

## *Take Heed & Beware of False Prophets* *Matthew 7:15-20*

Near the beginning of His preaching ministry, in the Sermon on the Mount, our Lord Jesus Christ delivered a warning in **Matthew 7:15-20**, saying, “Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye 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.”

Again near the end of His preaching ministry, in the Olivet Discourse, our Lord Jesus Christ delivered a warning in **Matthew 24:4-5** concerning the church age – “And Jesus answered and said unto them, Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many.” In addition, He further warned in **Matthew 24:11**, “And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many.”

Herein our Lord Jesus Christ warns us concerning the existence of false prophets and false teachers in the world around us. Indeed, he solemnly warns us to take heed and beware of their deceptive and destructive influence upon our lives and ministries. Our Lord recognizes the need for godly teachers to influence our lives in the right way, and He sends such godly teachers forth that they may help us grow in spiritual maturity. Yet our Lord also recognized that our adversary the devil would send forth a multitude of counterfeit prophets and teachers in order to lead us astray from God’s way of truth and righteousness. Thus our Lord delivered this solemn warning for us to take heed and beware. He warns us because of the certain existence of false prophets and false teachers in the world. He warns us because of the sinister purpose of false prophets and teachers to deceive and devour us spiritually. He warns us because of the serious damage that false prophets and teachers might produce in our spiritual walk. He warns us because of the spreading proliferation of false prophets and teachers throughout the church age.

### I. A Consideration of Definition

So then, what are these false prophets? Let us engage a consideration of Biblical definition. Commonly we view a prophet as an individual who can accurately foretell the future. Yet in God’s Word we find that prophets of God did not always foretell of future events. Rather, Scripture more commonly views a prophet as an individual who is directly commissioned and sent by the Lord God to deliver a message from God unto men. Indeed, these are the two central characteristics of godly prophets – They are commissioned by God, and they proclaim the message of God. As such, a true prophet of God is appointed by the Lord God as His very mouthpiece unto men. Thus in 2 Chronicles 36:15-16 the prophets of God are described as “the messengers of God.” A true prophet of God spoke, saying, “Thus saith the Lord.” The message that a true prophet of God delivered was the very Word of God. Indeed, a true prophet of God was responsible to take up and to deliver all and only that message which the Lord God commanded him. He was responsible to proclaim God’s truth faithfully and to exhort the people unto faithfulness thereby. (See Jeremiah 23:28-29) Even so, in application to our day, the word “prophet” may also encompass those who are ordained by the Lord our God to preach and to teach His inspired Word.

In light of this, false prophets are those who claim to be messengers from the Lord God with a message of God's truth, but whose claim is false. They claim to come in the name of the Lord God for the sake of the Lord God and His way of truth; yet they make this claim falsely. They claim to be the servants of the Lord, appointed by Him as preachers and teachers for Him. Yet the Lord God has not sent them. Rather, they are self-appointed preachers and teachers; and as such they are the ministers of Satan. (See **2 Corinthians 11:14-15**) They claim to be messengers of God's truth, preaching and teaching the Word and way of the Lord. Yet they pervert "the words of the living God," and speak forth their own doctrinal lies in the place of God's perfect truth. (See **Jeremiah 23:36**) Thereby they cause people "to trust in a lie." (See Jeremiah 28:15) Although they claim to be preachers and teachers who are sent from God, they are liars; for they actually teach contrary and consent not unto the wholesome words of our Lord or unto the true doctrine of godliness. (See **1 Timothy 6:3**)

In **Jeremiah 14:14** the Lord God described such false prophets – "Then the LORD said unto me, The prophets prophesy lies in my name: I sent them not, neither have I commanded them, neither spake unto them: they prophesy unto you a false vision and divination, and a thing of nought, and the deceit of their heart." Again in **Jeremiah 23:16** the Lord God spoke concerning such false prophets – "Thus saith the LORD of hosts, Hearken not unto the words of the prophets that prophesy unto you: they make you vain: they speak a vision of their own heart, and not out of the mouth of the LORD." In **Jeremiah 23:21** the Lord God declared concerning them, "I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran: I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied;" and in the closing portion of **verse 26**, He added, "Yea, they are prophets of the deceit of their own heart." Even so, in **Jeremiah 23:30** the Lord God indicated that these false prophets stole His words from the people.

