

Beware Of False Prophets

Their Motivation, Appearance, and Works

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God's true prophets had a practical office to discharge. It was part of their commission to show the people of God their transgressions and the house of God their sins. This means that they functioned as both pastors and ministerial monitors of the people of God. It was their duty to admonish and caution, to denounce prevailing sins, to warn the people of the terrors of divine judgment, and to call them to repentance. They also brought the message of consolation and forgiveness. They were the watchmen set upon the walls of Zion to blow the trumpet to timely warn of approaching danger.

The title *prophet* has a general application to all who have messages from God to man. The infamous label of false prophet also has a general application, which includes ministers, teachers, authorities, and the so-called scholars that do research (as the theologians do) and come up with their own human ideas.

This sermon will analyze false prophets from a general perspective. I do not intend to get into details specifically of a false prophet, but the content of a false prophet. A more general approach that includes all of these individuals: ministers, teachers, authorities, scholars, and theologians, whatever they may be called.

God's prophets were men who helped to bring moral order to people's lives. In contrast, false prophets were self-serving, encouraging immoral disorder by offering people what they wanted to hear and by promoting the wandering and confusing broad way approach to life.

Herbert Spencer is credited with saying, "When a man's knowledge is not in order, the more of it he has, the greater will be his confusion." This is certainly the case of those who teach and promote ways that are contrary to God's inspired written Word.

Speaking of confusion, perhaps no compilation of knowledge depicts confusion so well as the Catholic Encyclopedia. It was published in 15 volumes between 1907 and 1912 by the Robert Appleton Company. Under the article *Christmas*, listen to what the first paragraph says. Notice how confusing it is. This is under the heading *Early Celebration*. “Christmas was not among the earliest festivals of the church. Irenaeus and Tertullian omit it from their list of feasts; Origen, glancing at the discreditable imperial Natalitia, asserts that in the Scriptures sinners alone, not saints, celebrate their birthday; Arnobius can still ridicule the 'birthdays' of the gods.”

This is under the heading *Alexandria*: “The first evidence of the feast is from Egypt. About AD 200, Clement of Alexandria says that certain Egyptian theologians “over curiously” assign, not the year alone, but the day of Christ's birth, placing it on the 25th of Pachon, (which is May 20) in the twenty-eighth year of Augustus. [Ideler thought they did this believing that the ninth month, in which Christ was born, was the ninth of their own calendar.] Others reached the date of 24 or 25 Pharmuthi (which is April 19th or 20th). With Clement's evidence may be mentioned the "De paschæ computus", written in 243 and falsely ascribed to Cyprian, which places Christ's birth on 28 March, because on that day the material sun was created. But Lupi [that is a good name I think for this person] has shown that there is no month in the year to which respectable authorities have not assigned Christ's birth.”

Such confusion. They could not agree on it. They could not even agree or prove that it was to be kept and so every month of the year, has at one time or another, been a month for Christ's birth in the Roman Catholic Church.

The false prophets, theologians, and scholars of the early Roman Catholic Church took it upon themselves to decide that Jesus Christ's birthday should be celebrated, but they could not agree on when so they did nothing less than cause confusion that has continued to this day. Scripture does not tell us the day of Jesus' birth, but because of false prophets, who are also often called 'respectable authorities,' every month of the year has at one time or another been a candidate for the birth month of Jesus. Since the inspired written Word of God does not reveal it, they just chose a time when the pagans of the Roman Empire were already celebrating the time of the pagan winter

celebration of the rebirth of the sun. It is quite easy to see the confusion even in the description of the history of this non-Christian celebration.

This is what doctrinal syncretism by false prophets produces: confusion, misdirection, lies, and deceit. References to false prophets in the Bible are synonymous with anyone who falsely claims to be a spokesman for God to man. The classical American philosopher George Santayana is credited with saying, "Chaos is a name for any order that produces confusion in our minds." Anyone who supports or agrees with a false prophet and his deceit shares in and is guilty of the promotion of no less than chaos. The works of the flesh in Galatians 5 describes a social order of chaos. It aptly describes modern society today; not just on the holidays, but all year round, especially on their pagan holidays.

Turn with me, if you will please, to Jeremiah 23. False prophets, lying prophets, both male and female, are found in abundance in the Bible. The vast majority of those spoken of in Scripture are not prophets of alien or false gods, which also exist, but are those who profess to speak for and on behalf of the God of Israel and yet do not speak His Word or reflect His character. God's prophet Jeremiah was heartbroken by what the false prophets, the set of self-seeking leaders and respectable authorities, had done to the people of Judah. Notice the parallels to our people today.

Jeremiah 23:9-12 My heart within me is broken because of the prophets; all my bones shake. I am like a drunken man, and like a man whom wine has overcome, because of the Lord, and because of His holy words. For the land is full of adulterers; for because of a curse the land mourns. The pleasant places of the wilderness are dried up. Their course of life is evil and their might is not right. "For both prophet and priest are profane; yes, in My house [that is, in God's church] I have found their wickedness," says the Lord. "Therefore their way shall be to them like slippery ways; in the darkness they shall be driven on and fall in them; for I will bring disaster on them, the year of their punishment," says the Lord.

