

Matthew 7:15–23 (ESV)

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

²¹“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²²On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ ²³And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”

Jesus Is the Truth

There is a seemingly countless number of ways for us to get the news. We can read it in the newspaper, listen to it on the radio, watch it on TV, and even see it appear before our very eyes on every single type of social media account. But as the number of ways that we can get the news seems to be infinitely growing, it seems to be harder and harder for us to know which news sources we can truly trust. We could grab any random number of news sources and all of them could be reporting on a specific story differently. So, how do we know which news sources we can trust? More often than not, we will choose to listen to the ones that most closely agree with our own personal views and opinions, and we can even become convinced that everyone that is reporting differently is a liar.

In the same way, there are many different types of churches in the world that you can choose to go to. All of these different churches have news to report, news that is found in the Bible, and much like a news anchor, it is the job of the pastors of these churches to report on the news of the Bible and explain what it means to you. But not every pastor reports this news in the same way. It is for this reason that Jesus gives you the warning that he does in our text for today. He says,

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves” (verse 15).

On the outside, all of these different pastors can look exactly the same. They can wear the same clothes, perform the same outward motions, and even seemingly speak the same types of words. On the outside, they look like innocent sheep, just like every other pastor does. Because of this, it is easy to trust what they say and not question it. But while these pastors may appear to do everything right on the outside, they are not speaking the truth; they are speaking lies. Instead of preaching exactly what the Bible says, some of these pastors might be preaching only what makes sense to their own human reason, only what agrees with their own views and opinions; and if anything in the Bible doesn’t align with their human reason, they change it or drop it entirely, saying things such as, “This part of the Bible is just a fairy tale that is actually trying to teach us this,” or, “This part of the Bible applied to the people at that time, but it doesn’t apply to us today.” There are even some pastors that are only in it for themselves. They don’t actually care about you; all they want is to make successful lives for themselves. So, they only say the things that will give them fame and fortune, even if what they are saying goes against what the Bible says. If you listened to these different types of pastors and followed them, then you would be in danger of facing something much worse than physical death at the hands of ravenous wolves; you would be in danger of being led to your eternal death.

During Jesus’ earthly ministry, he could have given himself a life of fame and fortune. After all, people from all over flocked around him to have him heal them and their loved ones who were sick and dying and to cast out demons. And Jesus not only displayed his power by performing miracles like these; he also provided for their physical needs by miraculously feeding them, after which the Jews wanted to, as the apostle John says, “come and take him by force to make him

king” (John 6:15). But Jesus didn’t come to give himself fame and fortune; he came to suffer and die. As the apostle Paul says, “[Christ Jesus] humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:8). If Jesus was only looking out for himself, then this would make no sense. But he didn’t just care about himself; he cared about you. He suffered the eternal suffering that you rightfully deserved so that you would not have to suffer it. He died on the cross so that you would not have to die. He took your place and paid the price for your sins so that you may have eternal life.

Because Jesus was willing to do all of this for us, why would we want to follow anyone else or listen to any words that go against the words that he spoke? Unfortunately, we are tempted to do just that. Much like how we can choose to listen to news sources that only agree with our thinking, there are times when we are tempted to listen to those pastors who only say what makes sense to our human reason. We want the Bible to make sense to us. So, if we can’t understand it, we want to find someone who explains the Bible in a way that we think is reasonable. There are also times when we are tempted to listen to those pastors who only say what we want to hear, even if it goes against what the Bible says. In times like these, we are like the ones whom the apostle Paul warned Timothy of when he said, “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” (2 Timothy 4:3–4). In times like these, we don’t want to hear the truth.

Not everyone in Jesus’ day wanted to hear the truth either. While there were some who believed him, there were others who left him after he spoke the truth to them (John 6:66); and there were yet others who became his enemies when faced with the truth, enemies who would put him to death because they saw him as a threat. Jesus could have avoided this. When people came out

to hear him, he could have said what made sense to their human reason; he could have said what would make them happy. By doing so, not only would he amass a much larger following, but he would also avoid death. But Jesus didn't compromise on the truth and kept on speaking it.

Hearing the truth can sometimes be difficult. This is why we can be so easily tempted to listen to the lies that are told to us by false prophets. But while we may not want to hear the truth, we need to hear the truth, and the truth is that we are sinners. Many of the things that we want to do, many of the things that seem to make us happy, are sinful and evil, and we commit these evil deeds every day. The evil deeds that we commit make us worthy of eternal punishment in the fires of hell. But while this is difficult news for us to hear, what follows is the best news we could possibly hear. God the Father did not want us to suffer for the sins that we committed, so he sent his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to save us from our sins. Jesus saved us by taking all of our sins, all of our evil deeds that make us deserving of hell, and putting them to death with him on the cross. Our sins are no more, and the forgiveness of sins and eternal life in heaven are now freely given to us because of what Jesus has done on our behalf. This good news sounds too good to be true. We get the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation as a free gift? That can't be the whole truth, right? There has to be something more to it than that. But we know that it is true because Jesus said so, and whenever Jesus says something, it comes true.

Jesus had told his disciples many times what was going to happen to him. After Peter confessed that Jesus is the Christ, “[f]rom that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (Matthew 16:21). And all of that happened, just as Jesus said. Therefore, when Jesus says things such as, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6), and, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my

disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31–32), we know that we can trust that he is speaking the truth and can confess, as Peter did, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68).

Instead of following false prophets, who are no more than wolves in sheep’s clothing, we follow “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Jesus had all of your sins laid upon himself, including all of the times when you did not want to listen to him, and carried those sins all the way to the cross. On the cross, the Lamb of God was sacrificed for your sins. By the shedding of his innocent blood, your sins were paid for. Now, for those of you “who [look] on the Son [in the faith that the Holy Spirit has given you] and [believe] in him” (John 6:40), which is the will of your Father who is in heaven, eternal life is yours. You will not be turned away like the false prophets who claim to do everything that they do in Jesus’ name, when in reality they are only telling lies and are only looking out for themselves; you will be welcomed into the gates of heaven as God’s own dear child. What better news is there to hear than that?

It can be difficult to know which news sources to trust. One way that some people try to combat this problem is by doing their own investigating to find out who is actually telling the truth to the best of their ability. In the same way, you are always able to make sure that what your pastors are saying is true by putting what they say up against the truth of the Bible, just like the Bereans, who “examin[ed] the Scriptures daily to see if these things [that Paul and Silas were saying in the synagogue] were so” (Acts 17:11). This is because you can trust the words that Jesus spoke; you can trust in Jesus. Even in times when the truth seems uncertain, you can always trust in Jesus, because Jesus never lied, because Jesus is the truth.