In **Ezekiel 13:2** the Lord indicated that such false prophets and teachers prophesy and teach "out of their own hearts." Again in **Ezekiel 13:3** the Lord God cried woe against these false prophets and teachers, calling them "foolish prophets that follow their own spirit." Yet again in **Ezekiel 13:6** the Lord described them, saying, "They have seen vanity and lying divination, saying, The LORD saith: and the LORD hath not sent them: and they have made others to hope that they would confirm the word." Even so, in **Ezekiel 13:10** the Lord God revealed that such false prophets and teachers seduce people with a false peace. So then, **Isaiah 8:20** provides us with a clear definition for false prophets and false teachers, saying, "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them."

## II. The Certainty of Danger

Having considered the Biblical definition of false prophets and teachers, let us now consider the certainty of danger. With the opening line of **Matthew 7:15**, our Lord Jesus Christ warns us to "beware of false prophets," to watch carefully with guarded caution against their possible influence upon our hearts, lives, homes, and ministries. Yet to what extent might we encounter the spiritual danger of false prophets and teachers? Do they represent a minor danger that we might encounter only on a rare occasion? In fact, false prophets and teachers and their false teaching represents a spiritual danger of great significance that has multiplied all around us in this world. Indeed, our Lord Jesus Christ gave warning concerning the church age in **Matthew 24:11**, saying, "And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many." Let us clearly understand that the danger is real, that the danger is certain, and that the danger is great.

Indeed, we must clearly understand that the danger of false teachers and false teaching is a certain danger. Throughout our time upon this earth, we shall certainly encounter false prophets and teachers and their influences of false teaching. In **Acts 20:29-30** the apostle Paul gave warning unto the pastoral leadership for the church at Ephesus, saying, “For I know this, that after my departing shall [not might, but shall] grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.” In **1 Timothy 4:1-2** God’s Word gives warning, saying, “Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron.” Again in **2 Timothy 3:13** God’s Word gives warning, “But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived.” Yet again in **2 Peter 2:1-2** God’s Word gives warning, “But there were false prophets also among the people [in the time of the Old Testament], even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, 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.”

Even so, **1 John 2:18** declares, “Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time.” To this **2 John 1:7** adds, “For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist.” Thus, **1 John 4:1** gives instruction, “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.” In like manner, **Jude 1:3-4** gives the charge, saying, “Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints. For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ.” Even so, **Jude 1:17-19** gives warning, “But, beloved, remember ye the words which were spoken before of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ; how that they told you there should be mockers in the last time, who should walk after their own ungodly lusts. These be they who separate themselves, sensual, having not the Spirit.”

Indeed, the wicked one, our adversary the devil, is certainly motivated to send forth a great multitude of his false ministers to multiply falsehood and thereby to corrupt the hearts and lives of God’s people. Yet it is a sad truth that these false ministers will always find some to follow after their falsehood; for there are many among God’s own people who prefer self-will over God’s will, who prefer appeasement over conviction, and prefer ease over faithfulness. Even so, concerning God’s people in the Old Testament, **Isaiah 30:9-11** gives the report, “That 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, Prophecy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophecy deceits: get you out of the way, turn aside out of the path, cause the Holy One of Israel to cease from before us.” Again in **Jeremiah 5:30-31** the Lord God exclaims, “A wonderful and horrible thing is committed in the land; the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love to have it so: and what will ye do in the end thereof?” Yet the nature of God’s people in this time of the New Testament church is little different, even as **2 Timothy 4:3-4** reveals, “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.”

### III. The Caution for Defense

Due to the certainty of danger represented by false prophets and teachers and by their false teaching, our Lord Jesus Christ delivered a solemn warning with the opening line of **Matthew 7:15** – “Beware of false prophets.” Herein our Lord does not simply give a suggestion, or even a forceful warning. Rather, our Lord gives this warning in the form of a command. Furthermore, our Lord does not simply give this command of warning to spiritual leadership. Rather, He gives this command of warning unto His disciples as a whole. Thus every believer, every disciple of our Lord, is responsible to take up this charge and to BEWARE. Indeed, we all have been assigned this spiritual responsibility by our Lord to be personally on guard against spiritual attacks of false teachers and false teaching, lest their ungodly influence bring spiritual destruction upon our spiritual maturity and Christian walk.