Jeremiah 23:16-17 Thus says the Lord of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you. They make you worthless; they speak a vision of their own heart, not from the

mouth of the Lord. They continually say to those who despise Me, 'The Lord has said, "You shall have peace"'; and to everyone who walks according to the dictates of his own heart, they say, 'No evil shall come upon you.'"

Jeremiah 23:21-22 "I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran. I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied. But if they had stood in My counsel, and had caused My people to hear My words, then they would have turned them from their evil way and from the evil of their doings."

But instead, Judah went into captivity just the way this nation is going to eventually. In fact, we already are in slavery and captivity to our own governmental system and the bankers and the rest of the elite who control all of the major corporations and more.

Jeremiah 23:23-27 "Am I a God near at hand," says the Lord. "and not a God afar off? Can anyone hide himself in secret places so I shall not see him?" says the Lord. "Do I not fill heaven and earth?" says the Lord. "I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in My name, saying, 'I have dreamed, I have dreamed!' How long will this be in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies? Indeed they are prophets of the deceit of their own heart [In other words, they are telling you what God says; "I know a better way of doing those things."], who try to make My people forget My name by their dreams which everyone tells his neighbor, as their fathers forgot My name for Baal.

When He says, "who try to make My people forget My name," He is talking about what it represents and that is God's whole way of life. So these false prophets led people away from God's whole way of life to the point where they do not even recognize His name and they substitute foreign gods in that place.

Today it is not just governments that want to mix religious beliefs into one global religion, but most religious leaders are doing the same thing.

Ministers of so-called Christian churches are stealing God's words for their own gain. The Lord God is against ministers who steal His words saying, "God says we should do this or that."

Jeremiah 23:30-32 "Therefore behold, I am against the prophets," says the Lord, "who steal My words every one from his neighbor. Behold, I am against the prophets," says the Lord, "who use their tongues and say, 'He says.' "Behold, I am against those who prophesy false dreams," says the Lord, "and tell them, and cause My people to err by their lies and by their recklessness. Yet I did not send them or command them; therefore they shall not profit this people at all," says the Lord.

God made sure Judah knew through Jeremiah that He is against those false prophets, those false teachers in Judah. We can learn lessons from that today.

False prophets stand as representatives of all those who seek the true God as if He can be manipulated or controlled. Those who wish to find a way of providing religious support for their own greed and immorality teach their traditions, rather than God's truth. I have been in conversations with some people, for example, some who have worked on the headquarters building for Church of the Great God, contractors; many of them Baptists or other conservative mainstream Christian groups. You can talk to them about the Bible and what it says and they would agree with you; then in the next sentence, they say, 'when I go to heaven', or 'he's going to hell', or many other things including the Sabbath and so on. So, they do rely much more heavily on their traditions than God's truth. These false prophets and false ministers promote those things. Spiritual immorality is encouraged by ungodly spiritual leaders and such false teachers lead people down slippery paths and spiritual darkness.

People need spiritual leaders who are exemplary examples of faithfulness, righteousness, and commitment, not leaders who compromise by accepting and teaching lies. Recently a minister came in to visit a few weeks ago and wanted to attend here. He was an ex-Worldwide Church of God minister. Knowing that the history since then was somewhat dicey for these individuals, I asked him, "What day do you keep the Sabbath?" He said, "Sunday." I said to him, "Well, we keep Saturday, because that's God's

Sabbath by commandment, just as Herbert W. Armstrong taught." He said, "I can keep Saturday, too." He was an ex-minister from Worldwide Church of God. He did not care which one he kept. That is incredible. He said, "I love to speak. I just want to find a place where I can speak and teach people."

Christmas is a prime example of a false doctrine that turns people's hearts away from God. Think about what characterizes this pagan holiday. It is infamous for its decadence, lying, greed, cavorting, drunkenness, gluttony, and murder. In this, there can be no true worship of God and Jesus Christ because they must be worshipped in spirit and truth.

Turn with me, if you will please to Micah 2. Here we find some colorful images of false prophets. They are those who would be happy to say, "I will prophesy for you for plenty of wine and beer." If one feeds them, then they proclaim peace and if one does not, they prepare to wage war against him.

Micah 2:6-11 "Do not prattle [that is blather or speak nonsense]," you say to those who prophesy. So they shall not prophesy to you; they shall not return insult for insult. You who are named the house of Jacob: "Is the Spirit of the Lord restricted? Are these His doings? Do not My words do good to him who walks uprightly? Lately My people have risen up as an enemy—you pull off the robe with the garment from those who trust you as they pass by. Like men returned from war, the women of My people you cast out from their pleasant houses; from their children you have taken away My glory forever. Arise and depart, for this is not your rest; because it is defiled, it shall destroy, yes, with utter destruction. If a man should walk in a false spirit and speak a lie, saying 'I will prophesy to you of wine and drink,' even he would be the prattler [or the blatherer] of this people.

It had gotten so bad that these false and lying prophets were even prophesying that if a person would listen to them, they would have plenty of alcohol to drink. They were telling them what they wanted to hear. The people, the false prophets, and the politicians forbade God and Micah to prophesy. They said, "Don't speak nonsense." God, through Micah, recites their prohibition to themselves and forewarns them of the consequences. The descendants of these Jews of Micah's time, hundreds of years later,

commanded the apostles not to speak at all, as well, or to speak of the name of Jesus. The Jewish leaders complained that God's prophet would not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law.

