

“How to Not Lose Your Way”

Matthew 7:13-23

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I've shared with you before about the time I was in my office in my former church on a Saturday morning, when a guy wandered in and asked for the pastor. He looked like a pastor, wearing kaki slacks, blue blazer and tie, with a silver cross hanging around his neck. I thought he was supposed to be in a meeting of some kind, and I said, "I'm an associate pastor here. Can I help you?"

He said, "I'd like to help *you*. God has given me a message. There are demons in your church, but you can ward them off if you open cans of spam and put them on plates, and put one under each couch in your church." That's when he pulled out a plastic bag filled with wads of money. He continued, "I'll also make you a wager that the president is going to be impeached and thrown out of office within six months. If that doesn't happen, this money is yours. But if it *does* happen, then you let me come back and paint all the crosses in your church white."

Now, I have no idea why that was important to him, but that didn't matter. I responded like any Presbyterian pastor would. I said, "Gee, I'd like to help, but our session is in charge of facilities, and I don't think they'd go for that."

The guy was bizarre, but seemed harmless. But Jesus said others would come along, deceitful people who do harm to the church. He calls them false prophets, and they can look okay from the outside, but they're just full of crazy or harmful messages. The man I talked with that Saturday morning was pretty obvious, but sometimes false prophets are dangerous because they're convincing. They might have the right credentials and they can look and sound good. That's what Jesus meant by "sheep's clothing." And the problem with false prophets, with bad teachers, with liars and cheats, is they can get you going down a wrong path.

Maybe you've heard the saying that going into a church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going into a garage makes you a car. Of course, you can look a certain way on the outside, but the inside is very different. It's the same for prophets, for those who claim to teach for God.

The prophets had a distinctive way of dressing, kind of like the priests wore special robes. The prophets took the example of the great prophet Elijah, and they wore fur cloaks. The problem was that some people wore the clothing that had no right to it, so the prophet Zechariah talks about people who prophesy lies and who wear prophet's clothing to try to fool people:

On that day every prophet will be ashamed of his prophetic vision. He will not put on a prophet's garment of hair in order to deceive. (Zech. 13:4).

You can look right on the outside, you can even talk the talk, but you have to walk the walk. It's not enough to have the titles, the credentials, to graduate from seminary. You can't tell from the outward trappings. You need to be the real thing, not just wear the class ring.

That's why Jesus says you have to tell genuine teachers from the fruit they produce in their lives. Like they say, the proof of the root is in the fruit. Makes sense, right? A sapling from one tree might look a lot like another, but by the time it's producing apples, you're not as likely to mistake it for a maple tree.

But we have to be careful. False prophets can be impressive. Paul says,

“For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:13-15).

Teaching like that hurts the body of Christ. Peter said,

But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves. Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. (2 Peter 2:1-2).

Maybe the most poignant warning is described in the Book of Acts, when Paul said goodbye to the elders of the church of Ephesus:

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears. (Acts 20:27-31)

In fact, almost every writer of the New Testament warned the church about the danger of false prophets or false teachers that would compromise the message of the Gospel. That's why Jude said we need to “contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3). We have to contend because the faith of the church, like the faith of Israel was in the old days, is under threat.

Most of all, false teachers just say what people want to hear. Paul wrote about this when he said,

“For a time is coming when people will no longer listen to right teaching. They will follow their own desires and will look for teachers who will tell them whatever they want to hear” (2 Tim. 4:3).

So, I think the Lord would warn us about false teaching this morning. How do we tell what's true and what's false teaching?

Evaluate teaching based on God's Word.

False teaching deviates from God's clear Word. The prophet Jeremiah warned that false prophets make up their own messages. He said about the false prophets,

“They offer superficial treatments for my people’s mortal wound. They give assurances of peace when all is war” (Jeremiah 6:14).

This is what the LORD Almighty says:

“Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; they fill you with false hopes. They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD.” (Jeremiah 23:16)

Think that’s a problem in our times? Let me put it this way: teachers in the church deny the deity of Christ. They disregard what God’s word clearly teaches about money, sex, and power. “They stray from the faith once for all delivered for the saints. We shouldn’t be surprised, because God warned us about it.

