

**St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)**  
**Trinity 8 – July 21, 2024**  
**Matthew 7:15-23 – Beware of False Prophets**  
**Rev Peter Wagner**

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Beware of false prophets. This is the earnest message of Jesus for you today.

The world is full of false prophets, false preachers of false gospels and Messiahs. For example, the false prophets of the gospel of activism, who preach their false Messiah: you yourself. They say, “You can change the world. You can take your future into your own hands, away from the oppressive establishment, from those who only care about themselves, not you.”

Then there are the false prophets of the gospel of individualism, who preach their false Messiah: you yourself. They say, “You can be whoever you want. You can accomplish whatever you set your mind to. You can choose your own good, your own identity, even your own gender. Whatever you choose is good. And if anyone criticizes your choice, they are doing violence to you.”

Then there are the false prophets of the gospel of materialism, who preach their false Messiah: you yourself. They say, “You can find success and enjoyment by applying yourself to diligent study, to a good career, smart investments, patience, and hard work. And you can protect what you earn fair and square by voting for the right people, people who will lower your taxes and safeguard you from those who envy your success.” It’s all about you.

We could go on, to the false prophets of secularism, relativism, pluralism, or anything else. Under different names and ideologies, everyone wants you to worship the great false Messiah, the one preached by all the false prophets from the beginning of time until today: you yourself.

For ultimately, there is only one great idol and one false god: you yourself. Adam and Eve were deceived by the serpent, but Satan was merely a false prophet to them, preaching lies. He didn’t need to be their Messiah. Satan only said, “Believe in yourself, that you can obtain knowledge of good and evil by your own action. If you take matters into your own hands,” said Satan to Adam and Eve, “You can become like God.” You yourself.

Not only are the false prophets of the world clamoring outside the church, inviting you to worship at the altar of yourself; the false prophets within the church are doing the same.

Inside the church, we hear the false gospel of unionism. “Look at all the false prophets surrounding us!” these preachers say, “The last thing we need in the church is internal division. All these denominations and their petty disagreements, fixated on minor points of doctrine, they’re destroying the church, at a time when we most need to present a united front.” So they tell us, “You can save the church. You can overlook denominational differences, you can help find what we all have in common, what’s really important. And you can bring more people into the church by conforming your worship and music and preaching to whatever makes newcomers more comfortable.”

As appealing as this advice may sound, it’s only another false gospel and false Messiah: you yourself. Salvation doesn’t lie in ourselves and our own efforts to improve the church. Salvation lies in faithfulness to Christ and his word. There’s only way to stand against the attacks of the world: standing firmly in the one true prophet, the true Messiah, and every word he taught.

May we never preach anything of our own. May we always preach Christ crucified, and him alone. For there is salvation in no one else, but in the name of Jesus. Our only hope is in his blood, his saving death, the whole counsel of God in everything he spoke.

So beware of any prophet who preaches salvation in yourself. Pay attention to Jesus only, and the true prophets he sends in his name. True prophets like Jeremiah, who boldly stood against the false prophets of his day. And true prophets like the apostle Paul, who preached the pure word of truth. Who reminded the Ephesian elders, “I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.” The whole counsel of God, every detail, not hiding anything. “So pay careful attention to yourselves,” Paul preached, “And to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” Pay careful attention, to every detail. Focus on the truth, in all its fullness. Pay attention, because God paid attention to you. Though you were lost in sin, your God paid for you and obtained you as his church with his own blood.

So Paul continues, “For 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.” Twisted things, like saying you must add your own good works – however small and insignificant – you must add your own good works to the saving works and merit of Jesus. That’s what the Roman Catholics teach, but it’s a false gospel of you yourself: You need to add something to God’s grace. And other twisted things, like saying baptism and the Lord’s Supper are mere symbols of God’s grace at best, or even worse, signs of your commitment to God. That’s what most protestant churches teach, but again it’s a false gospel of you yourself: You need to offer yourself in these sacraments to God, they’re not means of grace by which Jesus applies his forgiveness to you.

So beware of any false doctrine, anything that pulls you away from Christ himself back to you yourself. Pay attention to yourselves and what you preach, says Paul to all pastors. And pay attention to the whole flock, because God loved his flock so much that he purchased it with his own blood. And he’s entrusted his flock to you pastors not for your own sake, not so you can save them, not so you can win praise and honor for yourself, but so he can save them by his blood and his word, making known his great power in your weakness.

Jesus himself says the same. “Beware of false prophets,” he says, “Prophets who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits.” Recognize them by their fruits. Recognize good preachers by their good fruits, bad preachers by their bad fruits. That doesn’t mean you should look at their deeds, good or bad. If you look at their deeds, you’ll find bad in them all. Even the greatest prophets gladly admit their sin. No, their fruits are not external righteousness. What Jesus is talking about is the fruits of their preaching. Does this prophet produce hearers who confess the truth about God? Do people respond to him by bearing fruit of repentance and believing the true gospel of Christ? Then he’s a true prophet. Otherwise, he’s false. You will know them by their fruits.

So pay attention to the fruits of the preachers you listen to. Test where their words are leading. Do they point you to Jesus and everything he taught? Or do they sift through his words, dividing them what’s most important, what really matters, and less important optional doctrines you can safely set aside?

There’s no such thing as doctrines, plural. There’s only one single whole doctrine. It all fits beautifully together, it cannot be divided. The one truth of everything Jesus taught, one faith, one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one baptism, one God and Father of all.

So seek prophets who point you to the fullness of the one true doctrine and the one true Messiah: Jesus himself. Live by every word that comes from his mouth, the mouth of God. Let him build you up, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself the cornerstone.

Jesus alone is the true prophet. His word is the burning fire, the hammer that breaks the rock in pieces. He is the healthy tree who alone bears good fruit. Those who are joined to his branches will bear good fruit, never to be cut down and thrown into the fire. For he is the true Word, the triumphant Word of the Lord who alone stands forever.

Listen to his voice, the voice of the living God. His word overcomes all lies, all false prophets, it overcomes the world. All who love the truth take refuge in him. As he said to Pontius Pilate, “For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world – to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.”

So as we endure the attacks of this world, surrounded by false prophets, let us pray for the true words of Jesus. Grant us, O Lord, your word. And send us your Holy Spirit, that we may always do and think and say the things that are good and right. Keep us in your truth. Lead us out of ourselves, into the true Messiah, Jesus Christ. Give us humble obedience to Scripture, praying for his mercy, that he would show us our blindness and our errors. Send us true preachers of the Gospel, faithful prophets to guide us into the truth and correct whatever is lacking. Through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, we pray, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.