But God answers that they certainly will prophesy. What God is saying is that His true prophets will continue to preach His way of life, no matter what happens. God says He will stop the false teachers, the false ministers, and the false prophets.

The Hebrew word is emphatic. The prophets had a commission from God and they must obey Him whether Israel would hear or not. Micah, and Isaiah at this point, or Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the rest after them were told by God basically that they would not prophesy to these rebellious Jews because it was like casting pearls to swine.

God does not say they shall not prophesy to you; but that they shall prophesy to others who would receive the prophet's words. God's Word will not be thwarted. Those who will listen and respond to God's prophets will never be deprived of God's truth. The Jews rejected Christ's message, so Christ opened the opportunity to hear the gospel to open-minded Gentiles. The false prophet, the opposite of a prophet, is a man who misrepresents God, and for his own personal gain he speaks only what is in his heart. Acts of sin proceed from the same evil heart.

Matthew 7 is the word of Christ spoken by Him as He concludes the Sermon on the Mount. He gives the disciples, the crowd, and the religious leaders four basic warnings. They must choose between two gates and roads, two kinds of prophets, two kinds of disciples, and two foundations. They are either with Jesus, or against Him; there is no fence-riding.

Matthew 7:13-20 "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way that leads to life and there are few who find it. Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A

good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them.”

Let us take a closer look at false prophets: their motivation, their appearance, and their works. God gave His prophet His Word; He told the Word of God and declared the Word of God and His prophet communicated what God had given him. However, the false prophet misrepresented God; a man who told either his own words or the words of the Devil or a demon, but certainly not the words of God. This is all very elementary.

Jesus Christ, in Matthew 7, assumes that we understand first the existence of false prophets. They are there. They are a fact of life and we have to deal with them. There are false prophets in the world and fellowshiping with the church. There is no sense in Jesus saying, "beware of false prophets" if they do not exist, and there is no such thing as a false prophet in the church.

Turn with me please to Deuteronomy 13. The Bible tells us a great deal about false prophets. They are familiar in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. If you go to the Old Testament you will find in the law that God laid down a penalty for misrepresenting Him. If a man came to ancient Israel and preached something that was not of God or if he prophesied something that was to come to pass and it did not happen, he was stoned because he was and is a false prophet.

Deuteronomy 13:1-5 “If there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, and he gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying, 'Let us go after other gods'—which you have not known—and let us serve them,' you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, for the Lord your God is testing you to know whether you love the Lord your God with all of your heart and with all of your soul. You shall walk after the Lord your God and fear Him, and keep His commandments and obey His voice; you shall serve Him and hold fast to Him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has spoken in order to turn you away from the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the

house of bondage, to entice you from the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall put away the evil from your midst.”

So in ancient times under the laws of God in Israel and Judah, they were to be stoned and killed. Today under the New Covenant, they are just put out of the church and left for God to take care of them.

We have, right at the very beginning of the Old Testament, a definition of what a false prophet and false prophecy really is. We find that as we go through the Old Testament that false prophecy was motivated not by loyalty to God, which was the motivation for true prophets, but rather first they were motivated by a desire for popularity in themselves. In other words, they were motivated by pride.

Turn with me if you will to Ezekiel 13:3. In the book of Ezekiel we find that Ezekiel was in a concentration camp by the River Chebar. At the same time, Jeremiah, Ezekiel's contemporary, was in the city of Jerusalem telling the people that they were going to be deported and exiled and the city was going to be destroyed. It was a very trying time, even worse than what we are seeing now, but no doubt similar to what existed, or will exist at the beginning of the tribulation.

Ezekiel 13:3-10 Thus says the Lord God: “Woe to the foolish prophets, who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing! O Israel, your prophets are like foxes in the deserts. You have not gone up into the gaps to build a wall for the house of Israel to stand in battle on the day of the Lord. They have envisioned futility and false divination, saying, 'Thus says the Lord!' But the Lord has not sent them; yet they hope that the word may be confirmed. Have you not seen a futile vision, and have you not spoken false divination? You say, 'The Lord says,' but I have not spoken.” Therefore thus says the Lord God: “Because you have spoken nonsense and envisioned lies, therefore I am indeed against you,” says the Lord God. “My hand will be against the prophets who envision futility and who divine lies; they shall not be in the assembly of My people, nor be written in the record of the house of Israel, nor shall they enter into the land of Israel. Then you shall

know that I am the Lord God.” “Because, indeed, because they have seduced My people, saying, 'Peace!' when there is no peace.

I have heard comments by people from other groups. They say the ministers are not warning them about what is happening in this nation and how bad things are getting. They are not hearing anything that relates this to prophesy. In some cases, they are even being told that we have another 25 or 50 years left before the Great Tribulation. They are not warning their people. I fear for them, the ministers in many of those groups who are not warning the people; because I only ask the question, "Could they be false prophets, false ministers?" They certainly could be if they are not warning the people of God.

Jeremiah was preaching that destruction and judgment was coming. He told them the Babylonians were God's instrument to come and sack the city and take the people away to Babylon for 70 years. While he was prophesying true things, false prophets were rising all around in Jerusalem.

