

Questions Jesus Asked: Do people pick grapes from thornbushes?

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[0 : 00] Let's pray. Father, would you open your word, open our hearts to hear your word this evening.

In Christ's name, amen. Good evening, folks. Okay, verse 15, let me read that to you again. Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

Jesus isn't messing around here. And I think his point is very obvious, but before we get stuck into the actual passage we're looking at, just a reminder of where his words, Christ's words fit into the sermon on the mount.

Okay, so immediately before Jesus says this bit about false prophets, he says this, verse 13, Enter by the narrow gate, for the gate is wide, and the way is easy, that leads to destruction.

And those who enter it are many. For the gate is narrow, and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few. Okay, and then there's the false prophets bit.

[1 : 09] Immediately after the false prophets bit, he says this, Okay, I'll say it again.

Jesus is not messing around here. And if you think that the sermon on the mount, or the popular perception of the sermon on the mount, is that it's all kind of, you know, peace and cuddles, this blows us out of the water.

It's very heavy stuff. And it's a stern end to the sermon on the mount. And if we take, well, let's have a look at all three sections, just in terms of how they kind of fit together, okay, before we look at just that middle bit there about the false prophets.

Okay, so little section one there, so the 13, 14. So there's this narrow gate and a wide gate. The way of Jesus, the way of the cross, is the narrow gate. The wide and easy way, quoting Anglican scholar John Stott, the wide way, the easy way, is the way of pluralism and permissiveness.

It's the way of no one can tell me how to live. I am my own authority. It's the way of many roads lead to God. It's the wide way.

[2 : 38] It's the appealing way. It's the nice way. It's the PR-friendly way. Okay, section two, the bit we're focusing on today, our false prophets will come, and they will tell you what you want to hear, and they'll try and nudge you into the wide way.

And the last section, 21 to 23, those on that way will face Jesus one day, and they'll say, hey, didn't we do cool religious stuff, though? Weren't we kind of Christians? Weren't there religious aspects to our life?

Weren't we nice? And Jesus will say, depart from me. All right, so I'll say this one more time. Jesus is not messing around here. So when Christ says, beware of false prophets, he is not saying, hey, guys, watch out for these false prophet guys, because, you know, they're a bit different.

And if they get in the church, you know, it makes things a bit awkward, and I have to make a few phone calls and sort it out, and it's kind of a bit messy.

No, it's not like that. It's beware of false prophets, because there is so much at stake here. Salvation is at stake here. And we know it's serious business because of the severity of the image that Christ uses right at the start in verse 15.

[4 : 02] They are ravenous wolves in sheep's clothing. They're wolves amongst sheep. And I think the idea of wolves amongst sheep is a bit cliché now, and so I think the picture is kind of lost on a bit, but it's supposed to be horrific.

In New Zealand, from New Zealand, we love lamb, right? We have 40 million sheep in New Zealand. And we have only 4 million people, 40 million sheep.

And, I mean, they're just, they're everywhere. Seriously, they're just, open your car door in the morning, a couple of sheep fall out. Like, they're just there like, they are everywhere. And we love our little lambs in New Zealand. We love our sheepies. I miss seeing sheep everywhere. Now, we don't have wolves in New Zealand, but we do have dogs.

We have a few wild dogs, a lot of family dogs, and those dogs do get loose, and they wander into farmer's fields. And it is perfectly legal in New Zealand to shoot the dogs.

[4 : 59] You see a dog on a farmer's field, the farmer will shoot the dog. Like a friendly, little, waggy-tailed Labrador will get shot and killed. I know it sounds very mean, right?

But it's because dogs kill sheep. A dog will tear apart a little lamb. It is a nasty, nasty business. It'll tear its body apart. And that's just a dog.

That's a friendly family dog will do that. Imagine what, like a wolf would do to a flock of sheep. So using this picture, right? Ravenous wolves amongst sheep.

Jesus wants you to be in no doubt that false prophets can do profound damage to the people of God. It's a serious business here. Okay, still working on this first verse here.

There are some assumptions here, right? When he says, beware of false prophets. There's a couple of assumptions here, and let's look at those. Okay, the first assumption is this. They exist.