So then, in the first place, we must be *aware*. At the very least, with His warning our Lord intends to inform us that we might be aware of this spiritual reality and certainty – the false teaching of false prophets and teachers IS in the world around us. Indeed, we must be aware that not all who claim to be from the Lord our God are truly the Lord’s ministers. We must be aware that not all teaching that claims to be from the Bible is actually Biblical truth. We must be aware that the true source for false teaching is the devil himself, the father of lies and falsehood. (See **1 Timothy 4:1 & John 8:44**) We must be aware that our adversary the devil uses false teaching as one of his primary weapons to deceive, defeat, and devour us spiritually. We must be aware that false teachers will not publicly announce themselves as such, but will disguise themselves as the ministers of righteousness, seeking to catch us unaware. (See **2 Corinthians 11:15**) We must be aware that they will put on the appearance of sheep in order to hide their true purpose to ensnare and devour with falsehood. We must be aware that they will employ smooth words (“good words and fair speeches” – See **Romans 16:18**), soft standards (“allure through the lusts of the flesh” – See **2 Peter 2:18**), subtle falsehoods (See **2 Corinthians 11:3**), and “sleight of hand” in doctrine (“sleight of men, and cunning craftiness” – See **Ephesians 4:14**). We must be aware that their false teachings will spiritually subvert the hearers, “increase unto more ungodliness,” eat like a cancer, and overthrow our faith. (See **2 Timothy 2:14-18**) Indeed, we must be aware.

So then, in the second place, we must also be *alert*. Our Lord’s command in **Matthew 7:15** to “beware of false prophets” does not simply inform our awareness, but more instructs us to alertness. The word “beware” means to pay careful attention, to be on guard with focused alertness. Indeed, we are to be sober and vigilant because our adversary the devil is ever seeking whom he may deceive, disable, defeat, devour, and destroy through false teaching. Indeed, this matter of false teaching is a matter of spiritual warfare; and our adversary the devil never takes a break. He is ever looking for any opening wherein he might attack our hearts and minds with falsehood and deception. If one approach does not work, he will try another, and another, and yet another. Therefore, we must “war a good warfare, holding faith, and a good conscience.” (See **1 Timothy 1:18-19**) We must reject all falsehood, and exercise ourselves “rather unto godliness.” (See **1 Timothy 4:7**) We must be diligent and faithful in studying God’s Word, in order that we might continue growing in spiritual maturity and doctrinal wisdom. (See **2 Timothy 2:15**) We must ever continue with conviction in the truths that we have learned from God’s Holy Word. (See **2 Timothy 3:14**) We must focus upon an ever deepening fellowship with our Lord, being “rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith.” (See **Ephesians 4:15 & Colossians 2:6-7**) We must not believe every teaching, but must ever search the Scriptures whether any given teaching is Biblically so. (See **1 John 4:1 & Acts 17:11**) Certainly, we must not despise any teaching of God’s Word. Yet we must test every teaching in

accord with God's Word, holding fast unto that which is truth, but also abhorring that which is false. (See **1 Thessalonians 5:20-21**) In all things we must ever be doctrinally alert.

So then, in the third place, we must be *avoiding* false teachers and false teaching. In **Romans 16:17** the instruction is given, "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them." Again in **1 Timothy 6:3-5** the instruction is given, "If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; he is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself." Yet again in **1 Timothy 6:20-21** the instruction is given, "O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called: which some professing have erred concerning the faith. Grace be with thee. Amen." And yet again in **2 Timothy 2:15-16** the instruction is given, "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. But shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness." Finally, concerning the truth of the gospel itself, **Galatians 1:8** gives instruction, "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed." Indeed, in order to give great emphasis to this instruction, **Galatians 1:9** repeats it, saying, "As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed."

Finally then, in the fourth place, we must be *aggressive* to contend for the faith and to silence the influence of false teaching. In **Jude 1:3-4** the exhortation and reason is given, "Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints. For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ." Indeed, we as believers, as the beloved, must earnestly and aggressively contend for the true teaching of God's Word specifically because false and ungodly teachers creep into our midst unawares teaching falsehood, encouraging ungodliness, and denying our Lord. These "speak perverse things" and seek to draw disciples away from our Lord Jesus Christ after themselves. (See **Acts 20:30**) These are "the enemies of the cross of Christ" (See **Philippians 3:18**), and we must earnestly contend against their corruptive influence within our midst. Indeed, the corruptive influence of their false teaching **MUST** be stopped because of the spiritual damage that it brings within our ministries and upon souls for whom we have responsibility. Even so, in **Titus 1:10-11** this very concern is revealed – "For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision: whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake." Yeah, if any teacher might approach in contradiction to "the doctrine of Christ," we are not to allow such any entrance into our homes or ministries; and we are not even to bid such to have a good day. Even so, in **2 John 1:9-11** the truth and instruction is given, "Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: for he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds." In this regard we must be spiritually aggressive.

