

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript.

Teaching: Carlon Tschetter
Series: The Sermon on the Mount
Message: Wolves in Sheep's Clothing

Transcribed Message
July 29, 2018
Matthew 7:15-20

There was an article entitled "Clergy Consider Handing out Abortion-Inducing Drugs in Church". This is a real story. The Rev. Donna Schaefer, the senior minister of Judson Memorial Church in New York City, is thinking of ways to make abortions available should Roe vs. Wade be overturned. I quote Rev. Schaefer: "I've had two abortions and was back to work in the afternoon. That doesn't mean they were inconsequential to me. They were profoundly positive experiences of exercising my humanity and freedom." I don't even know what to do with words like that. When Jesus said in Matthew 7:15 that we are to beware of false prophets who come in sheep's clothing, I don't think in my mind he was talking about Rev. Schaefer. To me, the Rev. Schaefer pretty well makes it clear who she is and what she believes and what she's about. And by the way, if you go to the website of their church, it's increasingly clear that she's not a wolf in sheep's clothing. She's a wolf in wolf's clothing. She is making no pretense about her message or what she is bringing. But He is in my estimation warning us and alerting us to somebody else, to someone else, and that I believe is what we have before us in Matthew 7.

We're in Matthew 7 this morning as we work our way through the Sermon on the Mount. Let me read and you can follow along in the 7th chapter verse 15 to verse 20: "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes or figs from thistles?" Jesus mentions the thornbush. At a distance, it had the appearance of the grape vine and so literally it looked like there were grapes growing on this bush. The thistle actually had a fruit that looked like a fig from a distance. Jesus is probably drawing from something that in the 1st century they immediately related to when he said that. "So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a

diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.” It seems to me what Jesus says to us in these verses is that anyone who brings a message that is contrary to the message that Jesus has passed along to us is to be viewed as a false prophet. One of the things that will mark them is they are deceptive in their messaging.

Here's the plan, folks, as we go forward. It's tentative at this point. We're going to be working our way through these verses this morning. Zach will pick up next Sunday into the next section of the Sermon on the Mount. He was actually going to finish the Sermon on the Mount because Bonnie and I were looking to maybe be gone for a couple of Sundays, but we have a grandson who's decided not to come. He's within the sound of my voice right now so if he is listening, and I think he can be listening, he is welcome to come at any time, but we'll wait for God's timing and God's plan. So it's possible that I'll be back with you on the 12th and finish out the sermon. If I'm not, Zac will handle the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. On August 19th, we're going to begin a new series. It is the fall launch. Remember last fall at this time in August we had a three-week study on being people of the book. This time we're going to go well beyond into the fall and we're going to be looking at being people who walk in step with the Spirit. We're going to undertake a study of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit and the work of the Spirit this fall. So that's the plan. We'll see how it unfolds. It'll all unfold according to God's sovereign purposes.

This morning we look at a first point here. Just a reminder where we are in the sermon at this point. You remember in the context of this and it is important when we look at the verses this morning. There was a call to discernment in chapter 7 and verse 6. Way back towards the beginning of the chapter, Jesus had described some people in that 6th verse in very strong language, in language that it seems often a bit abrupt and surprising. Jesus called us to be discerning in that 7th chapter and the 6th verse. That already alerted us to the fact that in the mind of Christ there are people out there who want to do us harm. That's what Jesus says in Matthew 7:6. You've got to pay attention. You've got to be alert. You've got to be discerning because there are people out there and they want to harm you. He puts us on notice about that fact. Then as you wrap up the rest of the sermon, which is what we're doing, you remember we said last week it's

almost as if the sermon itself ends at verse 12 and we have the wrap up summary beginning at verse 13 all the way to the end of the chapter. If you were with us last Sunday remember there were two gates, there were two ways. There were two groups of people and there were two destinies. This morning we finish off this analogy if you will because now we encounter in this passage this morning two trees. As Jesus spoke to this audience, we need to remember that He's talking first and foremost to His disciples. He is talking to His disciples who are His followers. There's a whole lot of other folks that are part of this gathering as He began to teach in what we have called the Sermon on the Mount. We have this mixed audience and it may even be possible that within this group are some of the people that He's going to be addressing as those who are wolves in sheep's clothing in verses 15 through 20. So here's a word from our Lord across the spectrum to this group of people that He's addressing. What He says to us in these verses is watch out and be on guard.