[5 : 59] False prophets actually exist. Because you might be sitting there thinking, oh, it's not many around now. Just different kind of folks. You know, it's not a drama.

No, there are false prophets around. There was false prophets back in the days. Now, a prophet back in the days was somebody that spoke for God, and they could say things like, God says this, or they could denounce evil, which is a pretty popular one.

And seeing the respect that people had for them, it makes sense that folks would claim to have this ability for speaking on behalf of God, and just kind of fake it, right? A Greek word for false is pseudo.

This is just for your interest. It means lie. Now, we don't know if Jesus had any particular false prophets in mind when he was preaching, but obviously there are plenty of them about. It even says in verse 15 here, the false prophets, they come to you.

So you didn't even have to go out hunting for them. They were just kind of like turning up at your church and at your door, right? And it wasn't just an issue back then. If you've studied church history, you realize that church history can be characterized as the history of church battling heresy, battling false prophets.

[7 : 10] And now moving forward, Jesus says as the gospel spreads, there'll be more false prophets. So it was a problem back in the days. It's been a problem for 2,000 years. It's gonna be a problem heading into the future.

So the first assumption, be under no illusion. False prophets exist. And remember they wear sheep's clothing. What does that mean? It means they pretend to be Christians, but preach something else.

Sheep's clothing today could mean that they have great Christian credentials. They could have masters in theology. They could have a PhD. They could wear a dog collar. They could wear a bishop's shirt.

They could be the winsome lecturer you have at university. And here's the thing about the falsity, the thing that's preached, the lies, the pseudo. It will likely be very attractive to you.

And I say that for two reasons. Firstly, they'll tell you what you want to hear. Things like, your sin isn't so bad. The second reason it's attractive is more of a sociological thing.

[8 : 09] And it's this. We live in a cultural climate which is, I think, suspicious of institutional anything. So anything or anyone that sets themselves up as being opposed to a big institution, a big mainstream institution, is seen as kind of cool.

You know, it's counter-cultural. The Occupy Wall Street movement, right, was huge. And I am in no doubt that there are core members of that movement that felt very strongly about the unequal distribution of wealth.

But I'm convinced that there was a whole lot of people jumped on that because it's just, you know, because it's cool. It's cool to be opposed to something big. You know, oh, Wall Street and your things you do wrong.

Ah! Loud noises! How does this relate to us today? Well, heresy is, which in previous generations could have been regarded as dangerous, obscure ideas.

Today, I think people can often view them as a bit sexy. Heresy has become kind of sexy. Heresies are kind of like brave and bold statements of religious freedom, right?

[9 : 33] They're things not to be avoided anymore. They're things which we, which people can value. Alistair McGrath, who's another great Anglican scholar, says that heresies are, well, he's characterizing how some people can view them.

Heresies are the plucky losers in past battles against orthodoxy. They're ideas which were defeated by the big, mean institutional church. When I say orthodoxy, I'm talking about mainstream historic Christian faith.

Let me give you a personal example, okay? I have a friend of mine who I might have talked about it before. He's been quite entrenched by this sort of obscure philosopher and it's really muddied his theology and his faith.

He's kind of a Facebook preacher and so he pages and pages each day of quotes and contents and ideas and stuff and the big enemy in his mind if you read all of his stuff is mainstream evangelical Christianity.

His posts are often very oppositional, right? So his narrative tends to be, oh, the church is so lame. Here's what Jesus was really saying in some sort of obscure passage, right?

[10 : 39] And so he posts these things like erotic images of Jesus or these scandalous things like God is incomplete. That was his most recent thing he wrote up there and it's kind of like, yeah, in your face, you know, big church and I challenged him once and I said, mate, you've just gone a bit off the rails here, mate.

You've gone a bit wacky, you know and he said, oh yeah, no, definitely, definitely, I'm a heretic and he just, he just, he wore that as a badge of honour because for him it represented like, you know, free thinking intellectualism or something as opposed to stodgy old orthodoxy.

and I think part of this, part of the issue here is that false prophets are popular and exist around the edges of evangelicalism because they feed into this post-modern suspicion that orthodoxy is simply the heresy that won back in the days.