#### IV. The Characteristic of Deception

Now, we must not be so vigilantly on guard against false prophets and teachers simply because of the falsehood that they bring, although that is certainly a valid reason for vigilance. We must also be vigilantly on guard against them because of the manner in which they come among us, for they come as wolves in sheep's clothing. Even so, in **Matthew 7:15** our Lord's warning continues, "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves." Their true spiritual character is that of "ravening wolves," but they do not come into our midst with that appearance. Rather, they come unto us and among us "in sheep's clothing," with an outward appearance like any other member of God's true flock. They are not actually sheep of the flock, but are actually ferocious wolves out to ravage the flock. Yet they put on the appearance of sheep and act the part of sheep, at least for a time. In every outward way possible, they will seek to appear as genuine members of God's flock and as genuine ministers of God's truth. Yet it is all lies and deception. Although their spiritual character is actually that of fierce, ferocious wolves, they put on the appearance and act of gentle, harmless sheep. They do this in order that they might acquire a welcome entrance into the flock. They do this in order that they might be allowed to abide comfortably among the flock. They do this in order that they might be allowed to interact with and have influence upon the flock.

Indeed, one of the central characteristics of false prophets and teachers is the characteristic of deception. In **Matthew 24:4-5** our Lord Jesus Christ warned, "Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many;" and again in **verse 11** He warned, "And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many." In **Romans 16:17-18** the warning is given, "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple." In **2 Corinthians 11:13-15** the warning is given, "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 also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works." In **Ephesians 4:14** the warning is given, "That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive." In **Colossians 2:8** the warning is given, "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ." In **2 Timothy 3:13** the warning is given, "But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived." Finally, in **2 John 1:7** the warning is given, "For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist."

This is the manner in which false prophets and teachers come unto and among us. They come through deception. Indeed, if they were publicly open about who they were and what their purpose, the committed and faithful disciples of the Lord would have nothing to do with them. Thus they come with a deceitful outward appearance of genuine innocence, purity, spirituality, and truth. They will speak favorably, "by good words and fair speeches," about Biblical things. They identify as Christians, talk positively of Christ and of Biblical Christianity, and choose the company of other Christians. They quote Scripture, employ Biblical terminology, and appear to be in harmony with Biblical doctrine. They uphold outward morality and religious practice, pursuing the outward forms of godliness. Through all of this they maintain a demeanor of innocency and sincerity. In every

apparent way, they will present themselves as good and faithful servants of our Lord. Even so, this is the reason that they are so dangerous; for by this means they are able to creep in unawares. In fact they are “deceitful workers,” employing “cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive” the simple and unwary. Therefore, we must beware; we must be ever aware and ever alert to their deceptive ways. Indeed, we must be ever vigilantly on guard, lest we be among the many who are deceived and devoured by them.

## V. The Commitment to Devouring

Indeed, such false prophets and teachers come unto us and among us “in sheep’s clothing;” but their true inner character is that of “ravening wolves.” In **Matthew 7:15** our Lord Jesus Christ described them precisely this way, saying, “Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.” Even so, our Lord’s descriptive reveals their true purpose in coming among us. Regardless of their outward appearance, their inner character and motivation is that of fierce, ferocious, grievous, hungry wolves. Wolves are a natural enemy to the sheep of the flock. Wolves have no true motive to befriend the sheep of the flock. Wolves have no true motive to uplift and edify the sheep of the flock. Wolves only have the motive and driving commitment to devour the sheep of the flock. Indeed, our Lord described them, not simply as wolves, but as “*ravening* wolves.” The word “ravening” indicates a greedy search after prey. It conveys the picture of wolves that are voraciously hungry to devour the sheep, that have an insatiable desire to seize the sheep with cruel fangs and to devour as much and as many as possible. In **Acts 20:29** such false prophets and teachers are described as “grievous wolves” that have no inclination to spare the flock. Thus we understand that they are voracious, insatiable predators without mercy or compromise. It matters not what their outward appearance may portray; this is their true, inner character and motivation.

