

Chuck Swindoll tells the story of the spider who built a beautiful web in an old house. He kept it clean and shiny, so flies would patronize it. The minute he got a “customer” he would clean up after him so the other flies wouldn’t get suspicious.

*Then one day a **fairly** intelligent fly came buzzing by the clean spiderweb. Old man spider called out, “Come in and sit.” But the fairly intelligent fly said, “No sir, I don’t see other flies in your house, and I am not going in alone!”*

Presently the fly saw, on the floor below him, a large crowd of flies dancing around on a piece of brown paper. He was delighted! He was not afraid if lots of flies were doing it. So he came in for a landing.

Just before he landed, a bee zoomed by, saying, “Don’t land there, stupid. That’s fly-paper!” But the fairly intelligent fly shouted back, “Don’t be silly. Those flies are dancing. There’s a big crowd there. Everybody’s doing it. That many flies can’t be wrong!” Well, you know what happened. He landed on the paper, got stuck, danced for a while, and died.

What does it profit a fly (or a person) if he escapes the web only to end up in the glue?ⁱ

Today, I have to talk to you about one of the most difficult, and yet very important topics, that a Christian pastor ever has to teach on. And that is, how do you choose a church? How do you know if a Christian leader is leading a church, deeper into God, or subtly diverting them, off of the path of life? ... How can you tell a good teacher from a bad teacher, or a good prophet from a bad prophet????

And the reason I find this, one of the most difficult passages to teach on, is not because it's difficult to understand – it's actually quite easy to understand.... The difficulty is, because it really calls into question, and forces us to put under the microscope, every Christian leader (their character, what they teach, their track record, their motivation for what they do...), and that's something I really don't enjoy doing. ... But Jesus commanded it. And He didn't only command it of me – He commanded it of you. And you have to put **me** under the microscope – “Is what **I'm** teaching – of God, or am I leading you astray?” ... You have to be discerning.

I know Jesus said, “Judge not, lest you also be judged”. But He also said, “**Watch out** for false prophets”, “Beware of them” “Be alert”... He told us to be discerning of the path we take.... And He also told us, that **His** path, ... would often be very lonely, because only a few travel it.....

None of us like to think badly of Christian leaders – we've been taught to respect them – and that's right – we should. We've always been taught to give everybody a fair go – don't judge – don't criticise – don't rock the boat... But Jesus commands us to be discerning, and to watch out for those who might be leading us astray, and to be very careful which path we choose to follow.... And the path that everybody else chooses – well, more often than not, that's the road to destruction... While the road to life – Well, very few find that one.

Most times I've heard this passage preached on, they've ended at verse 14.... ¹³ "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. ¹⁴ But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

And so it becomes a passage on evangelism.

"There are two roads", "There is a highway, loaded with people of the world, going to hell, But Christ calls us to enter through the narrow gate – to put our faith in Jesus Christ, and be saved – that's the narrow road"..... And that's fair enough. That's a good lesson to learn from what Jesus said. Don't go following the people of the world – Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ – enter through the narrow gate, and be saved.... – That's a good lesson...

But when you read it, in its context – as Jesus delivered it – to His disciples, you realise you've missed out on, probably the most **important** warning... Jesus continues on, to warn His disciples, about **false** prophets – There are people who, on the outside, seem really good – but on the inside, they're **not** God's servants.

There are **two gates** and **two roads**. One gate, leads to a wide, easy path – and lots of people take that gate.... The other gate, leads to a narrow, hard path, and only a **few** take that one... The danger – the warning, is, "Which gate have you chosen?... And are you on the right path? Are you **travelling** with Christ, or are you getting diverted onto the easy and popular path, **thinking** that you're with Christ, but you're actually following something other than His way?????"

There are false prophets aplenty, perverting the way of life, trying to coax you, onto a different path – the easier path – the more enjoyable path – the more popular path – the path of least resistance...

Somebody once said, "*Following the path of least resistance is what makes rivers and men crooked.*"ⁱⁱ

And even.. in our Christian life, there is always the temptation to follow the path of least resistance. If one bible teacher, teaches a hard road, and another bible teacher, teaches an easier, more appealing road, I can tell you now, which will be the most popular...

So, What is a False Prophet?