Let's start by just reminding ourselves about the reality of false prophets. The reality of false prophets. If you're very familiar at all with the Bible, it doesn't take very long to realize this is not a minor theme in the Bible. From the Old Testament on into the New Testament there is a lot in there about this very subject that Jesus addresses in these verses. There's a lot in there about false teachers and about false prophets. You can't read the Bible and take it seriously without understanding that this is a reality of life in our world. This is in fact what Jesus wants us to see. Now in chapter 7 verse 1, we have that favorite verse of everybody: don't judge. Everybody loves chapter 7 verse 1. Not so many people love chapter 7 verse 6 where Jesus spoke with great force about those that would do us harm and how we should be mindful of that. They certainly aren't going to be that receptive to verses 15 through 20. But this constitutes a warning from our Lord about something that He wants us to know is a reality, that is part of our life and our world.

If you were to go into the Old Testament, and we're not going to take the time to read all of these verses, but if you went into the Old Testament and you just started working your way through, it's amazing how many times beginning with Moses in the books of the Pentateuch and in Deuteronomy chapter 13 verse 1 that Moses reminds the people that as they walk with God into the future they need to be aware that there

are going to be those who are going to come in among them that are going to be false prophets. They're going to try to lead them away from God and away from His truth and His Word. Jeremiah. Let me just read that one for you because in Jeremiah chapter 5 Jeremiah says in verse 30: "An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely and the priests rule at their direction; my people love to have it so, but what will you do when the end comes?" Isn't that startling? Here is Jeremiah, a prophet of God, and he's observing what's going on in his day and his time and he is saying there are false prophets all around us and the people of God love to hear from them. Jeremiah says what do you suppose is going to happen when everything is said and done? Ezekiel issues a similar warning and so does Zephaniah. It is almost as if Jesus takes from the very words of Zephaniah. Zephaniah talks about ferocious wolves who are false prophets who will come in among you. The very language that Jesus uses and Zephaniah refers to them as being treacherous men who bring a false message.

Then you go in to the New Testament. In the same gospel that we're in, in the 24th chapter of Matthew, Matthew records that Jesus says false teachers and false prophets are going to lead many astray in the last days. So in the days in which we're living, one of the things that we can be observing is that there are people leading many astray. You remember Paul in that emotional departure in Acts 20 as he gathers with the Ephesus elders. He has spent a couple years of his life pouring into these men and pouring into the church. You remember they gathered there on the shore before he boards the ship to leave them and it is there that he pours out his heart and his soul to them. He reminds them that there are going to be wolves who are going to come from within and from without and seek to bring harm to the church. At the end of that time they were weeping together. 2 Peter chapter 2 Peter talks about destructive heresies that are brought by false teachers. Then if you want to read some of the strongest language in the New Testament, just go to the little book of Jude. Not even a chapter. It's just verses. The little book of Jude has probably some of the strongest language in all of Scripture about false prophets, about false teachers and about the danger that they pose. Go into the Old Testament and there it is from the beginning to the end. you

come into the New Testament, there it is again from beginning to end. Warnings about false prophets, false teachers.

You look at church history. What has church history revealed to us? The opening three centuries of the early church, they were inundated with false doctrine and false teaching that they had to battle back against to bring people to the Scriptures and to the truth of God's Word. Then we go all the way into our day and it is all around us as well. So false prophets, false teachers are a reality. They are at work. The reason that this is important, the reason these warnings are important is they're out there and they're spreading false message. But also there is the matter that truth is what matters. Truth matters. It matters what we believe. Eternal destinies hang in the balance.

If you were with us last Sunday when we looked at that analogy that Jesus gave us in two gates, in two ways, in two groups and two destinies, what Jesus is going to say in verses 15 to 20 is that one of the reasons that many people are on the broad way, having gone through the broad gate and enjoying life without any understanding of their destiny, is because there were false prophets and false teachers directing them through the false gate. That's the whole point of this context. You can't miss the linkage between what Jesus said last week and the reality of people by the millions going through these broad gates and broad way that seems so welcoming and so inviting. And yet at the end of that gate, at the end of that destiny is destruction and death. Why is that? Jesus tells us that one of the reasons very clearly is there are false prophets saying that's the way. To go that way. Follow me. So we have to acknowledge that false prophets are a reality. We have to acknowledge that they direct people away from the truth. Now a lot of us don't want to think about that. A lot of us get kind of uncomfortable when people's names get called out or when false teaching gets called out. We don't think that's very nice.

