

XXXIII. Matthew in Biblical Perspective  
A Royal Manifesto of the Kingdom from the King  
“Life Choice #2: Shepherds of Truth or Prophets of Deceit?”  
Matthew 7:15-20  
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October 17, 2010 – Morning Sermon

We are in the concluding verses of our study on the Sermon on the Mount. Let's look at Matthew 7. It's God's Word. It's the Truth. Matthew 7:15-20 says **15** *“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. 16 You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? 17 So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. 18 A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.*

The grass withers, the flower fades, this is God's Word. It abides forever and by His grace and mercy may it be preached for you.

We have been in a series of sermons of the manifesto by King Jesus, the first of six sermons recorded in God's Word that Jesus preached are found in Matthew 5, 6, and 7. We are now at the conclusion of it. We have learned that in the Kingdom of God you have a Christ centered, Gospel driven and Spirit filled life and it is based upon prayer and the Word. This life is only possible to be lived two ways by two things. Number one is you have to have a right relationship with God the Father through Jesus Christ and that relationship is based upon prayer and the Word. A life that gives us a revulsion to sin, a hunger for godliness, attractive to sinners and attracts us to sinners to win them to Christ is only possible with a right relationship to Christ, by faith and repentance we put our trust in Him.

The second thing we learned is that because of that relationship God, the thrice Holy God, Creator and Judge, has now become through Jesus Christ our Father, whose power, benevolence and commitment to us through His Son is unstoppable and unsearchable. That's why we learned how to pray saying 'Our Father' and that's how we learned how to live, not for men to see us but for men to see the Father in us to glorify our Father with our good works. That's why that happens in our life and now Jesus comes to the conclusion of it and this great Preacher shows us how to conclude a sermon where He brings us to a decision.

He brings before us three life choices. In the last study we looked at life choice number one. In this study we'll look at life choice number two and in the next study of this we'll look at life choice number three. Life choice number two which is who is going to teach you, who will be your teachers, who will bring forth the truth of God's Word to you? Jesus says to beware of false prophets. Why would Jesus say that? Before we jump into it I think the key is to loop back to life choice number one.

Life choice number one is death or life? Choose life, don't choose death. How do you choose life? To get to life you have to get on a hard way. To get on the hard way you have to come through a narrow gate. So let's look at the text for life choice number one. Matthew 7:13-14 says **13** *“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. 14 For the gate*

*is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.* So to enter through the narrow way is the hard way and the end is life, it's hard to find and it's not the majority opinion and there is few people upon it. There will be a lot of people on it but in comparison to those who choose the wide way and the easy way there will be fewer.

The Lord wants us to go through the narrow gate and it is so narrow that only one fits through at a time and you can't bring any baggage. Someone said to me the other day about those Chilean minors that were saved, "Harry did you see those minors in that little bitty tube going up over a half mile out of the bottom of the earth, coming forward? It was almost like a parable of life. It kind of reminded me of your sermon last week of how narrow the gate is and how small that capsule was those minors came up. Only a small person could get in there." This gate is smaller than that because they had some bags and rocks that came up that capsule. When you come to Jesus it's one at a time and you can't bring any baggage with you. You have to repent of your sin, your religion, your righteousness, and everything. It's 'Lord, nothing in my hands I bring, simply to the cross I cling.' So you put your trust in Christ alone. It's the narrow gate, hard way and eternal life.

It's not a hard way to earn salvation. The gate is Christ. The hard way is following Christ. It is hard to follow Christ. It's not hard so you earn heaven because Jesus has earned heaven for you but if you come to Christ and follow Him, in this world you will have persecution. It will be a challenge so it's a hard way and in the end is life. There are His people that are with you but in comparison there are not as many as those who take the wide gate and the easy way. By the way, life is not a multiple choice test. It is a true and false test. Either Jesus is who He said He was and salvation is through Him and that is either a truth or it's a lie. It's one of the two. If you don't believe Jesus is the way, the truth and the life the wide gate is multiple choice where you could choose secularism, atheism, agnosticism, hedonism and there's all kinds of isms on the easy way. But it's really a true and false test where it's either Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, no man can come to the Father but through Him or He's not. That's ultimately the decision that you makes. If you don't take the narrow gate then you go through the wide gate. .