Well, for our purposes here today, I'm going to group together "False Prophets" and "False Teachers" – they're pretty much the same thing. Satan will do everything that he can, to disrupt the mission of God, and corrupt the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And one of those ways, is through false prophets and false teachers. These are people, who (either knowingly or unknowingly) divert the people of God from doing God's will.

They divert people from the truth. They divert a church from God's will. They divert Christians from becoming the new creations that God wants them to be.

But where's the danger? (I might hear you ask) **Surely False prophets are rare, aren't they?** (And surely we can pick them out easy enough....?) We don't need to go looking

for a red under every bed – or searching under every rock to find what is virtually non-existent... do we?

Well, actually they're **not** rare. 2 Peter 2 Says, "There **will** be false teachers among you" – expect them. When the people of God have a mission, Satan will want to disrupt that mission, and the easiest way, is with false teachers. It is **regular** – it is **common** for false teachers to infiltrate a church. And the churches they target, will generally be the churches who are actively serving God... There's not a lot of point in infiltrating a church that's already dead....

Matthew 24 says ¹¹ .. **many false prophets will appear and deceive many people.**

Why do we think that it's rare, when the bible tells us it'll be common? The best trick the devil has up his sleeve, is to get people to believe that he doesn't exist. And false prophets are effective in their deception of the church, because we Christians are not alert in watching out for them.

So, **How easy are they to identify?**

Well, the most dangerous false prophets, are **very** hard to tell. A false prophet wouldn't be dangerous, if he / she were easy to identify.

Someone sent me a text just the other day – a little daily devotion, and it was warning about false prophets. And the example given was somebody who claimed to be Jesus – and people were following him. And that's true – that happens. But if I were to stand up here today, and tell you that I was

Jesus, come back to claim my kingdom, and you should all follow me, I think you'd very quickly pick me as a false prophet, wouldn't you??? Some false prophets are easy to recognise – but they're not the biggest danger.

VIDEO CLIP

Jesus referred to false prophets as “wolves in sheep's clothing”. Now, this is very important. They look good. They appear as innocent sheep. They look like Christians, they sound like Christians – they blend with the flock. Acts 20 says Even locals can rise up and become false teachers. You wouldn't suspect a local would you? Someone, from within your own congregation – they've been a part of the church for years – but they're given an opportunity, to rise up into leadership, and they start to lead the rest of the church astray.

These are **hard** to identify. They may even demonstrate the power of God. Amazing things might appear to be happening: Numbers exploding; excitement generating; . Maybe even miracles. They might even prophesy in Jesus' name – drive out demons in Jesus' name.... But that's all part of their cover, and part of their appeal.... And **that's** why they are so dangerous – there are many of them, and they are hard to identify – especially if we're not looking for them.

And this is where **their danger** lies.

2 Peter 2 tells us that they “**Secretly** introduce destructive heresies”. (how do you do that?)

What that means is, most of what they say, will be very good. But every now and then, they'll slip something in, that is a lie – and if you're not vigilant, you'll accept **it**, along with

everything else. And it is these lies, getting slipped in, that are the danger. If it's someone you respect, and they give teaching you respect, a lot of people won't question the little lie, and you'll begin to accept it.

And so many people accept false prophets, because they are men-pleasers. In fact, that is their **greatest** appeal – they are men-pleasers.

They're likely to tell you, just what you want to hear. They'll give you the confirmation you've been longing for. They'll give you the experience you're craving to have. They'll 'pump you up', but rarely correct you. They'll make you feel really good about yourself and give you a real sense of importance and self-value. They'll be forever putting positive spin on every occurrence in the church. They'll constantly claim every good thing that happens in the church as a miracle of God or a sign of God's blessing – and thus (you'll conclude) a blessing on their ministry. They'll turn your focus towards yourself and to your experience, and how Christ is meeting **your** needs...

They'll **tell** you what you want to hear, and **give** you what you want to experience.

Often, false prophets are very talented sorts of people – musicians, entertainers, speakers, academics. They have a way of 'working a crowd' – of getting you to come along with them – like the pied piper....

Their teaching will often appeal to your fleshly nature. Even though you're a Christian, you still have a daily battle with the flesh.

2 Peter 2 says that many will follow their shameful ways, or their licentious ways, or their sensual ways (what that means is, what they teach, and what they do, will feel nicer, easier, more appealing to the flesh – less challenging, more accommodating of **your** chosen lifestyle), and so **many** follow their ways...