Listen and understand. We are not called to enjoy this calling out of false prophets and false teachers. If it's something that we're enjoying, then I think we've got the wrong heart. I don't think Jesus is calling us to be heresy hunters. There are people who are heresy hunters. Over the years, we've had a few here at Covenant. They spend an inordinate amount of time on websites where all these websites do is call out people for something that they think they have taught that is wrong. In some cases, it

may very well be wrong, but in other cases they just look for every nuance and they interpret every word in the wrong way that they can and they call that out as heresy. Every so often, somebody like that shows up here and they usually don't stay here terribly long thankfully but they'll bring things like what did you mean by that? Did you mean to say it that way? Are you sure that's what the Bible's teaching? We are called to recognize two things. There are false prophets. They are a reality and truth matters. And how we deal with that and how we address that certainly isn't from the heart of enjoyment that we get to call out somebody for doing something that is different from Scripture and diverting us away from the teaching of Christ. But it is a necessary thing to do.

How is it that we are to do this? What is it that we need to know about those that Jesus is talking about? Let's look at that secondly. The description of false prophets. The description of false prophets is in verse 15 primarily and Jesus tells us two things to help us in this regard. He tells us that these false prophets first of all are deceptive. They're deceptive. Verse 15. They're coming to you how? They're coming to you in sheep's clothing. They're wolves but they're coming to you in sheep's clothing. Anybody again who has been a Christian for very long and has any understanding of basic Bible doctrine and truth when they hear somebody say something like I don't think the Bible is the Word of God, or I think the Bible is filled with errors and mistakes, most of us we would pretty well perk up when we hear that. You're not slipping anything by us when that's your introductory statement about something. If somebody said I don't really think Jesus is the Son of God. I don't think He really rose from the dead. I don't even know if He died on the cross. Even a new Christian perks up to hear that there's something wrong with that message. That's not what Jesus is talking about here. That's just the wolf who is acting like a wolf. They're not trying to deceive anybody with that kind of statement. Jesus is talking specifically about somebody who is deceptive because they're coming to you even though they are a wolf they're presenting themselves as being one of you. They are presenting themselves as being a sheep amidst the flock.

When Joseph Smith started Mormonism, he said he wanted to discover the gospel. He wanted to come to a better understanding of what he said was the true gospel, the original gospel. So he started something that we know today as Mormonism.

His pursuit was the true gospel. Who doesn't want to know the true gospel? When Charles Taze Russell started the Jehovah Witness group, he said something similar. He said I want to know what it is that is the true message of the Bible. I want to bring to people the true message of the Bible. That sounds like something that we should want as well doesn't it? When Rob Bell a number of years ago, and we've talked about this journey before, but when Rob Bell stepped out of Christian orthodoxy as an evangelical pastor for many years, when he stepped out of that arena and said he had come to a new understanding about God and the person of God and the character of God and the love of God particularly. He said love wins out and there's really not a God of the Bible that we want to worship who would ever punish His Son on the cross and would ever send anybody to eternal separation apart from Him. He called it love wins. False teachers are hard to detect because they come as a wolf but they're in sheep's clothing and they come with a message that is largely deceptive. Years ago Dr. Barnhouse said when you're looking for Satan, don't forget to look in the pulpit. Why? Because there's a lot of false prophets dressed as sheep who in their heart are really wolves as it relates to the Word of God.

That really shouldn't surprise us because listen to what the apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians chapter 11 verse 13: "For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds." You see, Paul is just simply putting a little different perspective on the very words of Christ. They're wolves but they dress up like sheep. Paul says do you understand? Do you realize that if Satan himself were to come to you, you would not be aghast at his appearance. You would be amazed. You would be attracted because he would be an angel of light. It's all based on deception. It is all based on bringing you under the pretense of the truth of God's Word, a message that is in fact contrary to God's Word. Jesus and Paul are in absolute harmony and the point is we have to beware, we have to be discerning.

