**BEWARE OF FALSE PROPHETS**

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"Wolves in sheep's clothing," Christ called them. Will you be misled by a soft and fleecy exterior? Here is help from God's Word to see through the disguise.

   God reserves His strongest condemnation for those who claim to be speaking for Him, but are actually leading people away from the true God.   
   "Behold, I am against the prophets, saith the Lord, that use their tongues, and say, He saith. Behold, I am against them that prophesy false dreams... and cause my people to err by their lies, and by their lightness; yet I sent them not, nor commanded them: therefore they shall not profit this people at all... for ye have perverted the words of the living God, of the Lord of hosts, our God.   
   "Therefore, behold, I, even I, will utterly forget you, and will forsake you, and the city that I gave you and your fathers, and cast you out of my presence; And I will bring an everlasting reproach upon you, and a perpetual shame, which shall not be forgotten" ([Jer. 23:25-40](http://biblia.com/bible/kjv1900/Jer.%2023.25-40)).

**Christ's warning**

   Throughout His ministry, Jesus Christ gave repeated warnings to avoid false teachers. In the Sermon on the Mount He cautioned:   
   "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. You shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them" ([Matt. 7:15-20](http://biblia.com/bible/kjv1900/Matt.%207.15-20)).   
   Christ said we should look at the fruits. What fruits should we examine? Obviously not those in which a wool-covered wolf could most easily pass himself off as a sheep. We should expect a false prophet to attempt, with all his heart, to look like a real one, or what he thinks is a real one. As Paul wrote:   
   "For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers [Did you know Satan has ministers?] also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works" ([II Cor. 11:13-15](http://biblia.com/bible/kjv1900/II%20Cor.%2011.13-15)).   
   We should expect a warm and ready smile. We can be confident of an outward expression of accommodation at least at first. We should also expect humility — lots of humility.   
   So those "fruits" are untrustworthy. What next?   
   Perhaps we should consider "good works" such as missionaries, converts, hospitals, drug clinics or free meals for vagabonds and vagrants?   
   Surely if they preach in the name of Christ, that is good fruit, isn't it? No, not necessarily, according to Jesus Christ. Right after telling us to beware of false prophets and to look at their fruits, He continued the Sermon on the Mount by saying, "Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven" ([Matt. 7:21](http://biblia.com/bible/kjv1900/Matt.%207.21)).   
   Referring to Christ as the Lord is not conclusive proof of good fruit. Doing what God says is.   
   "Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? And in thy name cast out devils? And in thy name done many wonderful works? [preaching, hospitals, missionaries] And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you."   
   Startling as it may seem, many people who have used Christ's name, who have accomplished many beneficial works, often at great sacrifice to themselves, were never recognized by Him as His servants. They used that name falsely! He continued, "depart from me, ye that work iniquity" (verses 22-23). Instead of doing the will of the Father, they did iniquity.

**What is iniquity?**

   The word iniquity in [Matthew 7:23](http://biblia.com/bible/kjv1900/Matthew%207.23) was translated from the Greek word anomia — literally against law or lawlessness. Christ said that He never knew and would send away those that work lawlessness.   
   False prophets find it troublesome to define sin. If forced to do so, they usually try to express sin as vaguely and unspecifically as possible. They reason that there is no point in losing followers by condemning what their congregations enjoy doing or bluntly refuse to change. Most will even refuse to consider the Bible definition in [I John 3:4](http://biblia.com/bible/kjv1900/I%20John%203.4), "Sin is the transgression of the law." Leader and layman alike want nothing to do with God's law. Under any circumstances. Period.   
   "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets," the founder of Christianity said. Yet most people that come in His name, claiming He is Christ, think exactly that. He continues, "I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot [not one little bit], will pass from the law until all is accomplished [everyone is keeping it].   
   "Whoever then relaxes [let alone breaks] one of the least of these commandments and teaches men [to do] so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven" ([Matt. 5:17-19](http://biblia.com/bible/kjv1900/Matt.%205.17-19), Revised Standard Version).   
   God's law expresses God's will. It shows the way He wants us to go. He does not want His law relaxed, diluted or slackened. He wants it kept fully, from the heart ([Rom. 6:17-18](http://biblia.com/bible/kjv1900/Rom.%206.17-18)).   
   In spite of Christ's words, many will claim that they are "free from the law" or "the law is done away." The Ten Commandments, to some, need not be kept. If that be true, it would mean the "faithful" are free to have another god before God the Father. They may take His name in vain, crush His holy Sabbath underfoot, steal, lie, commit adultery and covet until they turn bright green — all without guilt or sin. No wonder Christ will tell them "depart"!   
   Yet that is the ungodly doctrine many have been taught.   
   Laymen are not without some blame. "This is a rebellious people, lying children, children that will not hear the law of the Lord: which say to the seers, See not; and to the prophets, Prophesy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophesy deceits" ([Isa. 30:9-10](http://biblia.com/bible/kjv1900/Isa.%2030.9-10)). For pastors of godless flocks, it is easier to change the message than the members. Many non biblical observances are now called "Christian" for that precise reason.   
   Yet the main responsibility God lays at the door of the false prophets.   
   "There is a conspiracy of her [the nation's] prophets in the midst thereof, like a roaring lion ravening the prey; they have devoured souls; they have taken the treasure and precious things; they have made her many widows in -the midst thereof.   
   "Her priests have violated my law, and have profaned mine holy things: they have put no difference between the holy and the profane [God has set some days as Holy Days]; also, the first tenth of all income is holy to Him [[Lev. 27:30](http://biblia.com/bible/kjv1900/Lev.%2027.30)], neither have they shewed difference between the unclean and the clean [God did not intend all animals for food] and have hid their eyes from my sabbaths [God says the seventh day — why does anyone attempt to keep the first?] and I am profaned among them" ([Ezek. 22:25-26](http://biblia.com/bible/kjv1900/Ezek.%2022.25-26)).

