

Sunday, September 29, 2019

This sermon is the 9th in what looks to be a series of 10 sermons on the “Sermon on the Mount” found in Matthew 5-7. Lord willing, I will deliver the 10th and final sermon next week. As a reminder, I’ve been using the following as a high-level summary:

1. Our essential characteristics (what we are) – vv. 5:3-12
2. Our function in the world – vv. 5:13-16
3. Our relationship to the law – vv. 5:17-48
4. Our religious life – vv. 6:1-18
5. Our mundane life – vv. 6:19-34
6. Our relationship to other people – vv. 7:1-12
7. **Being doers and not hearers only – vv. 7:13-27**

We have entered now into the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount. Christ has spent the entire sermon describing the citizens of His kingdom. He started with the Beatitudes, to describe our internal state, beginning with the requirement that we be poor in spirit. He’s told us what our function in the world is (i.e., salt and light), how we relate to the Word of God and His law, how we live our religious lives, how we live our mundane lives, and how we relate to other people. In one sense He has brought us back to the beginning of the sermon. If we went into this thinking “yes, I’m already poor in spirit – I’ve already got this covered,” the rest of the sermon up to this point should have shown you what it **really** means to be poor in spirit, and how you don’t measure up. And now, as He concludes the sermon, He lays down an ultimatum. It’s as if He said, “I just told you what is required to be in My Kingdom. Now I’m going to tell you the only way to get there, and the dangers that would keep you out (namely, false prophets and self-deception).” Today, my intention is to go over Matthew 7:13-20, and then finish up next week with Matthew 7:21-27. Today’s text is:

“Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide [is] the gate, and broad [is] the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait [is] the gate, and narrow [is] the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it. 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.” (Matthew 7:13-20)

You'll see that He starts out with a command: "Enter ye in at the strait gate." This isn't an offer, or an invitation, or a suggestion – this is a command, from the only One who has the authority to command it. And in the construction of the Greek, it's not just a command – it's an urgent command. The idea is to do it now. Don't delay. Don't just sit around and discuss the strait gate. Don't just admire the beauty of the strait gate. Don't just stand back and observe the strait gate. Don't just watch other people enter in at the strait gate. YOU enter in at the strait gate. Do it now. Do it with finality. Do it decisively. Remember, we're talking about the eternal souls of people here – Jesus doesn't mince words and beat around the bush. Note that in Mark 1:15 where Jesus says, "Repent ye, and believe the gospel," that is also a command. This is the revealed will of God to you – He commands you to repent, to believe, to enter in at the strait gate, and you disobey that command at your own peril.

There are a lot of people who like to talk about how much they love the Sermon on the Mount – they love the ethics, they love the ideas, they love how He puts the Pharisees in their place. But these people never enter in at the strait gate. This isn't a sermon for you to sit back and admire – this is a sermon that requires action.

So what is this strait gate? The word "strait" (S-T-R-A-I-T) means "narrow." It's not "straight" spelled S-T-R-A-I-G-H-T, which means "not curved." We're talking about a narrow gate - very little room to get through, and very difficult to get through. One commentator describes it as being like a turnstile, and I like that. This is a controlled, restricted passage. Upon going through the strait gate, our Lord tells us that the way is narrow (the Greek word means "trouble, affliction, tribulation, compressed, distressed"), it leads to life, and there are few that find it. Contrariwise, there is a wide gate which leads to a broad road that ends in destruction, and many go that way.

So we have two ways, and only two ways. You either enter in at the strait gate, or you enter in at the wide gate. You're either on the narrow way, or you're on the broad way. You're either going to heaven, or you're going to hell. But what is this strait gate? It's obviously a metaphor, but He doesn't explicitly tell those people on the mount what it represents. But anyone who followed Him, and anyone who paid any attention to the rest of what He preached, would know exactly what He's talking about. As Christ tells us in John 10 and 14:

"Then said Jesus unto them again, Verily, verily, I say unto you, I am the door of the sheep. All that ever came before me are thieves and robbers: but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture. The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have [it] more abundantly." (John 10:7-10)

“I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.” (John 14:6)

So, He commands you to enter in at the strait gate. Why? Because the alternative is destruction. Everlasting destruction. Everlasting ruin. Just look at the teeming masses on the broad way – including almost everyone on earth who claims to be a Christian. The vast majority of mankind is strolling down the broad way, but their destination is hell.