How discerning do you think the church in America is with regard to the reality of false prophets and with regard to the importance of the truth of God's Word? How discerning do you think we are when the author of the number one best-selling book

over the last 15 years has written a book that has sold over 20 million copies? The author of this book denies the atoning death of Christ on the cross and says that anybody who believes that the God of heaven would put His Son on the cross would be nothing less than a cosmic abuser. Within the book and the movie, there is a message of universalism that ultimately everybody makes it to heaven irrespective of the cross or the work of Christ. How discerning do you think the church of America is when on that same list of books there's another book about a three-year-old boy who died and went to heaven? He came back and said that angels sang to him Jesus loves me, that he sat on Jesus's lap and as he sat on Jesus's lap Jesus had a crown on his head and on that crown was a pink diamond. He said that everybody in heaven has wings and a halo and their wings and halo are in accordance with their size so that big people have big wings and halos and little people have little wings and little halos. Before he left he got to pet Jesus's horse which was rainbow colored. He comes back and he tells the story and it is published as a book and a movie. Over 10 million copies of this book are sold and it makes the Christian bestseller list for weeks and months at a time. How discerning are we?

How discerning are we when the pastor of the largest church in America who has the number one sermon that's ever been listened to on YouTube. Over 3 million people have listened to the sermon. The title of the sermon is "The Power of I Am". It is not Exodus 3, the God of heaven. It is you. It is me. We are the power of I am. Oprah Winfrey listened to this sermon and said it changed her life. Do you know how many times Jesus is mentioned in the sermon? Do you know how many times the cross is lifted up? Do you know how many times man's problem of sin is talked about in this message? If you guessed 0 to all of the above, you're exactly right. The most listened to sermon in America taught by the pastor of the largest church in America. All I'm saying, all I am saying by that is we have to be discerning. We have to be paying attention. Whether these people are wolves in sheep's clothing is not even necessarily a part of the discussion. The reality is we're not very discerning when 20 million books can be gobbled up by Christians and everything that is of any significance in these books has nothing to do with Scripture, no biblical support. It is all extra. Jesus says be discerning because they're deceptive.

Secondly, because they're dangerous. They're dangerous. Look at verse 15: "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves." So He starts off verse 15 and He says beware. That word is a present imperative. You know what that means. It's a command. This is a command. This is something that we are to continuously be doing. We are to continuously be on the alert. There are false prophets whose appearance is that of sheep and in reality they are ravenous wolves. I would imagine that in 1st century Israel, number one on the list of any wolf, on their diet plan, their meal plan was a sheep. I would imagine that a sheep in the 1st century was always thinking I hope there's not a wolf out here to eat me. I would imagine it's the same in the 21st century. If you went to a rancher in Montana or Idaho or Utah where there are millions of sheep and said what is your greatest concern, I would imagine that those ranchers would have really high on their list wolves. They're ravenous creatures who are predators looking for something to eat. Jesus says beware.

I don't know about you, but when I see a beware of dog sign that's enough for me. They might have a Chihuahua but if they put up a sign beware of dog I'm just going to be a little bit more careful. I was a paperboy in Omaha when I was in like seventh and eighth grade. Paperboys ... can you believe this? We actually put a big bag on our back and we walked around and we threw papers to the yard. We didn't drive a car around the neighborhood and deliver papers. I can tell you that even as a seventh and eighth grader, I had an incredible prayer life when I got closer and closer to the houses on my route that I knew had a big dog that wasn't that friendly. I'm praying all the way: Dear God, please let that dog be in the house today. Because you can imagine some of the excitement of the paperboy running with a big bag of papers being chased by a large dog. So that's all Jesus is saying here. Beware. Be alert. It was to be a continuous state of mind, that you understand. He doesn't use the analogy of a wolf by accident. Wolves are incredibly intelligent. They're very cunning. They're deceptive and obviously they are very dangerous. How do we detect these wolves?

Let's look at the discovery of false prophets. Verses 16 to 20: "You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not

bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits." What do we do with this? I want to do something maybe a little bit different here because I think the first line of defense against false prophets Jesus underscores is that we're supposed to know them by their fruits. I'm going to take that to mean we're going to know them first and foremost by their teaching and by their doctrine. Sometimes, and I think in other passages it may be a legitimate way to look at that, but sometimes people say fruit you just look at their life. You see what's in their life. The whole point that Jesus is making is they're deceivers. The whole point that He is making is they're among you and they're bringing a message to you that is couched in deception. I think it's better to understand the fruits here as being their words. Jesus says the same thing actually in Matthew chapter 12. Jesus said it's hard to spot them because they're like a wolf in sheep's clothing.

So when we examine the fruit of their words, what do we see? there's four things that can help us guide us through this. First of all, what was the origin of their teaching? What's the origin of their teaching? If it's true doctrine, it is from the Word of God. If it's false doctrine, its origination is from man. If it's a mixing of both, then it's obviously still in the false doctrine category. It must have its origin in the Word of God. Peter says in 2 Peter chapter 1 verse 16 and all the way through the end of the chapter there's no word of prophecy that has come simply from men. Holy men of God as the Spirit brought the Word to them were moved and they received that truth. So the origin has to be God Himself and God's Word.

