

# THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW



## **True Guides**

### **Matthew 7:15-23**

We are back in Matthew 7 today. We'll spend this week and next finishing up the sermon on the mount, and then continue right through the rest of Matthew after that.

And in the sermon on the mount, Jesus is telling us what it means to live as a true Christian counter-culture - as a community of people who have been renewed by the Gospel and, as a result, live differently.

He sets a very high standard: we are to be holy as God is holy, but knows we will fall short and that we'll need to pray continually, "forgive us our debt as we forgive our debtors." So he expects true obedience. And if we are going to call ourselves Christians, followers of Jesus, we have to be striving for true obedience, understanding that we will fall short of perfect obedience.

And one of the most important things we can do to help us continue on the narrow road of following Jesus is listen to the right voices along the way.

It's important that, as we chart our course, we have the right teachers, we go to the right people as guides, and have the right people speaking into our lives. It is one of the things that forms us the most.

And in our day we have so many people we have access to that we can learn from. We listen to podcasts, watch tik-toks, sit with counselors, listen to

pastors, get guidance from all kinds of different ministers, read different authors, and listen to coaches and experts.

So now, more than ever, we can have access to guidance and teaching and counsel from a wide variety of guides from all around the world. And if we choose the right ones that can be a tremendous benefit. So it's good to seek out good teachers.

### **But should we?**

Some Christians have said we don't need all of these human teachers. We just need the Bible - we can read it ourselves and learn from the Spirit. And I agree, we can read it and know what it means as well as any religious expert, and we do have the Spirit to teach us. There's an important individual, personal dimension to our learning and growing.

But one of the things the Spirit teaches us in the Bible we are reading is that there are different types of teachers that God sends to Christians because we do need them.

We were meant to learn the Bible in our personal reading and study, and in community, and from teachers and pastors and mentors and wise friends.

1 Corinthians 12 speaks of some people being given words of wisdom and knowledge to give others, Ephesians 4 says God has through time given the church apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers, Romans 12 speaks of teaching and exhorting gifts.

So all of us, pastors included, need teachers to guide us and other wise voices speaking into our lives. If we're humble and receive guidance from wise godly people, we can chart a course for our lives that avoids some big pitfalls and leads us ever closer to Christ. Our fruitfulness in life is greatly increased as we learn from wise people who have gone before us.

But a ton of damage is done if we find the wrong teachers and voices to listen to. So Jesus gives us this guide to tuning in to the right voices:

**Matthew 7[15] “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. [16] You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? [17] So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. [18] A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. [19] Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. [20] Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.**

We will pick this apart verse by verse:

**Matthew 7[15] “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.**

So Jesus says to “beware,” a word that is also translated “pay attention,” and “be on guard.” Wolves in sheep’s clothing are always working their way in to church circles.

And you can see why that would be a scheme of our enemy: One of the worst things and most shocking thing you can do to someone is use the best thing to harm them. When someone comes into church, finally finding a place of refuge, and a wolf uses the church to bring harm, that creates a level of shock and disillusionment like no other.

The local church is one of the best things going, but there is no shortage of people who will use authority in church, a platform in church, or relationships in church to do real harm. That has been the case since day 1.

People find a place of influence in our lives and in our churches, and then use it to do harm.

So there are warnings throughout the Bible:

**Acts 20:29–30 [29] I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; [30] and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.<sup>1</sup>**

**2 Peter 2:1–3 [1] But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. [2] And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. [3] And in their greed they will exploit you with false words. Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.**

And the problem with people using positions of spiritual authority to do harm didn't start in 33 AD, it was an issue in the Old Testament era, too:

**Jeremiah 6:13–14**

**[13] “For from the least to the greatest of them,  
everyone is greedy for unjust gain;  
and from prophet to priest,  
everyone deals falsely.**

**[14] They have healed the wound of my people lightly,  
saying, ‘Peace, peace,’  
when there is no peace.<sup>2</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> Also (ESV)

<sup>2</sup> See also 1 Kings 22, Jeremiah 28

So in all of these passages, you notice a number of characteristics of false prophets:

- (1) They don't love the people (wolves don't kidnap sheep just to spend time with them, it's to consume them - to take from them only for the good of the wolf.
- (2) They act in secret, with guile and deceit - dressing like sheep but being wolves.
- (3) They encourage sensuality - living for the pleasure of the moment.
- (4) They are greedy and lie to gain.
- (5) And they divide people - they draw people away from the community to benefit themselves. In Matthew 7:15, when Jesus calls them "ravenous" wolves, the word for "ravenous" can be translated "**snatching,**" they snatch people away.
- (6) And then when it comes to what they say: they twist truth. They bring heresies - errors that deny the reality of the Lord who bought them. Or they tell the people their sin is OK and they are just fine with God when they're not. (They say peace, peace, when there is no peace.)
- (7) In the end, they bring a bad reputation to the church (the "way of truth" is blasphemed because of them). And we can see it so clearly in our day: many who walk away from the faith do so because of the wolves in sheep's clothing that did them harm, and they say, "If that's what a Christian leader is, then I don't want to be a Christian."

So if we had to boil the signs that someone is a false prophet down into two main categories, we'd say they have **bad character and/or bad doctrine.**

Which is where everybody starts. So not everybody who is still working through serious sins or still learning the basics of the faith is a wolf. But the difference is they still want influence.

Plenty of people are humble enough to say, "I can't lead right now" because I have to learn or need some time to change some things - and that's great and people like that are welcome. But if someone's character is glaringly bad right now, or their doctrine flies in the face of the established truths of the faith, and still they seek influence, that's where there's danger.

So Jesus says to beware of them. They will come into your life, and it would be hard to read all the warnings about them in the New Testament and not assume they will come into church.

We've seen some who have come in with heresies: denying the trinity, rejecting the authority of scripture.

We've also seen some who come with sensuality: accepting everything the culture around us says about issues and behaviors even when the bible's teaching is clearly the opposite. And they have come encouraging people in disobedience to the Lord. When people make deliberate decisions that do major damage to their lives, we can usually find someone who gives false counsel cheering them on.

So Jesus says to beware of false prophets.

### **"Prophets"**

And be careful of applying this text too narrowly. We might be tempted to say this applies only to people who call themselves prophets, which means that it's basically a warning against cult leaders.

But we don't run in to too many people like that: we've had a few come in claiming to be prophets sent from God with the same kind of authority someone like Elijah had, but that's more rare it seems in our setting.

But a prophet in the Bible was someone who told people how to live in light of who God was. So this can be anyone claiming to speak the truth that should guide your life.

It's anyone who gives you teaching and counsel that orients your life's direction. It can be anyone you look to as a guide in your life, anyone whose counsel or teaching help you with your big decisions. It can be a friend you go to for wisdom, a pastor, a counselor or therapist, a life coach, a teacher at school, a tiktok influencer or twitter guru, or an author.

It can even be a person who criticizes you frequently and whose criticism affects you.

It's anyone who you go to or listen to or read for guidance on how to build your life, make your decisions, or view your God.

A prophet helps you see what you should believe and how you should live. It's anyone who influences.

So how do we recognize a false one?

Sometimes we make this too fancy, thinking we need to discern peoples motives in some kind of woo-woo way, have almost a sixth sense.

Discernment is an ability to read minds, we might think. But Jesus says: look at what's evident.

The way we know we've got a false one is by the fruit in their lives.

**Matthew 7:[16] You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? [17] So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. [18] A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. [19] Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. [20] Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.**

The way you know that tree is an apple tree is that an apple grows on it. That fig tells you this is a fig tree. It's a sure bet.

So if the words or character of those who influence you are consistently false, it's a false prophet.

Which means we need to study the Bible and really learn theology so we can discern false teaching. And we need to be careful not to look away from the glaring and consistent sins like the ones mentioned in these passages: sensuality, deceit, and divisiveness.

We should take our advice from people who have healthy fruit: of their lips, and of their life.

But we can be easily swayed by false prophets if we don't look at those things. They come in in sheep's clothing, they are deceptive by nature. So sometimes we will ignore the teaching about looking at the fruit in their lives and instead we will listen to them because of their:

**Niceness** - They seem very spiritual and kind.

**Popularity** - Everybody is listening to this guy. Everybody buys her books.

**Claims of position or spiritual authority** - This person claims to have been specially anointed by God for this.



**Intelligence and Vocabulary** - He's so smart.

**Claimed Expertise** - This person is an absolute expert at mental health and can help me be mentally healthy.

Now people with any or all of those things might be legit. But Jesus said look at the fruit of the life.

Can we still be fooled? Yes but not forever.