“*Though* hand join in hand, the wicked shall not be unpunished.” (Proverbs 11:21). “Thou shalt not follow a multitude to *do* evil.” (Exodus 23:2).

It’s easy to go through the wide gate. In fact, that is the default position of every human being. It’s wide, it’s inviting, and it’s spacious enough to accommodate any number of beliefs and practices. The broad way encompasses everything other than Christ, His doctrines and His standards. And it’s not running out of room. Everyone from the raging atheist to the phony Christian can be found in this way.

If you listen carefully, this is where you will overhear lots of conversations about tolerance, open-mindedness, and ecumenicalism. You’ll hear of the virtues of our “free will,” how we’re all basically good people, and why it is that we are the masters of our own destiny. You’ll hear the words “love” and “peace” thrown around flippantly and meaninglessly. You’ll hear sins being excused and applauded, and self-indulgence and pleasures being pursued. You’ll hear about how those people over on the narrow way are intolerant, closed-minded, bigots, but we outnumber them. You’ll hear a lot of people talking about Jesus, prayer, spirituality and other religious jargon. All the while, everyone on this road is headed to destruction.

But why do most people go through the wide gate and take the broad way? Because the strait gate is hard. That is, it’s contrary to the flesh. Here’s what Luke tells us about it:

“Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able.” (Luke 13:24)

This word translated “strive” is “agonizomai,” from which we get our English word “agonize.” It means to fight, contend, struggle, endeavor, labor. This isn’t a gate that you mindlessly saunter through while you’re out on a Sunday stroll – this is a fight! It’s a struggle against sin, the flesh, Satan, the world. “The kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force.” (Matthew 11:12). “The kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it.” (Luke 16:16). The hardest thing that you will ever do in your life is give up your proud self-sufficiency and put your trust in the Lord, and without the regenerating work of the Holy Ghost, you will never do that. But when you do, it will give you sweet rest, peace and comfort:

“Come unto me, all [ye] that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke [is] easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30)

But look at what the rest of our Luke verse says - many will seek to enter, but they won't be able to. They may be attracted to the blessings associated with Christ, or the fellowship of the church, or the doctrines, or the ethics of the Bible. But they can't handle what Christ requires. They aren't laboring and heavy laden about the right things (i.e., their sins, their depravity, their inability to save themselves). They refuse to deny themselves. They can't take up their cross. They aren't willing to give everything up for Him. His commandments are grievous to them. His yoke is hard, and His burden is heavy to them. They're not willing to give up their sin. They prefer the way of the flesh and of the world, and it's too difficult to give that up. In other words, they don't have grace – they may sniff around at the edges for awhile (maybe a very long while), they may try a few other ways to get in (e.g., good works, self-righteousness), but they will not be able to enter in, and they'll ultimately continue on the broad way.

Let me tell you a few more things about this strait gate and narrow way:

- It is individual. Groups don't go through the strait gate – you go in one at a time. You aren't born into it. You haven't gone through the strait gate just because everyone around you has. It brings you, personally, face-to-face with sin, judgment, eternity, and the state of your own soul. “Every man shall bear his own burden.” (Galatians 6:5). Repentance is individual. Salvation is individual.
- It is fraught with troubles. Jesus never said you wouldn't have a yoke and a burden, but He did promise that it will be an easy yoke and a light burden. It is as Paul said in 2 Corinthians 4:8 – “We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair.” You'll suffer persecutions, you'll suffer afflictions, you may be called on to give up everything (your worldly possessions, your ambitions, your dreams, and even your own family, who may turn to be your greatest enemies). But don't look at what you have to suffer or give up – look at what you gain! Knowing that our sins are forgiven makes any difficulty easy to go through. Before entering this strait gate, though, you better make sure that you count the cost and that you're willing to make the sacrifice. Jesus didn't hide this from people – He told them right up front what it takes to be His disciple. In fact, by today's standards, He'd be considered the worst evangelist on the planet because He turned people away from Jesus. See Luke 9:23-26 & 57-62, Luke 13:23-30, Luke 14:25-33, John 12:25-26 as examples.
- You can't bring everything with you – it's too narrow. You have to leave your self-righteousness, your worldliness, and the old man behind. This is what it means to be poor in spirit.