False prophets and false teachers are “ravening wolves,” voraciously committed to devouring the sheep of the flock. Yet we must not view this devouring simply as some form of physical or material damage that they might inflict upon us. Rather, we must understand that this devouring is a spiritual devouring of our daily Christian walk in godliness and true holiness. Their true appetite is not simply against our outward living, but is much more so against our inward spiritual character. Certainly, they may carry a motivation to teach “things which they ought not, for filthy lucre’s sake,” supposing that gain is equivalent to godliness. (See **Titus 1:11 & 1 Timothy 6:5**) Certainly, the motivation for selfish gain out of a covetous heart is commonly found among them. Even so, the opening portion of **Romans 16:18** declares, “For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly;” and **Acts 20:30** adds, “Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples [away from our Lord Jesus Christ] after them.” Even so, the opening portion of **2 Peter 2:3** also declares, “And through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you.” Yet they are not simply con-men of the world, looking to con us for material gain. Rather, they are false prophets and teachers, looking to lead us astray from the wholesome truth of God’s Holy Word and from a daily fellowship with our Lord Jesus Christ. Even so, their purpose is primarily that of a spiritual devouring. Indeed, they are the servants of our adversary the devil; and as such they ever aid in his purpose to spiritually devour whomever he may.

So then, in what manner will this spiritual devouring take form? Their false teaching, that is contrary to the spiritually wholesome truth of God’s Word and that is contrary to the godly way of righteousness and true holiness, is the very tool by which this spiritual devouring is administered.

Indeed, deviation and departure from God's truth is not at all harmless, but is spiritually damaging and destructive. It will spoil us out of our walk with the Lord, our growth in the Lord, and our reward from the Lord. (See **Colossians 2:6-8, 18**) Their false teaching will not minister godly edifying in the faith, but will only subvert us from Biblical truth and godly character. (See **1 Timothy 1:4 & 2 Timothy 2:14**) Even so, **2 Timothy 2:16-17** gives warning concerning such false teaching, saying, "But shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness. And their word will eat as doth a canker: of whom is Hymenaeus and Philetus." This is the devouring nature of false teaching. It will eat away at our spiritual character like an external gangrene or an internal cancer, and thereby it will lead us unto greater and greater ungodliness. The false teaching of false prophets and teachers may go so far as to "overthrow the faith of some." (See **2 Timothy 2:18**) Even so, such false prophets and teachers will allure and lead believers away from our Lord Jesus Christ through diverse lusts of the flesh. (See **2 Timothy 3:6 & 2 Peter 2:18**) They will morally subvert individual believers and even whole households. (See **2 Timothy 2:14 & Titus 1:11**) Indeed, they shall draw many to "follow their pernicious [damaging, destructive, and deadly] ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of." Yes indeed, such false prophets and teachers are "ravaging wolves" with a driving commitment to devour the sheep of the flock.

## VI. The Consequence of Destruction

In **2 Timothy 3:13** God's Word declares, "But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived." By this it will appear that such false prophets and teachers will continue with growing success over time. Yet God's Word also reveals that the end for such false prophets and teachers is not success, but is the judgment-hand of God. As we have noted, in **Matthew 7:15** our Lord Jesus Christ described false prophets and teachers with the metaphor of "ravaging wolves" who come unto us and among us "in sheep's clothing." Then in **Matthew 7:16-20** our Lord added a second metaphor to describe these false prophets and teachers. Therein our Lord described them as corrupt trees that bring forth "evil fruit," placing them in direct contrast to the Biblically faithful preachers and teachers who are described as good trees that bring forth "good fruit." Even so, in **Matthew 7:19** our Lord Jesus Christ pronounced judgment upon these corrupt trees, these false prophets and teachers, saying, "Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire." Just as men in the natural world cut down and burn up fruit trees that never produce good fruit, but only cumber the ground, even so these false prophets and teachers shall ultimately be "hewn down" by the hand of God and cast into the fire of His wrath and judgment. Indeed, our Lord clearly indicates that such is the end for *every* corrupt tree, for *every* false prophet and teacher, that brings forth evil fruit. Regardless of any apparent success in the present, the wrath and judgment of the Lord our God is certainly the end for every one of them.