Jeremiah 6:13-15 “Because from the least of them even to the greatest of them, everyone is given to covetousness; and from the prophet even to the priest, everyone deals falsely. They have also healed the hurt of My people slightly, saying, 'Peace, peace!' When there is no peace. Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? No! They were not at all ashamed; nor did they know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; at the time I punish them, they shall be cast down,” says the Lord.

Flip over please to Isaiah 30. As a fact, Isaiah faced the same thing.

Isaiah 30:8-11 Now go, write it before them on a tablet, and note it on a scroll, that it may be for time to come, forever and ever [This is not only written to the house of Israel and Judah; it is also written to us in this day, the descendants of the Israelites.]: that this is a rebellious people, lying children, children who will not hear the law of the Lord; who say to the seers, “Do not see,” and to the prophets, “Do not prophesy to us right things; speak to us smooth things, prophesy deceits. Get out of the way, turn aside from the path, cause the Holy One of Israel to cease from before us.”

Is this exactly what is happening to us today, especially in the public schools? "Cause the Holy One of Israel to cease before us"—exactly what the people of this nation, especially intellectuals, are trying to promote and are succeeding. Literally, the children of Israel said, 'Tell us lies, we don't want to hear what you're saying. Tell us what we want to hear.' The descendants of Israel today are saying the same thing. 'Don't tell us the truth; tell us what we want to hear!' Some people in God's church have this same tendency, complaining that our commentaries are negative. They miss the value of advanced warning.

False prophets are motivated by their own desire for popularity and for their own pride. They will tell people whatever they want to hear. Not only are they motivated by their own popularity, to a large extent they are motivated by nationality more than loyalty to God. They often use appeals to national pride to deceive. We Americans are too big and too strong to fail. We always come up with solutions to solve our problems. This is often how we think, as Americans; even we in the church have a hard time, believing that somehow the United States will solve its problems.

They are too big to solve by human hands and minds. In the case of ancient Israel and Judah, and similarly in God's church today, there was and is the proclivity to believe and say, "We are God's people, we are Israel, we have the Temple, we have the law, we have the covenants, and we have the land. Don't come and tell us that God will come and judge His own people. We are His, the people of God's name!" This is exactly what many of the conservatives and mainstream Christians, approximately half the people in this nation, believe today.

Not only was their deceit motivated by popularity, but it was served by their own self-interest and greed; many of them wanted money. Balaam is one example. You can go right through the whole of the Old Testament; men and woman, false prophets and false prophetesses, who were only motivated by their own desire for popularity, by nationalism, and finally by their own greed.

In the Old Testament, we see a simple definition of what a false prophet is and what motivates him. He is self-centered, he is wrongly motivated, he is

detached from reality and what God is really saying to the people. He is run and driven by pride.

Then we go into the New Testament and the first occurrence we have in the reference to false prophets is in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:15. Jesus says, “Beware of these false prophets.” In Matthew 24:11, 24 Jesus tells us that in the last days, specifically during the tribulation period, there would be false Christs and false prophets who would rise up and try to deceive even the very elect. It is that time that we are entering—very soon, if we are not already in it. I do not mean the tribulation, I mean the period before it.

As we go through the epistles later on at the end of the New Testament, we find that the early church must have been absolutely plagued with such pseudo-prophets and ministers because almost every apostolic letter that we have contains a severe warning against false prophets. It is extremely important for us to be aware of these individuals. We need to be able to resist and put up our defenses, God's whole armor. In some of the letters in the Greek, they are called *pseudoprophetes* which means pseudo-prophets literally. That is the word that is used in Matthew 7:15 in the Sermon on the Mount. A prophet is one who was inspired by God. A *pseudoprophetes* said that they were inspired by God, but they obviously lied because they were not teaching what God's Old Testament prophets, Christ, and the apostles taught.

Please turn to II Corinthians 11. It is similar to another word that we find in the New Testament. It is *pseudapostolos*, which translates as pseudo-apostles or false apostles.

II Corinthians 11:12-15 But what I do, I will also continue to do, that I may cut off the opportunity from those who desire an opportunity to be regarded just as we are in the things of which they boast. For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works.

According to what they do; according to what they teach and preach. It was bad enough to claim inspiration, but they claimed apostolic authority. This takes me right exactly to the Pope himself and those types of individuals whom claim superiority over people in large organizations on an apostolic level of the 12 apostles. I do believe that Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong's work was the work of an apostle, but at a lesser level than the original twelve. I am not sure how else to phrase it.

Please turn with me to II Peter 2. A similar term in the Greek is *pseudodidaskalos* which is translated as pseudo-teachers. So you have pseudo-prophets, those saying they are inspired; you have pseudo-apostles, those saying that they are institutionalized of God to direct the church and to lay down doctrine; and then you have pseudo-teachers, those who come in and say, "I have a message from God that God wants you to know. I have new truth that God wants you to know." *Pseudodidaskalos* is the word we find in II Peter.

II Peter 2:1 But there were also false prophets [*pseudoprophetes*] among the people, even as there will be false teachers [*pseudodidaskalos*] among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction.

A false teacher may be someone who gives sermonettes who is not ordained. They may be speaking to a congregation of God's people, but they are leading you astray or teaching you things that are not biblical. We always have to be on our guard for things like this. Every man who speaks, ordained or not, is a human being and will make mistakes. But we must be careful about who we listen to and be sure that they do not take us out of the church.