What is the basis of their authority? What is their authority? If it's themselves, again that's the fruit by which we know them. They better be pointing us to God. They better be pointing us to the Word. If they're pointing us to themselves and to their words, that should cause us to pay attention.

Thirdly, is their teaching consistent with the whole of Scripture? Is what they're teaching consistent with the whole of Scripture? Is it a consistent message? We should be careful of new doctrine that somebody comes along with. It doesn't mean that every time that happens that it's got to be false but it should cause us to pay attention, maybe a little bit more so. When someone says they've got a secret about the Christian life? That always just makes me a little nervous because how can it be a secret if it's in the

Bible? It's right there. It's in the Bible. It is no longer a secret. So it shouldn't be that people are bringing us new understandings and secrets that nobody else knows but them.

Then lastly does it promote spiritual growth and health? Does it promote spiritual growth and health? This is so significant. The goal of sound doctrine is not simply to make you feel better about yourself. The goal of sound doctrine isn't to elevate your sense of self-esteem. It isn't so that you will know the power of I am. Honestly, if you listen to that message and listen to it with the discerning ear, it is a pathetic attempt for people to literally look in the mirror and declare things about themselves that may have nothing to do with reality. The message of the Word of God elevates in our lives what? Godliness. Christ likeness. Holiness. That's what the message of the Word does.

Then lastly, their trademark. Their trademark. I think we can say about their teaching this is the true revealer. Christ and the cross are not central. Christ and the cross are not central. That's the point of what Jesus said back in verses 13 and 14. Here is a broad gate and a broad way and a lot of people headed to a terrible destiny. Here's the narrow gate and a narrow way and few people headed to everything that we could ever hope for because it's wrapped in Christ and is wrapped in the cross and is wrapped in the gospel.

What is man's problem? If we don't address man's problem, what possible solution can we offer? If we aren't secondly ever going to talk about sin and judgment? What happens is false prophets don't want to talk about sin. They don't want to talk about judgment. That makes people feel badly about themselves. That pulls down their sense of self-worth would be their viewpoint. The reality is I'm not okay and you're not okay. We've all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. The glory of the cross is that Christ has done something about that. He has averted the judgment that awaits us because Christ took that on Himself on the cross. That's the message that gets lost. Sin and judgment are deemphasized so that we can cause people to see themselves in a way that is not even true.

Very often thirdly they are motivated by greed. They're motivated by greed and selfish gain. I love the way Paul puts it. He says that godliness has its own reward. Godliness has a great gain. It's moving us more like Christ. It's causing the light of the

gospel to shine that much brighter out of our life. In John 10, Jesus said the true shepherd, in keeping with this passage, is willing to literally lay down His life for the sheep. Here are these that are false prophets and false shepherds. They're really in it for themselves and they're in it for personal gain. Often times, that personal gain is financial in nature. Micah chapter 3 verse 11 says "The priests are for hire and the prophets prophesy for money."

Then lastly, judgment awaits. That's the point of verse 19. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Fire in Scripture doesn't always mean hell, but it is always linked with judgment. So here there is a judgment that awaits those who are false prophets. Wide is the road that leads to destruction. False prophets are making a profit while they are on the wide road leading many astray. Listen my friends, anyone who comes to you with a message that is contrary to what Jesus taught, by Jesus's own definition is to be seen as a false prophet.

So what do we take away? The greatest defense against false teachers and false teaching is to be grounded in the Word of God. That is our greatest defense. That is why we said back in August let's be people of the book. People of the book are discerning. People of the book are grounded because it is the truth of God's Word and only the truth of God's Word that will equip you, prepare you, strengthen you, enable you to be discerning. and always, always, always it will point you to the cross, will point you to Christ, will point you to the gospel.

Let's pray. Father God, it is that gospel that we lift up. It is our Savior that we acknowledge as Lord of all. It is because of what Jesus has done that we can honestly say that our greatest problem has been solved. That problem of being separated from You because of sin, Jesus did everything that needed to be done when He died on the cross. We're so very thankful for that. Lord, we celebrate that. We sing of that now and then we celebrate that as we gather around this table in just a few moments. In Jesus's name, Amen.¹