In fact, their spiritual destruction begins even throughout the period of their false teaching, through the spiritual corruption and shipwreck that they bring into their own lives. Even so, in **1 Timothy 1:18-19** the apostle Paul exhorted and warned Timothy, saying, "This charge I commit unto thee, son Timothy, according to the prophecies which went before on thee, that thou by them mightest war a good warfare; holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck." They will err concerning the faith and fellowship of God, even as the apostle warned Timothy in **1 Timothy 6:20-21**, saying, "O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called: which some professing have erred concerning the faith. Grace be with thee. Amen." Their conscience will become "seared" as "with a hot iron, even as **1 Timothy 4:1-2** warns, saying, "Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to



seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron.” They themselves will be overcome with bondage of corruption, even as **2 Peter 2:19** reveals concerning false prophets and teachers, saying, “While they [the false prophets and teachers] promise them [their followers] liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption: for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage.” Thus in time their spiritual corruption and folly will be publicly revealed, even as **2 Timothy 3:8-9** indicates, saying, “Now as Jannes and Jambres withstood Moses, so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, reprobate concerning the faith. But they shall proceed no further: for their folly shall be manifest unto all men, as theirs also was.”

Even so, **2 Corinthians 11:15** reveals that their “end shall be according to their works;” and **Jude 1:4** reveals that the Lord our God has ordained them unto the condemnation of His wrath and judgment. In addition, **Jude 1:11-15** pronounces woe upon them, saying, “Woe unto them! For they have gone in the way of Cain, and ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward, and perished in the gainsaying of Core. These are spots in your feasts of charity, when they feast with you, feeding themselves without fear: clouds they are without water, carried about of winds; trees whose fruit withereth, without fruit, twice dead, plucked up by the roots; raging waves of the sea, foaming out their own shame; wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever. And Enoch also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these, saying, Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints, to execute judgment upon all, and to convince all that are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodly committed, and of all their hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against him.”

Furthermore, **2 Peter 2:1-3** declares, “But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, 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 make merchandise of you: whose judgment now of a long time lingereth not, and their damnation slumbereth not.” Finally, **2 Peter 2:12-17** proclaims concerning these false prophets and teachers, “But these, as natural brute beasts, made to be taken and destroyed, speak evil of the things that they understand not; and shall utterly perish in their own corruption; and shall receive the reward of unrighteousness, as they that count it pleasure to riot in the day time. Spots they are and blemishes, sporting themselves with their own deceivings while they feast with you; having eyes full of adultery, and that cannot cease from sin; beguiling unstable souls: an heart they have exercised with covetous practices; cursed children: which have forsaken the right way, and are gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Bosor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness; but was rebuked for his iniquity: the dumb ass speaking with man’s voice forbad the madness of the prophet. These are wells without water, clouds that are carried with a tempest; to whom the mist of darkness is reserved for ever.”

## VII. The Certainty of Discernment

Certainly then, we must take heed and beware of false prophets and teachers, since they come unto us and among us as “ravening wolves” with the objective to devour our spiritual walk. Yet our Lord has also warned us that they will not advertise themselves as “ravening wolves,” but will come unto us deceptively “in sheep’s clothing,” with “cunning craftiness” and with “good words and fair speeches” to “deceive the hearts of the simple.” (See **Ephesians 4:14 & Romans 16:18**) So then, if false prophets and teachers are so cunningly deceptive, how can we discern their nature

in order that we may avoid them? In the opening portion of **Matthew 7:16**, our Lord Jesus Christ gave the answer, saying, “Ye shall know them by their fruits.” Again in **Matthew 7:20** our Lord gave the answer, saying, “Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.”

In **Matthew 7:15** our Lord employed the metaphor of “ravening wolves” “in sheep’s clothing” in order to emphasize the deceptive character and devouring commitment of false prophets and teachers. In **Matthew 7:16-20** our Lord shifted to a metaphor concerning the nature of trees and the nature of their fruits. Along this line of thought, in the closing portion of **Matthew 7:16**, our Lord asked the rhetorical question, “Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?” The obvious answer is to the negative. In the natural world individuals do not seek to pick grapes from thorn bushes or to pick figs from thistle plants. Indeed, in the natural world we fully recognize that the fruit of a tree or plant fits the precise nature of that tree or plant. Thus in **Matthew 7:17-18** our Lord applied this natural principle of truth unto the matter of false prophets and teachers in contrast to faithful preachers and teachers. Therein He said, “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.” Herein our Lord described Biblically faithful preachers and teachers as good trees bringing forth good fruit, and He described false prophets and teachers as corrupt trees bringing forth evil fruit. Furthermore, our Lord indicated that a given tree will bring forth fruit after its own nature. On the one hand, a good tree (a Biblically faithful preacher or teacher) by nature will bring forth good fruit and will not bring forth evil fruit. On the other hand, a corrupt tree (a false prophet or teacher) by nature will bring forth corrupt fruit and will not bring forth good fruit. So then, we can discern the true nature of a prophet, preacher, or teacher by the nature of his fruit; for the nature of his fruit will be the same as the nature of his character.