Notice how it said that few find the narrow gate. Satan who is a liar and a murderer from the beginning, who doesn't want God to be glorified and others to be drawn to Him, and who doesn't want you to come to Him, so how do we find the narrow gate? Jesus says He has provided an instrument. He has provided those who will speak the truth of His Word and it is through the foolishness of preaching that we are being saved (1 Corinthians 1:21). Faith comes by hearing the Word of Christ (Romans 10:17). So Satan knows God's method to get you to the gate and stay on the way is through true prophets who are shepherds of truth. They are prophets of truth who will speak the truth in love. So if that's the way God will get you to the narrow gate, so you will come to Christ and follow Him, Satan will get all kinds of false prophets so that you won't come to the narrow gate or find it so that we'll be deceived, detoured and deluded. That's what Satan will do. He'll bring false prophets to people. So Jesus says to beware of false prophets.

Life choice number two is a very important choice in your life. In fact, other than what you do with Jesus, I don't think there's a more important choice in your life. Life choice number two is who will be your teachers. This may be a sermon that empties this

church. One might be thinking, “I don’t want you Harry.” But it’s not just one teacher, who will be my disciple or my teachers in the congregational communities. A prophet is a divinely called, empowered and appointed spokesman to bring the truth of God’s Word to me in love. Lord, I need that but when all is said and done the pupil becomes like their teacher. So who will be my teachers? Jesus’ command is to beware of false prophets. Should this surprise us? Satan says if true prophets are the way that God gets His people to the gate and keeps them on the way and then brings them to life then Satan says I’ll get pseudo prophets, false prophets who look like true prophets, sometimes act like true prophets and can fool people. This shouldn’t surprise us that this is Jesus’ second command.

The first command is to enter by the narrow gate, make a choice. The second thing is to make sure you have true prophets who will point out the gate and help you stay on the way so that you’ll go to eternal life. So the fact that Jesus says to beware of false prophets shouldn’t surprise us. Go read the Old Testament because it is jam packed with false prophets. Check Jesus’ sermons. Jesus had six recorded sermons in the Scriptures and the first one is the Sermon on the Mount. The last one was also given on a mount, the Mount of Olives. In the first sermon He ends up by saying “Beware of false prophets.” In the last sermon they asked Him a question, “Jesus when will You come again?” Jesus said, “Here’s what’s going to happen when I come again but before I come here are some of the things that will be happening around you. There will be people who claim to be Christ but don’t listen to them. There will be many false prophets who will lead you astray.”

Did you know that every single book in the New Testament contains warnings or descriptions of false prophets? The Old Testament is jammed with the recording of false prophets and their effectiveness and warnings of false prophets. So that is the command – beware of false prophets. The life choice before you is who your teachers will be and who will be those who guide you? So the bad news is there are false prophets but the good news is you can recognize them. They don’t make it easy but you can recognize them.

Matthew 7:15-16a says, **15** *“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. 16 You will recognize them by their fruits.* What is interesting here is if Jesus gives true prophets as His ambassadors to guide us to the gate and on the way, to help us, nurture us, care for us, teach us and encourage us and Satan gives pseudo or false prophets, true prophets are in the lineage of Jesus and false prophets are in the lineage of Satan. Is Satan a false prophet? Yes. In Genesis 3 does Satan come to Eve and say “Hi I’m Satan and I’m against the glory of God”? No, he comes as a serpent in camouflage, masqueraded. Does he bring the truth? No, he says “You can be like God. God doesn’t want you to be happy and by the way it’s all about you and your happiness. So if you’ll just believe me that it’s all about you and joy is not making it all about God for He doesn’t want you to be happy because it’s really all about your glory.” So Satan brings death. He is a liar and a murderer from the beginning. He masquerades, he’s false, he’s a murderer and God brought the judgment upon him.