II Peter 2:2-3 And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber.

We do not have time to look at all of these titles spoken of in Scripture, but we have the false brothers, false speakers, false witnesses, and even in Matthew 24:24 we have *pseudochristos*, false Christs. Jesus Christ said they would pretend to be the Messiah. In I John 2:18-22 the apostle John said that they would deny that Christ had come in the flesh and they would try to dupe and pervert even the Christians among them.

Notice that all of these Greek words have the word *pseudo* or *pseuda* as prefixes. We have that word in our English language; it literally means in the Greek, a lie, something that is false, something that is a sham, and that is exactly what the word means in our language today.

Turn with me to Acts 20. Let me give you another insight into these false prophets. We are going to take some time to go over this. I think it is so relevant and so contemporary in this age in which we live. Paul charges to the elders in the church of Ephesus a great warning against false prophets.

Acts 20:29-31 For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.

That is a lot of warning the apostle Paul did. Paul warned Christians consistently that false prophets would come into the church. They would rise from within the church and he warns them to beware. The false prophet's motivation of desiring to be popular, his motivation of selfish ambition detaches him from reality, and he is driven by self-centeredness, a desire for recognition. He tells people what they want to hear. Of course, human nature is the same in both the Old and New Testament. So the same motivation drove the false prophets of the Old Testament as it does the New Testament.

Paul says in II Timothy 4 that it will be the same in the early church as it will be in the last days.

II Timothy 4:3-4 For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers [or false prophets]; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables [things that are not true].

Of course, human nature is the same during all time periods. Why in the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, does Jesus Christ now address this very strange and negative subject? The reason why is simply in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, particularly chapter 7 talking about holy living and the fine line between hypocrisy and a real holy life. The fine line is only a visible one. This is in the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 7:13-14 Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.

That in itself should scare us; it should make us very concerned that there are only a few that find the narrow way of God's truth. We should be on guard for those who go by the wide gate; who preach liberty in the way that the world does.

Christ is not talking about fasting, praying, giving, and all sorts of those things. He stuck a dagger into those who were motivated to be seen by men and it is a little easier to see the relevance. In Matthew 7:13-14 Jesus says there are two ways; narrow and wide. The contrary wide way causes death and confusion. Jesus was considering and indirectly referring to the Pharisees and the Sadducees. However, His primary audience was His disciples that had gathered to hear His warning against people with false righteousness or people with self-righteousness. The Pharisees and the Sadducees were the blind leaders of the blind. The false prophets were and are spiritually blind.

A false prophet will be like the Sadducees and Pharisees. They will exhibit a hypocritical, ostentatious, self-righteous attitude. They will have no true

inward spiritual life, no vital relationship with God, and no true righteous fruit produced in their lives. These false ministers profess, advocate, and preach the wide gate and the broad road. They try to encourage people to enter the gate that is wide and allows people to keep all of their baggage of sin and other religious systems with them. They encourage people to call themselves Christians and followers of Christ; yet they also encourage people to live in ways that are not according to the teaching and the holiness of the righteousness that is found in Christ. They think they are alright because they profess faith, but there is no genuine life of God in their experience and they do not produce any or very few good works.

The false minister and his followers have not only an external profession of their religion, that is, they present an image that feigns righteousness, but their religion is not supported by an internal production of good spiritual fruit and attributes. In other words, they do not produce spiritual fruit. Their image of righteousness will not produce a vital and real yield. Essentially, the kind of godly characteristics that you see in chapters 5-7 of the Sermon on the Mount will be absent from them.

So Jesus is giving us a warning not to be deceived that there will be false prophets; in fact there are false prophets everywhere. Christ tells us how we can recognize them and how to identify them. They are very subtle, but very recognizable; you will be deceived by a false prophet if you judge them only by sight. By their image of honesty and virtue is what you see, but behind that is their fake and phony heart. You will be deceived by false ministers if you judge them by their appearances, but you will recognize them if you judge them by what they produce and by the way they live their lives. *You will know them by their fruits.*

Whenever the firm demands of verses 13 and 14 were given, the demands of true discipleship take up your cross and follow Christ, the false teachers were inevitably going to arise and promote the wide gate, preach the wide gate, and preach the wide way. That is the connection between verses 13 and 14 and the rest of this passage. They will try to convince people to go on the wide way, through the wide gate; if you are going to avoid the wide gate and the wide way, you are going to have to turn a deaf ear to false ministers; not

even give them the time of day. Christ said, "Beware of the false prophets." Literally in the Greek language, "Hold your mind away from these false prophets." They have nothing to offer except their own confusion.

The God of the Old Testament and the Savior of the New Testament, Jesus Christ, firmly stated that false prophets, false teachers, and false preachers were individuals that promoted confusion and were worthy of death. If they are playing with your mind and you sense confusion, close your mind to them. Do not listen to them. This includes the Sunday preachers on Sunday morning. I am always amazed at how many people claiming to be in God's church, who regularly listen to sermons on Sunday morning by the Sunday worshipping preachers. It is incredible to me to fill your mind with that which is literally from false ministers and false prophets.