You know, orthodoxy is the idea that got the most votes you know, the Council of Nicaea in 325. I mean, that's the narrative that the Da Vinci Code will try and tell you, right?

This revisionist view of church history which says that they kind of voted on whether Jesus was God and that Jesus is God had a slim victory. I mean, you must remember if you ever sort of start to feel a bit Da Vinci Code-ish in your theology, you remember it's fiction, right?

[12 : 08] Just remind yourself, this is a book of fiction which doesn't bear a lot of relevance or doesn't bear a lot of historical... It's not right. Their view of history is incorrect.

Anyway, that was quite a large rant, wasn't it? I'm sorry about that. Our cultural climate in summary is just attracted to the subversive. And so if you feel like theologically, if you feel like yourself drifting a little bit and you start being quite enamored by ideas which are a little bit left of what the Bible teaches about what the creeds teaches, do you start to feel that a little bit?

Can I just ask you to do this? Just kind of center yourself for a moment and be really honest with yourself and ask yourself, am I thinking this because this is what the Bible teaches or am I attracted to this because it just makes me feel cool to be different?

Okay, the other reason I said that false prophets are a problem today is because the message is appealing.

They'll tell you what you want to hear. So there's a cultural attraction and there's this vanity, like I'm hearing stuff I like. It makes me feel better about myself.

[13 : 32] You know, in the historic heresies tend to repeat themselves, things like Gnosticism, which we won't get into. But they tend to make Christianity, often make Christianity primarily about self-discovery as opposed to redemption.

Because self-discovery Christianity sounds a bit more appealing. You know, the idea that you're discovering your true identity and being all you can be and your best life now and ten steps to be successful and a winner and prosperous and all that.

it's much more appealing than a religion, a faith that says, you know, you are worse than you think you are and you need to be rescued, which is what the Christian faith says. All right, I'm going to stop because I'll just keep ranting on that.

All right, so the assumptions, still on verse 15, so the assumptions, looking at the time, so the assumptions, there are false prophets out there, false prophets here, probably, and their teaching

can be attractive.

The next assumption is that if there's false teaching, there must be truthful teaching, there must be a truth, there must be an objective standard of truth by which false prophets can be measured.

[14:43] The idea of false makes no sense unless there's a truth and there's a million places in the Bible to go to talk about truth but let me take you to something which is quite relevant to our passage we're looking at.

It's Jeremiah 23 and it contrasts two types of prophets here. Jeremiah 23, 16 to 17. Listen to this, it's great. Thus says the Lord of hosts, do not listen to the words of prophets who prophesy to you filling you with vain hopes.

They speak visions of their own minds not from the mouth of the Lord. So it's their own stuff, not God's stuff but here's the money line here.

They say continually to those who despise the word of the Lord, it shall be well with you and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart they say, no disaster shall come upon you.

It's going to be fine. So do you see what the false prophets are saying that's quite attractive, right? To people who are on a journey away from God they're saying it shall be well with you, no disasters shall come upon you, you're okay, I'm okay, let's be nice to each other.

[15:56] Now everyone wants to hear that, don't they? The problem is it is a denial of God's judgment and it's one of Satan's great lies. You think that it's one of his first big lies to Adam and Eve when Eve is tempted by the forbidden fruit and Satan says just go eat some of that and she goes oh I'm not really loud, God said I shouldn't, something bad will happen and Satan says to her surely you will not die, surely not.

God's not like that. Anytime you hear teaching that denies God's judgment you are listening to a heretic.

The passage goes on and tells these prophets what they should have been doing, verse 18. For who among them has stood in the counsel of the Lord to see and hear his word? This is what they should have been doing, they should have been seeking God, they should have been speaking God's words.

Now this side of Jesus this is pre the incarnation, right? This side of Jesus we have this amazing gift in God's word which is God speaking to us and we work really hard here at St. John's and I know other churches do but we work really hard at preaching expositively.

This is one of the ways we try and protect ourselves from being heretical is that we tend to go through books of the Bible. I try and make my main points from the text.

[17:26] So listen with critical ears when I'm preaching and when you hear anyone preach up here and ask yourself is this idea from God's word? If it's not, it might be nonsense.

It might not be but it might be nonsense. Getting back to the point here, Jesus assumes a truth from which we can diverge.