Now look at what Jesus says about these guys. In Matthew 7:15 they come as ravenous wolves but appear like sheep. They masquerade in sheep’s clothing. They teach what is false. It’s a lie in order that you’ll go through the wide gate, the easy way which leads to death. They are like the one they follow which is Satan. They are

deceitful, bring deluded lies and desire your destruction, in fact so much so that they're actually not sheep. They appear as sheep but actually they are ravenous wolves. They don't show up as ravenous wolves. The other day I was out jogging and I saw a coyote. That's not a wolf but its close enough for me and first I looked for a stick. Then the next thing I was looking for was how to get out of there. So they don't show up looking like wolves, they show up in sheep's clothing. They show up with 'rev' in front of their names. They speak from pulpits. They write books in the name of religion. They perhaps even have wide media ministries. They have all kinds of acclaim and may even have a very large following. Remember there are a lot on that wide road. So the trappings are all there. They are masquerading, teaching the lie and the end of it is death. They are extremely appealing in all of that but Jesus then switches metaphors from wolves to trees. You'll know before long a ravenous wolf in sheep's clothing when you get close enough to it. In being ravenous their whole objective is to gratify themselves and destroy others but instead of using that metaphor Jesus switches metaphors to trees.

Matthew 7:17-20 says **17** *So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. 18 A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.* I think Jesus has done something very important here. When you find out that it's a ravenous wolf it may be too late but if you can start looking at the tree and start inspecting the fruit of that prophet's ministry then you get a clue of what kind of fruit is being produced. What do we mean by fruit? The first thing is their character, eventually their character will come out. I'm not saying that true prophets are sinless. They are sinners saved by grace but eventually the false prophet's character will reveal where he is and where he is not in terms of a relationship with the Lord. Secondly, are the false prophet's relationships. People will be used by a false prophet. Ravenous wolves eat sheep. Good shepherds lay down their life for the sheep. Thirdly, listen to the over content of their message. They may use all kinds of Bible verses and be subtle and sophisticated in how they arrange them but over all it will be what they need to say to get people and use people instead of bring to people the truth of God's Word.

Today we hear this term contextualization where we have to communicate to people in their terms and I agree with that. If I want to communicate to you then I need to learn the English language but there is a big difference in speaking to people in their terms and speaking to people on their terms. Jesus doesn't come to us on our terms. He comes to us on His terms. False prophets find a way to appeal to people in their terms for their terms and in order to use them. So you can see the character, their relationships, their conduct, their ministry content, what they speak and then finally it's intent meaning what happens because in their wake are broken lives, families, dreams, marriages, hearts, children and destroyed churches either destroyed by death like some of our mainline churches or destroyed by becoming a pet project of that prophet where it's so difference but it's really about that prophet.

So what is it that we look for? We look for fruit. Is God being exalted? Is the truth being spoken in love? Is it a Gospel driven ministry where sinners are called to Christ, to repentance and Christ will take you right where you are? But Christ will never leave you right where you are. Is it a ministry that is unsafe for sin but safe for sinners to be introduced to a Savior of sinners? Is it a ministry in which the Spirit of God is

welcomed? You begin to look at fruit. One other thing about the false prophets is Jesus reveals you'll know them by their fruits and you may not know them immediately because their masqueraded but ultimately you will know them by their fruits and then He says their end will be cut down and thrown into the fire. Their end is divine judgment by God Himself and cast into hell along with the one who they served, Satan.

