

“Two Voices”

Introduction: As we began to do last week, we are looking at how Jesus brings his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount to a close by putting before his listeners a number of alternative choices. Last week we considered two paths, next week we'll examine two foundations, and today we'll think about two voices. In each of these pairs Jesus describes for us the two basic choices we have in life – to follow him, or not to follow him. To seek, with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, to put what he has taught into practice, living as citizens of the kingdom of God, or to ignore what he has taught and continue to live as a citizen of the kingdom of this world. As we saw last week, one alternative leads to life – to prospering, and the other to destruction – to perishing.

The two voices of which Jesus speaks are represented by false prophets, and, by implication, true prophets. One voice speaks for God, the other voice claims to speak for God but actually twists who God is and how God would have his people live. Let's hear how a true prophet, Jeremiah, describes the problem, and then how Jesus both warns and instructs his followers. [READ]

I. Warnings

A. As we think about these two voices, let's begin by making two assumptions. First, false prophets existed. In his discussion of this text, John Stott makes a very simple but profound and important observation in this regard. He says, “In telling people to beware of false prophets, Jesus obviously assumed there were such.” It makes no sense, Stott continues, to put on your garden gate a sign “Beware of the Dog,” if all you have are a couple of cats!

B. A prophet is someone who speaks for God. A false prophet is one who claims to speak for God but falsifies his word for their own benefit. We meet them throughout both the OT and NT. As Jeremiah describes it, false prophets speak from their own minds. They have not stood in the council of the LORD to listen for his word in order to pass on his truth. As a result, they have not given their listeners an opportunity to turn from their evil ways, and instead, have filled them with false hope. They say: “Your sin means nothing; God does not really care. Just keep on walking down that broad path (as we considered last week) living however you like.”

C. A second assumption in the warning that Jesus makes here is that there is such a thing as an objective standard of truth from which a false prophet deviates. The apostle Paul warns the leaders of the church in Ephesus of this as he speaks to them for what he knows will be the last time. He says:

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw disciples after them. So be on your guard!
(Acts 20:28-31)

A couple of things to notice here.

1. The enemies of the flock – those who distort the truth – are described as savage wolves, just as Jesus had described them: ferocious wolves. Their intent is to destroy the flock.

2. Not only that, their desire is to amass followers of their own. There is an arrogance here that can come with a leader who puts him or herself in the place where only Jesus belongs, be it in a cult, a megachurch, or a little church.

3. These wolves are not only dangerous, but they are also deceptive. As Jesus pictures them, they can even look like sheep outwardly, but they really are just dressing up in sheep's clothing. "From your own number," Paul warns these leaders. And he warns the church in Corinth that these false folk are "masquerade as servants of righteousness" (2 Cor. 11:15).

So we see that a church can face danger not only from eternal sources, but also from within. The enemy desires to knock the church off course, and will use any means possible. How, then, can we recognize these ferocious but often hidden wolves and their desire to draw us away from Jesus? Jesus gives us a couple of tests to use.

II. Instruction

A. In doing so he shifts the metaphor from a wolf to a tree and its fruit. For, while a wolf can disguise itself, a tree cannot! As grapes don't come from thornbushes, nor figs from thistles, neither does good fruit come from a false prophet. "By their fruit you will recognize them," Jesus says. Fruit, in the prophet, or teacher's own life, is the first test. Importantly, as Jesus goes on, this fruit does not consist of simply a verbal profession of faith, "Lord, Lord." Nor does it consist of apparent displays of spiritual power, like driving out demons or performing miracles. There is something deeper, a change of character, that Jesus calls for in each of us, as the Sermon on the Mount has revealed. And that something is living in obedience to God's will. If there are those who are calling others to live in such a holy way, but they are not doing so themselves, watch out, Jesus warns. If that person makes no attempt to love his or her neighbor, extend mercy to those in need, be patient with those who are struggling, exercises kindness behind closed doors at home, that person is not worth listening to.

B. A second, and related test, is to see if there is any fruit in the person's ministry. Is he or she leading people to Jesus, or away from him? Is he compromising the historic doctrines of the faith, especially as they have to do with the person and nature of Jesus? Is he encouraging his listeners not to worry about making their way down the narrow path, but to go ahead and enjoy the broad path (vv. 13-14)? Are those who are following him exhibiting faith, hope, and love, or something less than? If no fruit can be found in the person's ministry, watch out, warns Jesus.

C. Importantly, these fruit tests don't give us a license to go "heresy hunting!" But, they do remind us that there are false teachers in the church and that we are to be on our guard. Truth matters. They give us a way to assess who it is we're listening to and whether we're hearing God's voice, or a voice that intends to draw us away from Him.

Back to the metaphor of the wolf. When you think about it, wolves are natural enemies of sheep, hence, a good shepherd, as Jesus would later teach, was always on the look-out for wolves in order to protect his sheep, whereas the hired hand would abandon them at the sighting of a wolf, leaving it to scatter and even destroy the flock. May we shepherd one another well, keeping an eye out for what and who we are listening to, that we may stay on the path that leads to life.