teaches about salvation. Does he mention salvation at all? Does he believe that we are hopelessly enslaved to our sins, and that only Christ can set us free? Does he believe that the Bible is the Word of God, and that the Bible is the only book which God has given to us? What does he believe about the Lord Jesus Christ? It usually doesn’t take very long to find out where a person stands with regard to the truth of the Word of God, and especially concerning what he believes about Christ.

Also, can you see evidence in this prophet’s life that for himself, as well as for others, that he is primarily concerned about a holy life? Put this test to yourself. In 1 John the Apostle John writing by the Holy Spirit has given us the marks of a true child of God. Is this what this teacher teaches who has come to us as a prophet?

These are all things to be especially concerned about.

But let me say just a word about good works which also have to be included when we speak of fruit.

In Rom. 1:13 the Apostle Paul said this:

Now I would not have you ignorant, brethren, that oftentimes I purposed to come unto you, (but was let hitherto,) that I might have some fruit among you also, even as among other Gentiles.

And then he followed up that statement about “fruit” with these well-known words:

14 I am debtor both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians; both to the wise, and to the unwise.

15 So, as much as in me is, I am ready to preach the gospel to you that are at Rome also.

16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek (Rom. 1:14-16).

Dawson Trotman of the Navigators used to say, “The fruit of a Christian is another Christian,” and that is true. It is not all that is included in that word fruit, but it is an important part of it.

So we need to find out from this “prophet,” whether or not he believes that people are lost in their sins, and that he is preaching Christ as the only Savior.

A classic passage on fruit is John 15:1-16. And the sixteenth verse seems to indicate that prayer and answers to prayer are fruit in the life of a Christian. I am sure many of you will remember the Lord’s words:

Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you.

There is much more that could be said about fruit, but let me mention just two more. One has to do with giving. Salvation affects our attitude toward money. We want to honor the Lord with what He has given to us. When the Apostle Paul wrote that “thank you letter” to the Philippian church for the gift which they had sent to him in prison, he said this:

17 Not because I desire a gift: but I desire fruit that may abound to your account.

18 But I have all, and abound: I am full, having received of Epaphroditus the things which were sent from you, an odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, wellpleasing to God (Phil. 4:17-18).

Finally, I remind you of 1 John 3:14:

We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death.

Often these teachers who suddenly appear on our doorsteps, are concerned about getting us away from the church, and becoming a part of their group. Paul said this much about the false teachers among the Galatian churches.

15 Where is then the blessedness ye spake of? for I bear you record, that, if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me.

16 Am I therefore become your enemy, because I tell you the truth?

17 They zealously affect you, but not well; yea, they would exclude you, that ye might affect them (Gal. 4:15-17).

Be very careful about listening to anyone who would draw you away from the fellowship of the Lord's people.

Concl: "Beware of false prophets." We have them today just like every other generation, only maybe more so. Let no one turn us away from our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us never accept "another Gospel," which is really not another because there is only one Gospel. May the Word of God be our guide as to what salvation is, and as to what those who know Jesus Christ as Savior are to be, and how we are to live. Judge all teaching by the Scriptures and you will never go wrong.

Closing verse:

By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name (Heb. 13:15).