**Legalistic?**

   Occasionally, a minister who upholds the law is accused of being legalistic. Every minister should be known for godly mercy. But mercy does not mean relaxing the law of God. It means God granting forgiveness for the repentant, those who acknowledge their sins and strive to turn from them.   
   On the other hand, God denounces the false prophets for not showing the right, but unpopular way. "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 should have turned them from their evil ways and from the evil of their doings" ([Jer. 23:2](http://biblia.com/bible/kjv1900/Jer.%2023.2) [1-22](http://biblia.com/bible/kjv1900/Jer%2023.1-22)).   
   When God created mankind, He knew we would need a lot of forgiving. That is why Christ was "slain from the foundation of the world" ([Rev. 13:8](http://biblia.com/bible/kjv1900/Rev.%2013.8)). Christ's blood covers our sins, not when We wallow in sin (knowingly continue to break God's law), but when we forsake sin, ask His free gift of forgiveness and begin to obey Him.   
   False prophets don't give the straight story about sin. They give their own ideas about what sin is. A true minister knows that God defines sin, not man. And the law of God is that definition ([Rom. 3:20](http://biblia.com/bible/kjv1900/Rom.%203.20)).

**Inside the Church**

   Not all false prophets come from outside the Church. Some were formerly faithful servants of God, but swerved from the "straight and narrow" path.   
   The apostle Paul called the ministers of Ephesus together during his last visit to that ancient city. He knew that false prophets would soon descend upon the flock of God. So he alerted the leaders to the dangers that both pastors and flock would face.   
   "Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you [overseers], to care for [feed] the church of God which he obtained with the blood of his own Son. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock." These wolves would mostly come from outside the Church.   
   But worse, "and from among your own selves will arise men speaking perverse things [distorted doctrine] to draw away the disciples after them" ([Acts 20:28-30](http://biblia.com/bible/kjv1900/Acts%2020.28-30), RSV).   
   Faithful pastors protect the flock from those who would spoil them. But some of those called and ordained in God's true Church would covet Christ's sheep. So they would turn from the teachings and the teachers they had originally acknowledged: Then set up their own government, with themselves at the top. That is treason, one of the most vicious attacks the flock of God must endure.   
   A faithful minister would always submit to those leaders whom Christ chose, trained and put in authority over His Church. Christ's words are especially clear. "A person who speaks on his authority is trying to gain glory for himself. But he who wants glory for the one who sent [commissioned] him is honest, and there is nothing false in him" ([John 7:18](http://biblia.com/bible/kjv1900/John%207.18), Good News Bible).   
   Christ faithfully honored, obeyed and glorified the Father who sent Him. The apostles of Jesus Christ, whom He sent into all parts of the world, responded to Him in the same spirit of honor and respect. They in turn were to ordain other men to various Church offices under themselves to see to the spiritual needs of the people as God added to the Church.   
   Except for Judas, all the apostles remained faithful to the One who sent them. But that was not true of some of the, individuals whom the apostles ordained and sent. Paul said some would turn from serving the needs of Christ's flock under the government of God to serving their own interests instead.

**Peter's warning**

   Peter alerted the Church of the same danger. "But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in [to the Church] damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them [they were converted], and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious ways: by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of. And through covetousness shall they with feigned words [in sheep's clothing] make merchandise of you: whose judgment now of a long time lingereth not, and their damnation slumbereth not" ([II Pet. 2:1-3](http://biblia.com/bible/kjv1900/II%20Pet.%202.1-3)).   
   Everyone can make a mistake. But usually, true prophets become false prophet:; to receive for themselves the respect and contributions due to God's true representative. Wolves wear sheepskins to eat mutton. The prophet motive becomes the profit motive.