God is not the author of confusion; Satan is. They are there to put you on the broad road and to keep you from the narrow way. James 3:16 says, "For where envy and self-seeking is, confusion and every evil thing is there." False prophets deceive people by their image of feigned righteousness. But they falsely project themselves to be, simply because their appearance is deceptive.

The first reason Jesus Christ gives to be aware of their image is that externally they come in sheep's clothing. The first way they deceive you is by wearing sheep's clothes. These are not the pigs and dogs that we find in Matthew 7:6 because they are easily recognized as pigs and dogs by their behavior.

Matthew 7:6 "Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces."

Matthew 7:15 "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves."

In Jude 4, we see that these are people who creep in unnoticed. Christians sometimes make the mistake of thinking that because they look like sheep,

they are sheep, but eventually after a period of time, their true character is exposed. By then it is too late for some and the damage has been done for some of the other sheep.

Jude 4 For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ.

There are three possible meanings of the sheep's clothing in Matthew 7 by which you can know these false prophets. The first is the obvious one. *They are pretending to be believers*. They are pretending to be the sheep of God. They present themselves as insiders and are disguised as sheep.

A deeper and second meaning is that *these false ministers and leaders are impersonating, not just specifically sheep, but impersonating shepherds*. The Greek word for 'sheep's clothing' may refer to a woolen garment that was worn by the shepherd in Palestine. When the shepherd watched his flock from the hillside, his coat was often one of sheep skin since it was so readily available. Many years ago, I had a coat made from sheep's skin and it had the finish of suede on the outside and thick furry wool on the inside. It was the warmest coat I have ever had. It was the most comfortable because it shapes to your body. Sadly, this area is too warm for that coat so we have gotten rid of it. Sheep skin makes a high-quality garment.

The prophets of the Old Testament wore a similar garment. In fact, Elijah wore what was called a mantle, which we find was a 'hairy' cloak. *Barnes' Notes* says that a mantle was the upper garment, a sort of cloak or cape, perhaps made of untanned sheep's skin.

Please turn to Zechariah 13. Zechariah, referring to false prophets, said a very interesting thing about them. They wear a rough garment to deceive.

Zechariah 13:1-6 In that day a fountain shall be opened for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin and for uncleanness. "It shall be in that day," says the Lord of hosts, "that I will cut off the names of the idols from the land, and they shall no longer be remembered. I will also cause the prophets and the

unclean spirit to depart from the land. It shall come to pass that if anyone still prophesies, then his father and mother who begot him will say to him, 'You shall not live, because you have spoken lies in the name of the Lord.' And his father and mother who begot him shall thrust him through when he prophesies. And it shall be in that day that every prophet will be ashamed of his vision when he prophesies; they will not wear a robe of coarse hair to deceive. But he will say, 'I am no prophet, I am a farmer; for a man taught me to keep cattle from my youth.' And one will say to him, 'What are these wounds between your arms?' Then he will answer, 'Those with which I was wounded in the house of my friends.'

It shows there, I believe this is Millennial, that false prophets will not be treated too kindly by the house of Israel. In other words, the false prophet wears the coarse garment that ordinary prophets would wear to show that they are a prophet and they deceive by wearing 'sheep's clothing' or literally, 'shepherd's clothing.' False ministers are very good about falsely putting on the image of God's ministers. This represents the mannerisms and the acts that are put-on to deceive.

Luke 20:46-47 "Beware of the scribes, who desire to go around in long robes, love greetings in the marketplaces, the best seats in the synagogues, and the best places at feasts, who devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. These will receive greater condemnation."

It is interesting that here Jesus says that the scribes love to walk around in long robes. There were those who were appearing, not just as sheep, but as shepherds, as prophets and apostles; they wanted to deceive God's people, but underneath their cloak, they were anything but sheep or shepherds. Satan is an expert at cloak and dagger, a covert operative. So are his ministers and prophets.

A third definition of what sheep's clothing is and what it really means, is *the simple way they come to the people*. They are gentle, caring, and believable on the exterior. They are very persuading and seem very concerned for people's welfare. They tell people the words people want to hear. They say to people, "Look at this gate. It's not narrow; it's wide. God's way of life is not

narrow; it's wide, full of liberty." They convince people to heap up for themselves many teachers and ministers. They treat the multiple resources of Bible studies and sermons as a smorgasbord from which they can choose only those things that they like to hear. Pleasant things, funny things, and interesting stories that do not offend them. The false ministers, teachers, and religious hobbyists seem so kind. They seem so polite. They appear to be such righteous people. They do not seem as offensive, direct, and narrow as God's own disciples do in their pursuit of the Kingdom of God.

These false teachers, these pseudo-Christians are teaching offensively easy, wide messages to people. The people think it is so pleasant and alluring; it must be true. In Ezekiel 13, we find an example of this. The false prophets were condemned by God because they were prophesying out of their own hearts, from their own spirit, and sometimes they repressed people because they would weigh them down, sometimes with their own sins and sometimes with confusion.

Ezekiel 13:22-23 "Because with lies you have made the heart of the righteous sad, whom I have not made sad; and you have strengthened the hands of the wicked, so that he does not turn from his wicked way to save his life. Therefore you shall no longer envision futility nor practice divination; for I will deliver My people out of your hand, and you shall know that I am the Lord."

