

Pastor Don Nelson

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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

**“SHEPHERD OR WOLF?”**  
**Matthew 7:15-20**

Everyone who accepts the mantle of pastoral ministry is to **“Preach the word of God. Be persistent, whether the time is favorable or not.” “Correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction”** (II Timothy 4:2 {NLT/TNIV}).

‣ I am not infallible; but am I fulfilling this calling? On what basis would you answer “Yes” or “No”?

➤ {Acts 17:11} In the Book of Acts, Luke praises the Jews who lived in Berea, saying that they **“were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.”**

‣ Do you measure the quality of my preaching and teaching in light of Scripture? I encourage you to do so.

**“Now the overseer”** (the pastor) **“is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money”** (I Timothy 3:2-3).

‣ I am not perfect; but am I a man of integrity whose attitude, conduct, and relationships honor God? What reasons do you have to answer “Yes” or “No”?

➤ {I Jn 4:1} The apostle John cautions, **“Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”**

‣ Have you discerned my **“spirit”** to be sure that I am **“from God”**? It is right for you to do so.

■ Please turn with me to Matthew 7:15. Messiah warns, **“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.”**

The role of ‘prophet’ was well-established in biblical Judaism and the early Church. The prophet’s purpose was to speak directly for God. Most often they delivered messages of rebuke or comfort: they called sinners to repentance and encouraged the righteous. Sometimes, they foretold the future.

We don’t have prophets *per se*. Prophecy is no longer a designated ministry in the Church.

However, true preachers and true teachers share some of the functions of a prophet. These men and women speak for God – not directly, but indirectly – through his Word, by the gifting of his Holy Spirit, and with the approval of his people the Church.

{Mt 7:21} I used the adjective **“true”** to modify ‘preachers’ and ‘teachers.’ Just as **“Not everyone who says... ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom,”** so not everyone who claims to speak for God as a preacher or teacher really does. There were false prophets in the first century, and there are false preachers and teachers in the twenty-first century.

■ **“Watch out for false prophets,”** preachers, and teachers. **“They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.”**

📖 **“Sheep”** is a metaphor, first for Israel as a people and then for Christ Followers. Hence, **“They**

**come to you in sheep's clothing**" could describe any person who claims to be a Christian.

📖 {?} On the other hand, **"sheep's clothing"** also refers to woolen garments. **"The wool of the sheep, when it was sheared, was [woven] into cloth"** and **"Shepherds, for the most part, wore cloaks made of wool."**

📖 {Jn 10:22; Heb 13:20; I P 5:4} **"Shepherd"** is another biblical metaphor. Jesus is **"the good Shepherd," "the great Shepherd,"** and **"the Chief Shepherd,"** with an uppercase S. Likewise, pastors are exhorted to **"Be shepherds"** (that's a lower-case s) **"of God's flock that is under [their] care"** (First Peter 5:2).

So, workers who shepherded sheep for a living wore **"sheep's clothing."** Spiritual leaders in local churches were called **"shepherds."** And, there are some who **"come in sheep's clothing"** even though they are false. Put it all together and verse 15 is probably focused on false leaders instead of false believers in general.

■ **"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves."**

Back in April we wrestled with Matthew 7:1-5 one Sunday and Matthew 7:6 the next. In the first section Messiah *prohibits* judgment: **"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured."** In the second, he *commands* judgment: **"Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs."**

📖 You might remember that the Greek verb translated **"judge"** has a range of overtones. It can entail harsh criticism, denunciation, and condemnation; or it can imply constructive consideration, discernment, and assessment.

We simultaneously obey both commands by refraining from sinful judgment and exercising righteous discernment. We kill the spirit of criticism within ourselves and refuse to condemn anyone – as we assess the claims and conduct of others, not for the purpose of managing them or their business, but to determine how we should respond to and interact with them.

{II Ti 3:16; I Th 5:20-22} So **"Watch out"** is not a license to nitpick the sermon or lesson. It is a call to carefully consider the preacher or teacher's words, in order to **"hold onto" "teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training"** that **"is good"** but to **"reject whatever is harmful."**

{I Ti 4:12} **"Watch out"** does not give carte blanche to shine a spotlight on a leader's minor frailties; it is a call to discern whether to follow their lead. Church leaders are to **"set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity."**

■ In Matthew 7:16-18 Messiah explains, **"By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit."**

☑ Have you ever bit into an apple that was colorful and fresh and unblemished on the outside – only to discover that it was mealy or tasteless or had a rotten core? It can be tricky to distinguish good fruit from bad fruit.

So it is with false prophets. Those who are at all effective usually look like the real thing, at least on the surface. Many of them quote Scripture. Many of them use Christian catchphrases. Many of them are charming or authoritative.

📖 But good fruit is not charisma or confidence; it is Christlike character, Christlike words, and Christlike deeds that are generated over time by the indwelling Spirit of Christ. No pastor or teacher is perfectly consistent in this, but we should be faithful and reliable.

A quick comparison and contrast might be helpful:

★ A shepherd endeavors to influence others. A wolf strives for control.

★ A shepherd serves others. A wolf desires to be served.

★ A shepherd nurtures mutual relationships of giving and receiving with others. A wolf is all about getting and taking.

★ A shepherd speaks the truth in love. A wolf speaks half-truths and lies to advance their interests.

★ A shepherd will sacrifice their comfort, reputation, and even their security for others. A wolf will sacrifice others for their comfort, reputation, and security.

★ {Mt 5:16} A shepherd lets their **“light shine before others, that they may see [their] good deeds and**

**glorify”** God. A wolf gives and prays and fasts and does other good deeds for personal glory.

■ I could keep going, but you get the picture.

**“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.”**

There is plenty of money, fame, power, and illicit pleasure to be had in the false prophecy business. If it were not so, fewer people would go into it.

■ But while false prophecy can be highly lucrative in the short run, it always ends in judgment. **Matthew 7:19: “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire”** – if not in this life, then in the next.

The greatest danger for God’s people is not that they will donate their life’s savings or be used and abused by one of these charlatans, as unjust and immoral as that is. It is that, having been bitten by a ravenous wolf, they themselves will become one.

{Mt 23:25} The Lord’s critique of hypocritical teachers and Pharisees fits here: **“Woe to you! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and then you make that convert twice as much a child of hell as you are.”**

I am not false prophet. I am not a ravenous wolf. But do not take my word for it.

{1 Th 5:20-22} The apostle Paul advised his original readers, **“Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold onto what is good, reject whatever is harmful.”** I urge you to follow his counsel

as I preach and teach. I also urge you to follow it as you listen to preachers and teachers in other churches, on the radio, on TV, or on DVDs and videos.

■ Christ Jesus clearly states in verse 20, **“by their fruit you will recognize them.”** I am not sinless. Yet I invite you to inspect my fruit as it is revealed in my words, deeds, and relationships.

I simply ask that you do so in a spirit of constructive discernment and not harsh condemnation. By exercising discernment together we can grow in *αγαπη* [agapē] love for God and each other, in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, and in service to the Kingdom of God and our neighbors.

Matthew 7:15-20 is the Word of the Lord.