John Calvin wrote that ““Nothing is more difficult than to counterfeit virtue.” You can't fake it forever.

**Luke 7:35 [35] Yet wisdom is justified by all her children.”**

Jesus is saying here that the soundness of advice can be judged by what the wisdom produces: what is the fruit of the wisdom? Does it produce a godly life in them?

So it's worth asking, “Does my pastor, my teacher, my counselor, my guide, or even my greatest critic have a life that shows fruit? Do they embody the fruit of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control?

Do they seem to be making efforts to live on the narrow way described in the sermon on the mount: righteousness, transparency, humility, purity, obedience, truthfulness, love, generosity, rejection of hypocrisy.

Have they suffered a bit, been rejected by others, and remained loyal to Jesus, or does the wisdom they claim to have not sustain them?

Do they have friends that have stayed with them a long time?

Does their spouse respect them?

If you go to dinner at their house, does it always feel like you just interrupted an argument when you walked in the door?

Doctrinal knowledge matters a lot. Expertise is good. But the kind of learning that you orient your life around should have a life oriented around it.

I know a life coach with a terrible life, i know very unstable mental health counselors, i know adulterous pastors, i once had a pastor tell me “I don’t believe any of this stuff” - and he got up to preach the stuff every Sunday.

This is why the New Testament gives this command:

**1 Thessalonians 5:12–13 [12] We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, [13] and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.**

The word for respect here is used a lot in the Bible and is almost always translated, “know.” “Know those who are over you in the Lord and teach you.”

And a reason we should know a bit about them is because their life will tell us whether their wisdom is sound.

Now we have to be careful - there are extremes. This week, someone on twitter posted: *“I left my church because my pastor was good at preaching about Jesus but not very good at being Jesus.”*

To forewarn you: I’m not very good at being Jesus either. That’s why I *need* Jesus. Any mentor or pastor or guide you draw closer to will impress you less. They all have sins and weaknesses and blindspots. In fact, it’s a bad

sign if they don't acknowledge that. If you don't see any of those, you don't know them that well, and they may be hiding.

But there should be confession of their sin, honest acknowledgement of their wrong, and consistent efforts at true obedience that bear real fruit.

Any teacher will get it wrong sometimes, but there should be a general commitment to the truth and sincere and fruitful efforts at getting it right.

And the biggest part of getting it right in their guidance is they point people to Jesus, not to themselves.

IF they claim to be good at "being Jesus," run away. But if they consistently point people to Jesus with their words and with a life they try to live for Him, they probably have something to teach you.

A good guide points you to Him: and encourages you to trust and follow His words, to yield to Him, and to follow His ways.

There's only one whose life has always been true and whose words were always true. And if any teacher doesn't point to Him when it comes to showing us how to live our lives, make our decisions, and find true north, we're listening to the wrong guide.

Good leaders lead you to admire Jesus more, not them. They don't allow you to continue think they're something amazing, they point to Christ.

And this is not just false humility. The only way it can is by continually reflecting on the Gospel. That I am a sinner in need of a savior, no matter what kind of leader I am. That my best works are tainted with bad motives. That if the people I minister to knew me better they would all universally admire me less. And the Jesus I'm pointing them to is the Jesus I need.

Christianity, uniquely, is not just a call to follow a wise and holy way. It's centered on the salvation Jesus offers on the cross.

No wisdom for life is complete without bringing the cross to bear on it.

Lords Supper

**Prayer of Confession:**

Father, we thank you that you hold out wisdom for us day and night, in your Son, in your word, and through so many faithful mentors and teachers and leaders who have gone before us. You've put so many faithful people in our lives to point us to Christ, and we thank you for them.

Yet we confess that often we go looking for the shiny new thing. We disregard faithfulness and the fruit of solid words and a faithful life, and are swayed by the attractiveness of charisma or success. So forgive us, and help us to seek out and find faithful leaders in this journey.

Jesus, we thank you that you are the only perfectly qualified guide to truth and life. Every word and work you every produced only always honored your father. Your wisdom has been more than vindicated by your life, especially by the force of your life that conquered the grave. So help us to follow you ultimately.

Spirit, give us eyes to see true faithfulness so we can be wise about who to listen to. And help us to discern false doctrine, sensuality, and a sinful way of life so we know who to steer clear of. Lead us to the voices that will lead us to you.

**Assurance:**

**John 6:51 “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh”**