Here's 3 examples of what they might teach:

- We live in the era of the mega-church. There are churches, scattered throughout the world, with thousands, sometimes tens of thousands of members in the congregation. Now, there's nothing wrong with a mega-church – provided they're teaching the true gospel.

But a very high percentage of these mega-churches preach a prosperity doctrine. "God wants you to be rich." "Give money to the church and God will bless you 10 – 100 times over" ... Now, who doesn't want to be rich? And people flock to these churches, where they get all sorts of teaching on how to be successful – how to get their finances prospering – how to get up on top in life.... It appeals to the flesh – all good advice for living – but it's not the gospel... Many fall for it, hook, line and sinker – and generally, these are the biggest, fastest growing churches in our western culture.

And it's not only mega-churches – you'll find little churches, even sprinkled throughout country Qld, who teach this prosperity doctrine – an appeal to the flesh – I'm sure you've heard it.. It is so common to hear it on Christian television or Christian radio, and it's quite common within this town – don't fall for it....

- A second example, can at times, appeal to us good evangelical types....

For me, and for many Christians, there's nothing more exciting, than to see new converts. But sometimes, when there's an altar call, what people respond to, is not the gospel.

Sometimes the message that is preached is, "If your life's a mess, receive Christ, and let Him fix it". And people 'make a decision for Christ', and they're counted in the ranks of converts, but they're not yet saved.

The bible teaches us, that to be saved, we repent, believe, receive. Repent of your sins – and that is a doing thing – we have to demonstrate repentance, Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and receive the Holy Spirit. And there are many empty conversions, that are not real conversions at all, generating excitement – claimed as "fruit" of a ministry... but they're not fruit at all – it's all smoke and mirrors...

- Another example, is what I call "the 'me' church". And this teaching is growing fast. That's where it's 'all about me'...

It tends to attract, mainly the younger generation (my age and younger), because (I don't want to sound patronising to younger folk, but) generally, we are called the 'me' generation for a reason... But it's not **only** the younger folk – many 'more-mature' Christians love the 'me' church, either because (a) they're excited to see the younger folk being a part of it, or (b) because they

despise authority... And the ‘me church’ doesn’t promote much submission to authority – except maybe to main pastor...

You might recognise some of this teaching: “When it comes to serving God, If you don’t feel like doing it – don’t do it”...

Of course, they don’t phrase it any where near as crass as that – it gets spiritualised – to give it the appearance of Godly teaching, and it’ll sound more like this: “*God has given each of us spiritual gifts (which is true), and God has given us passions and desires (hmm, less true). And some of us have been trying to function outside of the calling of God (sometimes true). If God hasn’t put a passion for something in your heart, why are you trying to do it – you’re trying to work outside of God’s calling (often, not true)... But there will be other things that God has put a passion in your heart about, and those passions, are the passions of God... (very often, not true)*”

It can sound all very good, reasonable, and spiritual? And it really appeals to the ‘me’ generation. On the surface it sounds good, but only **some** of it is true? And that’s what makes it dangerous.

If you render it down, basically it is an appeal to the flesh – do what you enjoy doing – don’t do what you don’t enjoy. It assumes that God will always call us to what we enjoy. And if I don’t want to do it, well God obviously isn’t calling me to serve Him in that way. ... But that’s not true.

When God gives a direction, we have a choice to either obey or disobey. Jonah was told to do something he didn't want to do. In fact, many of the prophets were called to do what they didn't want to do... Jesus begged His Father,... If there's another way, I don't want to go to the cross... But I am willing.

Who here **is** passionate about martyrdom? Of course not.. Does that mean God doesn't call people to be martyrs? Who feels a yearning to be persecuted? None of us... God calls us to obedience – not to our passions... Because way too often, what appeals to me, is an appeal to the flesh – not an appeal to the spirit....

Why would Jesus have told us that His road, is the hard road, if we only had to do what we want to do, or what we feel passionate about? – that sounds like the wide, easy road to me...

So that's just a few examples – we could talk all morning about other common false teachings that appeal to the flesh, but we must move on.

So, **how do false prophets attract so many** followers (who maybe once, **were** sound followers of Christ)?

Well, we've already noticed that what they teach, appeals to the flesh. They are men-pleasers – they are likely to tell you what you want to hear – likely to give you what you want to see.