I have three takeaways as we bring this to a conclusion in our hearts and our lives. Before I give you the takeaways I want to say something else. Remember I said that every book in the New Testament contains warnings on false prophets and obviously we don't have time to look up all the texts. I just want to show you one in Acts 20. There was one church that the Apostle Paul spent most of his time with and it's the church at Ephesus. He was there for about three years and he is now about to leave them. He will never see them again and this is what he says to them. Acts 20:17-18, 26-27 says *17 Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. 18 And when they came to him, he said to them:* (Then he gives this great sermon to the leaders of the church, now let's skip down to the middle of this sermon.) *26 Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, 27 for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.* He is saying, "I will face God as a prophet sent from Him on your behalf as a shepherd of truth and I'm innocent." Why? It is not because he's the greatest preacher in the world and not because he didn't hold back from them the truth. He held them up in love and didn't hold back the truth. He gave to them the whole counsel of God.

Now, he is saying that there are coming come people that aren't like that. Acts 20:28-29 says *28 Pay careful attention to yourselves 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. 29 I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you* (the leadership), *not sparing the flock.* Jesus said to beware of false prophets for they will come to you. They don't set up shop and hope you stop by. They don't look for a good location that you may walk by. They will come to you. They will find a way to you, through media, pulpits, lecterns, seminars; they'll find a way to get to you. The true prophet doesn't just come to you but the true prophet comes for you to lay down their life for you in the name of Christ. These prophets will come to you and one of their ways they come after the sheep as wolves is not only masquerading but they love to infiltrate.

He goes on to say in Acts 20:30, *30 and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.* Satan loves to persecute the church and penetrate the membership of the church with grumbling, gossip, slander and things like that but another he does it is to penetrate the leadership of the church with false teachers and false leaders who are wolves devouring the flock with their own selves. Paul is just picking up on what Jesus has said. That's all he is doing. Beware of false shepherds. Beware of false prophets because they do come. By the way, if Jesus says to beware of false prophets then that tells you there are false prophets and there are true prophets. Secondly, He is telling us we live in an age where truth is relevant, you have your truth and I have my truth but Jesus says that's not true. There is truth and then there is a lie. Some speak the truth and some are committed to speaking the lie. You find those prophets who are committed to speaking the truth in love to you and they will not be perfect people, because there is truth and there is the lie, there is error.

With that being the case here are the three takeaways. The first takeaway is I believe the most important decision you'll make in your Christian life is this matter of obeying Christ in this life choice to beware of false prophets. So the most important decision you will make in your Christian life is who you listen to, what you listen to, and how you listen. When Jesus did the parable of the sower it is recorded in Matthew, Mark and Luke and please always check what I say to see if I'm a true prophet or not but if you'll check this parable Jesus says to bear good fruit you have to have the seed sown in your life and the Holy Spirit has to work in your heart. There is hard ground, thorny ground, rocky ground and then there's good ground. When He finished this parable of the importance of sowing God's Word in your heart, in one Gospel book He said, "Therefore pay close attention to who you listen to." In one Gospel it says "Be careful who you listen to" and in one Gospel it says "Be careful what you listen to" and in one it says "Be careful how you listen."

So what are we being called to do? We are being called to prioritize the hearing of God's Word from those who God has called. Do not be lazy about the hearing of God's Word. Faith comes by hearing the Word of Christ. It is through the foolishness of the message preached that we are being saved. So I want to get that good teacher in my community. I want that good small group disciple leader. I want good preaching that is faithful to expound the Word of God to me, in love, in faithfulness, in context. I want that in my life therefore I have to take the time to prioritize it and the time to exercise discernment. The man may have "Rev" in front of his name or a PhD, a DD, an Md, he may have all of those degrees, he may be in a mainline church or a storefront church but I have to exercise discernment say is this true to God's Word? I can know them by their fruits.

I don't think we're practicing discernment and prioritizing in the Evangelical church. I'm just being honest with you. The mainline churches wouldn't be dead, cults wouldn't be flourishing, these exotic things in the name of Jesus wouldn't be out there, teachings that turn the Gospel into self centeredness where it's all about me if we were practicing discernment and prioritizing. Jesus did much to save me but He didn't do much to save me to make much of me. He did much to save me so I could be free to make much of Him. That's the whole point of why He saved me. But we can take this Gospel and rest it into something that is self centered, man centered and all about other things and then we have deadness and perversion of the Gospel out there and the reason for this is that we haven't prioritized the hearing of God's Word for us and our families. We think all we need is a nice religious commercial each week to encourage us instead of a hunger for God's Word longing for the pure milk of the Word of God whereby we are nourished.