The setting here is that the false prophetesses have disheartened the righteous with their lies and encouraged the people not to turn from their evil ways. This directly opposed God's purposes for His people. Eventually, God judges the prophetesses and the people then realize that these women had lied. The prophetesses themselves are forced to admit their sins. The result of this practicing of lies is a worthless, repulsive worship. How absolutely unchristian it is to celebrate the man-made and humanly-reasoned holidays. Especially that of Christmas. A day mixed with pagan symbols; a day God did not ordain. There is increased depression around Christmas and around all of the world's holidays. You do not find that with God's holy days. You find encouragement, joy, excitement, and rejoicing. What a contrast!

False prophets commend those for their wickedness. They tell them they will have life and they condemn the righteous who do what God wants them to

do. They tell God's people that they have death and they encourage people to take the broad way of life. The point, when talking about sheep's clothing, is that the false prophet does not advertise his lies. He comes as a preacher of truth, often with the language of the church, and he uses the vernacular of the church, but puts a different meaning on the words to deceive.

We must not only be discerning by critiquing these false prophets, teachers, and religionists, but by their character and actions we must also discern their motives.

I John 4:1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

If many false prophets have gone out into the world, where did they come from? Oftentimes it is from God's church. How many hundreds of ministers have gone out into the world from the old Worldwide Church of God? Many hundreds have which is very interesting in light of this. The apostle John is speaking to the church in this verse; not the world. The physical church exists in this world, but is not *of* the world. You will be deceived if you judge them only by their external traits because externally, they wear sheep's clothing.

Matthew 7:15 “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.”

The second reason that Jesus Christ gives to be aware of feigning righteousness is found in the second half of verse 15. They are ravenous wolves. Inwardly, they are wolves that want to tear the church apart. In the first century in Palestine, the wolf was the natural enemy of the sheep. The sheep were entirely defenseless and the wolf would absolutely ravage them. Therefore, Jesus taught elsewhere that the good shepherd is always on the look-out for the sheep and always looks-out for wolves.

A hireling, in other words, a man that is hired to do the job of a shepherd but is not really a shepherd, does not really love or own the sheep. He will run away or abandon the sheep if a wolf came along. In God's church we find that happening every once in a while. The shepherd will abandon the flock. It

is sad, but it happens. Like the false shepherd, the hireling has self-interest. The self-interest causes him to love his life more than he loves the flock, whereas the good shepherd, Jesus said, gives his life for the sheep.

(I would like to qualify these statements by saying I am not referring to anyone that has been associated with Church of the Great God. Let God be the one to judge anyone who has left us. I do not know what their heart is; that is what God is the judge of.)

The false prophet teaches in order not to give, but to get; not to impart spiritual wisdom, but to display his wisdom. A person cannot work to display his own wisdom and glorify Christ at the same time. His motivation is not to feed, but is greed. His god is himself and he wants to satisfy his own fleshly lusts and desires. These are people who are ravenous wolves, determined to devour the flock of God, to their own ends. The apostle Paul was concerned about the Devil, the Serpent, acting like a ravenous wolf who would corrupt God's people in Corinth.

II Corinthians 11:3-4 But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted—you may well put up with it!

Paul continues on throughout this chapter that there are many ravenous wolf-types and these false prophets who look like sheep but are ravenous wolves underneath. They are vicious, resentful, often bitter unbelievers, who prey on the immature, the unstable, and the gullible. Sometimes these individuals deceive God's people and for a time, God's people go astray.

Christ tells us how to test these false prophets. He changes the metaphor from sheep and wolves, to trees and fruit; from sheep's clothing, which a wolf might wear, to fruit which a tree must bear. The difference in the two illustrations, is this: a wolf can disguise himself, but a tree cannot disguise its fruit. Its fruit declares what it really is and what kind of tree it is.

That brings us to the second point. First of all, I said you would be deceived by false prophets if you judge them by their image of feigned righteousness. But secondly, Christ says you will recognize these false prophets if you judge them by their fruit. Judge them by what they do and what they produce.

Matthew 7:16-20 You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them.

You will know them simply, because as verses 16-20 tell us, their fruit is defining. Their fruit is revealing. Jesus Christ is not telling us to be critical, but to be on our guard.

False prophets and teachers can only bring forth bad fruit. You cannot restrain someone's flesh or make them holy; their flesh manifests wickedness. In II Peter 2 you can read about the filthy work of the flesh of the false prophets and teachers.

II Peter 2:18-22 For when they speak great swelling words of emptiness, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through lewdness, the ones who have actually escaped from those who live in error. While they promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage. For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: "A dog returns to his own vomit," and, "a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire."

There are many parallels between the natural world and the spiritual world. A newborn baby desires and can only digest milk; new Christian desires and initially, can only digest the milk of the Word of God. There are many illustrations. In Matthew 7:16 we have an illustration from the natural world

that corresponds to something in the spiritual realm regarding deceivers. Christ tells us, first of all, that the species of the tree can be known by its fruit. In other words, from the law of Genesis, everything in this world produces after its own kind. It is a positive statement. It is telling us that the only thing that the tree can produce is what it is naturally designed to produce. Thorn bushes do not produce grapes and thistles do not produce figs. What Christ is saying, with regard to the prophet, is similar to what Isaiah said.

Isaiah 8:20 To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.