That’s why we have to know our Bible. Twenty years ago I asked my pastor how I could begin to prepare for seminary. He said, “Have you ever read through the whole Bible? I said no. He said, “Then I challenge you to take the Bible reading plan I use. If you do, then you’ll read four chapters a day, and by the end of a year, you will have read through the Old Testament once, and the New Testament and the psalms twice a year.” I started then, and I’ve kept up the practice ever since. Nothing else has helped me develop an instinct for the truth like that practice, and nothing else has helped my spiritual life as much. Are you growing in your knowing of Scripture? We have to evaluate what we hear and read based on God’s Word.

Evaluate teaching by what it produces.

When our girls were little, they had a Playskool kitchen, and they would spend hours playing in it. They’d use plastic food, plastic dinners, plastic mashed potatoes and peas, and pork chops and puddings. The food looked real, and it was fun to play with, but let me tell you, you went away hungry from those meals. It didn’t do a thing for your digestive system. The kitchen didn’t produce a thing that was substantial.

It’s the same with teaching in the church. We have to look at what it produces, or we’re just getting plastic meals. No nutrition, nothing substantial. You have to scrutinize the meals you’re getting, and look at the fruit. False teaching can only produce plastic fruit. So beware of people whose words sound spiritual, but they’re really motivated by fame or money or power. You can tell who they are because in their teaching they minimize Jesus, and maximize themselves.

We tell false teaching by the results: it makes people reject the authority of God’s word, it leads to division in the body, and it leads to messed-up lives.

Evaluate teaching from the lives of the teachers.

False teaching taints the lives of the false teachers. What do you look for in a teacher? Look for integrity, for persons who are learning to live in both grace and truth. False teachers often throw away one and focus on the other. Their lives show it because of their pride, greed, sexual immorality. The New Testament says these are people controlled by their own will. They take advantage of weak and broken people. They love having authority, but they refuse to submit to it or to make themselves accountable

to others. They like taking the broad path, and doing things the easy way. They talk the talk, but they don't walk the walk.

That's why you have to be careful about spiritual leaders who live by different rules than the ones they set for everyone else. Now, I'm not saying any of us in a leadership role in the church gets it perfect. We're just as broken as anyone else, just as weak, just as subject to temptation. But we have to practice what we preach, and show a lifestyle of being on the road with Jesus. We have to be in the process of change to better reflect his image. That's why a major moral failure destroys a pastor's credibility, and his or her ability to preach and lead a church. We have to be able to say, like Paul did,

Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ. (1 Corinthians 11:1)

Many people can put on a good act. But no one can fake it forever. Your true character eventually comes out in your actions and in the fruit you produce. It's not enough to claim to be a Christian. You have to know Christ. It isn't profession that matters, it's practice.

How do we keep from falling under their influence, to say nothing of becoming a negative influence on others? One way is to develop a "do hard things" mentality. We have to be suspicious of the way that looks too good to be true. Most things really worth doing are hard.

It's why Jesus says "the highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose the easy way. But the gateway to life is small, and the road is narrow, and only a few ever find it" (vv. 13-14). It reminds me of the famous poem by Robert Frost, "The Road Not Taken." He talks about coming upon a fork in the road as he walked in the woods, and having to choose between them:

Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.
I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Conclusion

What does all this mean? It means you have a choice: you can either choose to listen to the truth or you can listen to lies. We need to be aware that everything we hear is not true. Every interpretation of the Bible is not true.

How can we tell the difference between truth and error? Jesus says we need to evaluate teaching by what it produces, by its outcome or effect.

Not that if it's *popular*, it must be true. Not that if it *meets my needs*, it must be true. It means that if teaching is true, it's going to lead people to look more like Jesus, to care about what he cares about, to do what he does, to grow in faith, hope, and love, to grow in dependence on God, humility, purity, and peace.

Some people do things in the name of Jesus that aren't in the Spirit of Jesus, who don't have a relationship with him, who don't have eternal life. So like the apostle John tells the church,

Dear friends, 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. (1 John 4:1)

The truth is all around us. So are false prophets. Who are you going to listen to? Listen to the truth and *live* the truth, and that's how not to lose your way.