Let me see that teacher's life that preacher's life that discipler's family and their relationships. What is in the wake of their ministry and what's happening through their ministry? I know they are not perfect but if they are here to point me to Jesus I want to see if they know Him and if they speak faithfully for Him. I believe it's the most important decision you'll make in your life to prioritize the hearing of God's Word and to exercise discernment of who you listen to, because when it's all said and done the pupils become like their teachers.

The second takeaway is it takes time to reveal what false prophets carefully conceal. I love the way Jesus switched the metaphor to the tree and its fruit. When you

find out you have a wolf in front of you it's usually too late so He says "Let's look a little earlier. I will go to trees here." You don't put a tree in the ground and go get fruit from it. It takes time to develop the fruit. So a prophet may look like a tree, say they're a tree but I will take the time to look at their life over time and see what it has borne out. The fruit will be revealed. Jesus says "You will recognize them by their fruit. They can't hide it forever. What a man sows he reaps." It will eventually come out in their life, in the content of their preaching, the intent of their ministry and all of that will eventually come out. Ultimately it is impossible for false prophets to bring forth God centered, Christ centered, Gospel driven, Spirit filled ministry. A diseased tree cannot bring forth good fruit. So look at the fruit. What is the fruit? Everything comes to life. So when you look at the fruit it matters greatly what you're looking for.

The false prophet eventually will devour the sheep, destroy his church, and will make it all about them to lead the disciples astray after them. With the false prophet, it's all about them and their gratification and the decimation of the flock. Thus they destroy entire denominations. Churches are being destroyed because false prophets are in the pulpits. God's people just sit and listen. I'm not talking about secondary doctrines of church government but I'm talking about the virgin birth, the truth of God's Word, the atonement of Jesus Christ and the call of the Gospel. They will let that go if somebody departs from it from the pulpit and by the way don't touch my grandmother's stained glass for I might leave the church. It's absolutely amazing how we do not take the time to see that they are destroying Christ's church and we continue to uphold it. So there is error, chaos, destruction of families and marriages and lives but if you'll just take the time to look eventually false prophets will reveal the lie and the death. It won't be immediately for they look like sheep in sheep's clothing and they look like a tree but eventually it will come out.

The third and final takeaway is so important. Having tried to tell and to declare from this text the absolute importance of life choice number two of who and what you are going to listen to and how you are going to prioritize it, it is ultimately important that you must intentionally avoid skepticism and cynicism yet careful and continuously pursue and embrace evaluation and examination. We live in a culture that is absolutely ripe with cynicism and skepticism and that is not what we are being called to. We are called to evaluation and examination yet maintaining the posture of the learner. I want to look at one more text in Acts 17. I love this passage so much. Acts 17:11 says *II Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.*

Why were they noble? They received the word with all eagerness. They weren't skeptics, learners, hearers, and they prioritized the teaching and preaching of God's Word. They continually devoted themselves to the Apostles' teachings and to preaching. They loved it and they examined the Scriptures daily to see if these things were true. So they are learners, hungry, teachable, yet discerning, not cynics and skeptics but evaluating and examining if this is true. Asking, is it Christ centered, Gospel driven? Does it grieve the Holy Spirit or does it draw the Holy Spirit? Does it lift up the truth of God's Word? Is it true in context and consistency? The result is a people who are equipped, growing in grace, truth and knowledge of Jesus Christ.