2Peter 2 says “They exploit you with stories that are not true”. False prophets can tell great stories – they'll have engaging

yarns about an experience they've had, which helps them to make their point in an engaging way,.... But it's actually not true – they've made it up – or they've embellished it so much, that it's a lie...

Jeremiah 8, says ¹¹They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. "Peace, peace," they say, when there is no peace. .. That means they do the spin-doctoring... And say "Ah, it's not as bad as it seems... It's all good".

It's not only the gullible who follow false prophets. They will often have a very charismatic personality. And it's not only a few who will be deceived... Remember Jesus said that many follow on the wide road – the easy road...

But **why do they do it** – What's their motivation?

2 Peter 2 gives us one reason – greed. And that **can** be the case – there are some very big churches, and the leaders of those churches are getting very big pay-cheques, but that can't be the only reason, because it certainly wouldn't explain why every little tin-pot church is open to attack from false prophets..

Of course material gain can always be a motivation, but Acts 20 reveals another reason – they do it to draw disciples away, after them. Often, what they desire and enjoy, is power. The power, the influence, the ego-trip that they get from having people follow after them – and lap up what they say.

Our passage for today, says that no matter how good they look, inwardly they are ferocious wolves (ravenous wolves). What it literally means, is they want to be stealing away. And they steal away the people of God, from the mission of God. They divert the mission of the church, from its God-given direction – which is usually the tough road, onto the wide, easy, enjoyable road.

So, if they're such a danger, **how do we identify a false prophet?**

Jesus said, "By their fruit you will recognise them". But what fruit are we looking for?

False teachers will usually point to what they've done or what they've achieved, as "fruit" – it's seen as the blessing of God, on their ministry. They might point to numbers, excitement in the church, 'decisions for Christ', maybe even baptisms. Jesus said they will even point to miracles, prophecies; they even drive out demons in Jesus' name... But on the day of judgment, Jesus, ^{23...} **will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'**

Isn't that amazing? False prophets have the ability to achieve amazing things in Jesus' name – they have the ability to stir a church up and set it on fire... but they're not of God – Is it any wonder that they deceive people.

Achievement is not the fruit that God looks for. Fruit is not excitement, numbers, or money, - nor is it, an eager sense of expectation....

Fruit – the fruit of the Spirit – is a deeper level of **transformation.**

Fruit is the fruit of one's character, and the thing with fruit is, it usually takes a long time to grow. *When we first moved to St George, I bought Robyn an avocado tree, and it took several years before it began to fruit... Somebody else will get to enjoy that fruit now, because we had to move....*

And you know what??? People are the same as fruit trees. Sometimes it takes a while for the fruit to show, but eventually it will.

A good tree bears good fruit, and a bad tree bears bad fruit. And it's the same with people.

Eventually a false prophet will get caught out – some will eventually see their fruit:

- Maybe lies
- Maybe greed
- Maybe lust, or anger
- Laziness, or violence
- Self-interest
- Questionable ethics
- Foul language or false humility
- Double-mindedness or faithlessness....
- They might be two-faced, or dishonest

It might take years for their fruit to be recognised... But until then, we have to rely on the gift of discernment:

2 weeks ago, I shared a little bit about the gift of discernment, and I said that some people will identify false prophets far quicker than anybody else. It's not because they're more spiritual. Nor is it because they're less gullible. They identify

false teachers, far quicker because of the Holy Spirit Gift of ‘discernment’. They have a God-given ability, to discern sheep from wolves. *They’re like the maremma’s (if you like). They’re amongst the flock, but they can sniff out the wolf.* They give warning, when someone who **appears** to be of God, is actually leading people astray.

And it’s very important, that the Christian church, and particularly the leaders of a church, pay attention to what these people say. God gives spiritual gifts to the church, for a reason, and we don’t all have the same gift. And the gift of discernment, is given to **some** people, to prevent the **whole** church, from being led astray.

I find it hard to teach this sort of stuff... But we’ve been working our way through the Sermon on the Mount, and this is what Jesus taught – He warned His disciples about wolves in sheep’s clothing, and I have to do the same.

Be vigilant, and stay true to the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ, turning neither to the left or the right. Don’t take the popular path – the easy road... Stay the course... Follow Christ – not the crowd.

Questions:

ⁱ www.holwick.com
ⁱⁱ www.holwick.com