**Why a following?**

   Peter said many would follow the wrong way. Why do false prophets have a following?   
   First, God says that the entire world is deceived ([Rev. 12:9](http://biblia.com/bible/kjv1900/Rev.%2012.9)). The inhabitants of the earth are separated from God and don't know it. They are cut off from His law, from His mercy and from His Spirit. God will make all of those freely available to every human who ever lived. But not at this time. Only a few are called now. The rest are blinded to God's ways.   
   Many simply inherit their religion from their parents. They never question it deeply, just accept it as they do their name and nationality.   
   But a more basic reason is that most people prefer looking good to doing good. After telling Isaiah to "Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins," God complains of their love of religiosity. "Yet they seek me daily, and delight to know my ways, as a nation that did righteousness, and forsook not the ordinance of their God: they ask of me the ordinance of justice; they take delight in approaching to God" ([Isa. 58:1-2](http://biblia.com/bible/kjv1900/Isa.%2058.1-2)).   
   Many people want a religion that has all the trappings of godliness but few of the constraints. Choirs and candles are pleasant. Sabbaths and tithes are not. Preachers that are innocuous are tolerated. Those who expect their congregations to conform to the Word of God will be asked to go.   
   False prophets have followers because many people want a religion more than they want God. You can choose from hundreds of different types of "Christianity." Some are very sober. Others are actually wild. Some are strict, others lenient. You can be soothed or shouted at, but you won't be "lost" if you attend regularly.   
   Or pick from the hundreds that never mention the name Jesus Christ. False prophets don't need to use His name. Marx and Mao didn't.   
   Converted members of the true Church can fall into the same trap. Paul wrote Timothy: "Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables" ([II Tim. 4:2-4](http://biblia.com/bible/kjv1900/II%20Tim.%204.2-4)).   
   False prophets respond to the itching ears of wayward sheep. The wolves entice them away from life toward death.   
   Constantly, in Paul's writings, he records how often he had to contend with false prophets and false brethren. He wrote Timothy how to recognize them quickly.   
   "Anyone who teaches novelties and refuses to fall in with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the doctrine that tallies with godliness, is a conceited, ignorant creature with a morbid passion for controversy and argument which leads only to envy, dissension, insults, insinuations and constant friction between people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the Truth. They imagine religion is a paying concern" ([I Tim. 6:3-5](http://biblia.com/bible/kjv1900/I%20Tim.%206.3-5), James Moffatt translation).

**Why does God permit false prophets?**

   Why does God allow wolves to have access to His flock? Why doesn't He expose them before they do any harm? He has His reasons!   
   The first and most basic scripture about false prophets explains why. "If there arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and giveth thee a sign or a wonder, And the sign or the wonder come to pass, whereof he spake unto thee, saying, Let us go after other gods, which thou hast not known, and let us serve them; Thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams: for the Lord your God proveth you, to know whether ye love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul" ([Deut. 13:1-3](http://biblia.com/bible/kjv1900/Deut.%2013.1-3)).   
   God wants his flock to stay with Him and the truth no matter what. Those with "itching ears" desiring to turn away from or relax His law or overthrow the stewards He chose will have the opportunity to do so. Maybe, upon seeing the fruit of their own heart, some will acknowledge their wrong way and return to the flock.   
   He is confident the true sheep will not be led astray by false prophets. Referring to Himself as the shepherd of the sheep, He said: "And when he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice. And a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him: for they know not the voice of strangers" ([John 10:4-5](http://biblia.com/bible/kjv1900/John%2010.4-5)).   
   His sheep acknowledge Him. They acknowledge His doctrine. "Jesus answered them, and said, My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me. If any man will do his way, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself" ([John 7:16-17](http://biblia.com/bible/kjv1900/John%207.16-17)).   
   They would respect those whom Christ placed as leaders. "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that receiveth whomsoever I send receiveth me; and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me" ([John 13:20](http://biblia.com/bible/kjv1900/John%2013.20)).   
   Jesus warned, "For false Christs and false prophets shall shew signs and wonders, to seduce, if it were possible, even the elect" ([Mark 13:22](http://biblia.com/bible/kjv1900/Mark%2013.22)).   
   The flock of God is certain to encounter many trials and tests — false prophets and treasonous pastors among them. But the true sheep of His pasture, who seek His leadership and His will, won't be led astray and devoured. Thankfully, it is just not possible. Christ's sheep will see the fake fleece and run!

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