I want to finish with this thought. Jim Jones was a preacher in San Francisco. He took hundreds of people to South America. When they got there hundreds of them killed

themselves in the name of this false prophet who we were told was a great urban minister in the Christian church when he was in San Francisco. They did an examination of the hundreds of people who went to their death following a false prophet. How many false prophets have brought the death of marriages, lives and everything else but these people just died. That's where we get the phrase "They drank the Kool-Aid." In their examination they found out that over 80 percent of those followers of Jim Jones had grown up in evangelical churches as children.

When I was a youth pastor at Covenant College, a group came through called Children of God cult. They set up camp and started drawing all the High School students out of Chattanooga that were leaving parents and going out and living with them. So a bunch of us youth pastors got together to try and go out there to rescue those kids. I didn't do a survey so it's not scientific but I'm telling you over 90 percent of the kids that we were able to get out of that cult, it may have been 100 percent but it was so obvious that all of them had come out of churches.

So let me ask you parents a question. What do you want out of the Youth ministry at Briarwood? I'm all for games because I've been a youth pastor. You don't know how many times I've swallowed toothpaste that has been rinsed by everybody else, you don't know how many times I've slid down slides and had milkshake hamburgers but are you saying to Briarwood or to your children, I want you to learn God's Word so that the false prophets won't get you. I want you to know the truth of God's Word. Do you prioritize it as a parent or do you just want us to have a nice little youth group to keep your kids out of trouble. Do you want them to come to the gate and the narrow way to follow Jesus?

If we are to exercise that discernment what do we do with false prophets? I'll tell you what we don't do and that is we don't condemn them to hell. That's divine judgment. God says He will cut them down and throw them into the fire. That is not our job, our job is not to listen to them and my other job is that God may use me to win them. I'm not going to listen to them but I might win them to Christ. We are to listen to those whom God has sent through His church by His Spirit who are speaking the truth in love. I want to make it a priority in my life to listen carefully, thoughtfully and with discernment. Then when I run into them I won't listen to them but I may win them to Christ.

We have been celebrating fifty years here at Briarwood and one of the things we have been celebrating is a founding pastor. Have you ever noticed that some things may read that Briarwood is the birthplace of the PCA? That meant that our founding pastor was disciplined because he wouldn't go along with false teaching. He was disciplined and defraught. He stood on the verge of losing everything. So why am I telling you this. So he didn't want to listen to a false prophet and he wanted to be a true prophet, praise the Lord, but we've heard that. Maybe you haven't heard this. The two men in the Presbytery who most went after our founding pastor when he stood for the truth, I had one of them in my office two weeks ago praying with him. I asked him to give me his background. He said, "I was one of the guys who went after your predecessor. I can't tell you how much I love Jesus now." This man has been turned around. Another one got turned around but he's with the Lord now. This one is retired but he's doing more for Jesus now than he ever did when he was not telling the truth. He said one of the reasons he came to the Lord was that he not only saw someone who wouldn't abide by false

teaching but that someone loved him no matter what he did against him. That's where Jesus wants us to go. Don't listen to them but go after them. God may use you to bring them to Him. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the time we could be together in Your Word. Would You please speak to our hearts. You may be reading this today and perhaps the wide gate and the 'isms' have been shared with you and the thought that all roads lead heaven just as long as we're sincere but please hear this. I'm grateful for any sincerity but we can be sincerely wrong. Jesus said "I am the way, the truth and the life." Here's the decision. Life choice number one is, is He telling the truth or not. If He is and you believe He is then turn aside with all of us from our sins and even our religion. Satan would love for you to think that baptism will get you to heaven and that church membership will get you to heaven. But right now, turn from that, philosophical subtleties, religious rituals and your sins and put your trust in Jesus Christ right now. Say "O Lord, I come to You." Father, may I ask You to allow us as a congregation to uphold truth always in love and because we love may we preach and teach the truth. Would You give our people a hunger to make it a priority in their life and discernment to make sure they are not drawn to the evil way. Having come through the gate even though the way is hard, we want to stay on it as we follow Christ all the way to life, thanking You that He goes with us. We pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.