Yet the question remains – What does this fruit represent? In nature the fruit of a tree is that which a tree produces and that of which others partake. Even so, the fruit of a prophet, preacher, or teacher is the message that he proclaims and teaches. In **Matthew 7:15** the “sheep’s clothing” reference represents the outward appearance of a false prophet’s or teacher’s outward behavior, and the “ravening wolves” reference represents the inward reality of a false prophet’s or teacher’s inward character. Even so, the “evil fruit” reference represents the corrupt message that a false prophet or teacher produces and its spiritually corruptive influence. In **Matthew 12:33-37** our Lord Jesus Christ provided some clarification for this principle. In **verse 33** He reiterated the principle that a tree is known by its fruit, saying, “Either make the tree good, and his fruit good; or else make the tree corrupt, and his fruit corrupt: for the tree is known by his fruit.” Then in **verses 34-47** He provided His clarification, saying, “O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things. But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.” With this clarification our Lord applied the principle of a tree’s fruit primarily unto the communication of our words and speech. Even so, the fruits of a prophet may be understood as the message that he communicates.

Now, **1 Timothy 6:3** divides this matter of false teaching (evil fruit) into two corresponding elements, saying, “If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness.” The evil, corrupt fruit of false prophets and teachers may be observed in that they contradict the truths of God’s Word and/or in that they contradict the doctrine of godly living. On the one hand, if they teach a different

Christ Jesus, or a different Spirit, or a different gospel than is taught in God's Word, then their fruit (their teaching) is evil and corrupt; and we may recognize them as false prophets and teachers. (See **2 Corinthians 11:3-4 & Galatians 1:8-9**) If they "cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine" of God's Holy Word, then their fruit (their teaching) is evil and corrupt; and we may recognize them as false prophets and teachers. (See **Romans 16:17-18**) If they teach the philosophies of men after the traditions of men and the principles of the world, and not after the authority and fellowship of Christ, then their fruit (their teaching) is evil and corrupt; and we may recognize them as false prophets and teachers. (See **Colossians 2:8**) If they teach the "commandments of men, that turn from the truth" of God's Word, then their fruit (their teaching) is evil and corrupt; and we may recognize them as false prophets and teachers. (See **Titus 1:13-14**) On the other hand, if they teach "perverse things" to draw away disciples away from Christ and after themselves, then their fruit (their teaching) is evil and corrupt; and we may recognize them as false prophets and teachers. (See **Acts 20:29**) If they turn "the grace of God into lasciviousness (a freedom for selfish and lustful living), then their fruit (their teaching) is evil and corrupt; and we may recognize them as false prophets and teachers. (See **Jude 1:4**) If their teaching leads them and allures others to walk after the lusts of the flesh, then their fruit (their teaching) is evil and corrupt; and we may recognize them as false prophets and teachers. (See **2 Peter 2:18-19**) Indeed, if in any way their teaching contradicts God's Word or godly living, then their fruit (their teaching) is evil and corrupt; and we may recognize them as false prophets and teachers.

In conclusion then, our Lord has not only warned us to take heed and beware of false prophets and teachers, but has also provided us with a clear means to discern and detect false prophets and teachers. Indeed, our Lord indicates His expectation that we should discern and detect them, and provides us with a certain assurance that we can discern and detect them. In both **Matthew 7:16** and **Matthew 7:20**, our Lord stated, not simply that we could know them, but that we *shall* know them by their fruits (by the message of their teaching). Certainly this test for discernment and detection will require an understanding of God's truth on our part and a careful consideration of the message in relation to that truth. Yet this test for discernment and detection stands as a certain test if we will employ it under the guiding influence of the indwelling Holy Spirit. We do not need to fear. The standard of God's truth is an eternally firm standard; and if we will depend upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit in relation to that standard, we can be assured that the Holy Spirit always understands every detail of the truth and that He is never deceived by any false teaching.