Jesus is no syncretist. He doesn't believe that contradictory ideas are simply complementary realities in terms of the same truth.

Okay, so where are we? We're getting close to the end here. So, there are false prophets that lead you to the wide, the easy path which leads to destruction. There is a truth which has been revealed to us.

Hold on to that. And the rest of the passage is mostly how to tell the good guys from the bad guys. Verses 16 to 20. Jesus uses the metaphor of good and bad fruit and it's pretty, you know, I think it's pretty clear.

[18:25] The gist is pretty clear. You recognize these false prophets by their fruit, verse 16. Verse 17, so every healthy trees bear good fruit but the diseased trees bear bad fruit. So they can be identified by the way they live.

So the life of a prophet, if it doesn't measure up to what they are speaking, it's an indicator that they might be a false prophet or a false teacher. Like a tree without fruit can look like, like I can't tell trees without fruit apart really, like see a plum tree and an apple tree.

They can, they can, the apple tree can go, yeah, yeah, I'm totally a plum tree, right? I'm totally, totally a plum tree. No drama, nothing to see here. Come spring or summer when they start, the fruit starts coming out, there is no way for that tree to pretend it's a plum tree when the apples start appearing.

There is no way for a heretic to disguise who they are, ultimately. So the first kind of fruit that reveals themselves, the way they reveal themselves, the first kind of fruit we're talking about here is probably character, I think, and Paul picks up on this later on when he talks about the fruits of the spirit, meekness, humility, kindness, patience, self-control, etc.

If these things are missing in a teacher, it can be an indicator that they're a bit off, that they're a bit dodgy. The other kind of fruit, I think, is the teaching itself.

[19 : 53] I say that because that's what Jesus says in Matthew 12, 33, 37. He uses the example of fruit as relating to the teaching of people.

Let me read Matthew 12, 33, 37. Either make the tree good fruit and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad. For the tree is known by its fruit.

You brood of vipers, how can you speak good when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of the good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of evil treasure brings forth evil.

I tell you, on the day of judgment, people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you'll be justified, and by your words you'll be condemned. So, two fruits.

How they live, what they teach, is a pretty good indicator as to whether you're dealing with somebody that's a bit off or not theologically. Okay, I'm going to wrap up. Folks, let me tell you what you're all thinking.

[20 : 56] This is not a particularly encouraging teaching. I know that. But I think it's kind of ironic, right? You know, we get given a text, and I have to preach what the text says.

That protects me from preaching heretically, I think. I try and teach what the Bible says, what the has been, how that text has been interpreted historically.

It protects us from heresy, in most cases. This has not been an encouraging text, but it is God's word, and it is trying to tell us something, trying to tell us something really important, and what it's trying to tell us is this.

It's a solemn reminder that false teachers exist. They exist outside the church. They are also in the church. It also gives us tips on how to spot them. But you should know that this is a not unique teaching from Jesus.

This is not him going off in some weird spiral and sort of going, oh, by the way, false teachers, bad, you know, and then on to other stuff. If you read through the epistles, which are like the little letters after the gospels, it would be, it's striking how much attention is paid to false teaching.

[22 : 05] And I find that very interesting considering you'd think that being killed for your faith would be the big presenting issue for the early church. You'd think they'd be writing a lot about that.

Here's how you spot the guy who comes to your door who wants to kill you. You know, here's my tips on that. As opposed to, here's how to spot the guy that's doing the false teaching.

It would seem that the disciples, the writers of the New Testament, saw the big threat to the church was heresy.

Just one example. That was our first reading tonight. Let me remind you of the last couple of verses. Paul's final words to the church in Ephesus. I know that after my departure, fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.

And from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore, be alert. Okay, what's the action points?

[23 : 13] Here we go. Beware of false teachers. Beware of people, speakers, teachers, professors, lecturers, anyone that tries to widen the gap to God.

Anyone who tries to lull you into a false sense of security with the message that God is love, so it doesn't matter what you believe or how you behave, as an example of a popular heresy.

This is not the counsel of God. This is not the message of the Bible. This is the soothing message of the world. And it is death. So beware of false prophets, folks. And hang on to God's truth.

Amen.