Their natural fruit declares what species of tree they naturally are. The false prophet tries to make man his own savior, and yet the fact is unchanged. That which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the spirit is spirit. What He is saying is, if the fruit is bad, it reveals that the species is corrupt.

Secondly, in Matthew 7:18, it says a good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Christ has moved from natural produce to moral produce. He stopped talking about the language of fruit and different kinds of fruit; now He is talking about good morals and bad morals. He is now talking about the grade of the fruit, the caliber or character of the fruit.

Jesus is telling us to look at the fruit of the prophet to determine if it is good fruit. The fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are listed in Galatians 5:22-23. Then the works of the flesh, bad fruit, are the moral opposite as listed in Galatians 5:19-21. The works of the flesh: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousy, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambition, dissension, heresies, envy, murderers, drunkenness, revelries. There is a comparison for us to see of the good prophet, the true prophet, and the false prophet; the fruit of the Spirit and the works of the flesh.

It is not that a false minister or a false prophet will be guilty of all of the works of the flesh, but he is habitually guilty of some of them. That pretty much describes the Christmas season celebrations: confusion. You will not find the 'works of the flesh' associated with God's holy days.

Notice the comparison that the apostle Paul makes between the ways of this world and the ways of true Christians. They are diametrically opposites. The traditions and celebrations of the world are marked by the works of the flesh. These are the actions toward which sinful human beings tend to gravitate. Bad fruit is produced from our innermost desire to please the self.

Let us begin to wrap this up. Those who practice the works of the flesh will not inherit the Kingdom of God. Morally, their fruit will be bad if their nature is bad. Christ worded this concept to the Pharisees slightly differently in Matthew.

Matthew 12:34-35 "Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things."

The teachings of these false prophets and teachers encourage immorality. Therefore, we are to test the spirits to see whether they are of God. We do this by comparing what the false prophets say to what is said in the Scriptures. Sound doctrine and righteous living are the characteristics of true prophets. In examining the prophet, minister, or teacher, we should look at both the character and the message of the man.

As we know, fruit takes time to grow. It takes time to see whether a man is a true minister of God. It may not always be immediately obvious what kind of truth a man is teaching until it eventually has an effect on his and other people's lives. Eventually, as the fruit of his efforts began to grow, it will reveal what sort of man he is. In time, a man will be exposed by the moral or immoral fruit that he produces. A tree cannot produce anything other than its kind; a good tree cannot produce evil fruit and neither can a corrupt tree produce good fruit.

John the Baptist said in Matthew 3:10, “Therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” In other words, this fruit is useless to God. Peter says, it goes to swift destruction and Paul says it is fit for destruction. The only route that these false ministers are heading toward is the wide path, the wide gate, and the broad way.

The social engineers of this pop culture today are trying to brainwash the whole world into believing that there is no difference between Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, or Islam and all of the other pagan religions. They syncretize and fuse all the religions of the various gods together. They tell us we all have the same god or gods. They try to convince us that in religion, there is no restrictive narrow gate; just the liberty of a wide gate.

But Jesus Christ tells us the exact opposite. There is just one specific narrow way. Even the health and wealth gospel that says that Christians should be rich, prosperous, and successful in our business is a broad gate. It is a broad way where you can bring all of your worldly baggage with you. God is not against wealth, but He will test us to see how we use it when we do have it. One of the main ways He tests us is at the Feast of Tabernacles when we are somewhat unusually wealthy.

Combining idolatrous practices with the worship of God was a recurring problem among the ancient Israelites. They often willfully mixed pagan religious customs with their worship of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It was similar to what mainstream Christians do today in their pagan religious celebrations of Christmas and Easter. You find no syncretism in God's holy days. None whatsoever. Profiteering evangelists and preachers, many of those on television, some of them with charismatic appeal, who do their work for money and who turn the grace of God into lasciviousness, lead people down the wide path to destruction.

False prophets can be found in the churches, in the education system, and in the government. They are of the spirit of antichrist. The most dangerous to God's people are operating in the church, as the epistles show. Christmas is a deceitful misdirection that entices people away from God's holy days. This revelry in and of itself should show that this worldly holiday is in no way related to the Father and Son of righteousness.

The holy days lead to peace, joy, hope, and spiritual growth. They are based in Spirit and truth. That is why God instructed the Israelites not to follow pagan customs or worship Him as the world does. Remember, He says in Deuteronomy 12, “You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way. . . . Whatever I command you be careful to observe it. You shall not add to it nor take away from it.”

Modern psychology has labeled sin a 'sickness' rather than acknowledging that it is the breaking of God's immutable law. Just blame it on your parents, blame it on the establishment, or blame it on society. If that does not work to wash away the guilt, blame in on your own genes.

Thomas S. Monson is credited with saying, “Amidst the confusion of the times, the conflicts of conscience, and the turmoil of daily living, an abiding faith becomes an anchor to our lives.” He may be a worldly man, but he hit the truth right on the head there.

We have to diligently take our stand, scripturally and righteously, with the prophets, the apostles, and most of all with God the Father and Christ our Savior. Then we will be able to recognize God's true prophets and teachers. We can appreciate what God has provided for our education and our edification through them. May God grant us the discernment to recognize and learn from true and faithful ministers and teachers in God's church. We offer up that quick prayer.