- Only a few people are on the narrow road. You won't be alone, but you won't be with the multitudes. This is not the popular path. Jesus calls His loved ones a "little flock" and tells us that "many are called, but few are chosen." (Luke 12:32 and Matthew 22:14). You are with an exclusive remnant of people, hand-picked by God. Remember that the purpose of a gate is to let in...and to keep out.
- It is uncompromising. It starts off narrow and difficult, and it stays narrow and difficult. Satan doesn't take vacations, so you must always be circumspect.
- It requires you to walk as Christ walked. Look up ahead on the narrow way, and you will see Christ leading you. He did not come only to save you from Hell – He came also to "purify unto Himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works." (Titus 2:14). This is a path to be trodden, not a path to be admired. And this is why He uses the metaphor of "a way." It is your manner of life. Your course of conduct. This is why in the very early days of Christianity, Christians were described as those who were "of this way" (or, "of THE way") – see, for example, Acts 9:2.

At this point in the sermon, I would remind everyone to "examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?" (2 Corinthians 13:5). If you have not entered in at the strait gate, stop rebelling against that command. If you are unsure whether you've entered, you better get sure. That should become the number one priority in your life. Are you concerned that because you sin, you must be on the broad way? My friends, nobody is sinless. You can fall flat on your face on the narrow way and get back up ("For a just man falleth seven times, and riseth up again" – Proverbs 24:16). "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9). But if you're wandering along without caring which way you're on, and without considering your destination, you are a fool. Give yourself neither peace nor rest until you are sure you are on the narrow way.

Moving on to the rest of today's text, Jesus immediately addresses the subject of false prophets. Why? Because ravenous false prophets are stationed at every turn to direct you to the wide gate and the broad way. They are in abundance, and they are highly successful. One of the reasons that few find the strait gate is because there's always a false prophet to redirect you away from it.

He tells us to "beware" of them. They're dangerous! It means to be attentive, take heed, guard yourself. You must watch closely, because they're exceedingly crafty and are experts at what they do. A sheep's natural defense mechanisms are to constantly be watching in front, to the sides, and behind, flee if they perceive danger, and band together with the rest of their flock. If you aren't on guard and circumspect, these wolves will devour you. Paul warns us that "after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock."

(Acts 20:29). Zechariah 11:16-17 describes the false shepherd as one that “shall not visit those that be cut off, neither shall seek the young one, nor heal that that is broken, nor feed that that standeth still: but he shall eat the flesh of the fat, and tear their claws in pieces...that leaveth the flock!” So far from caring for and protecting the sheep, they devour them. A far cry from our God or His faithful under-shepherds: “He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry *them* in his bosom, *and* shall gently lead those that are with young.” (Isaiah 40:11).

A false prophet comes in sheep’s clothing. They pass themselves off as true believers, true prophets, and true shepherds. They want to put on a façade so they look like the true prophets of God, but they’re deceivers, just like the false prophets in Zechariah 13:4 who had once worn “a rough garment to deceive.” Underneath that holy exterior, they are ravening wolves. What does “ravening” mean? It means rapacious, extortionate, predatory, to snatch or seize. It’s the same word translated elsewhere as “extortioners” (thieves, robbers). We’re talking about someone who greedily pursues and seizes people for their own gain and benefit, giving no regard for the soul of the one whom they pursue. When it’s all said and done, despite what they may say to the contrary, these false prophets couldn’t care less about you – they care about what they can get out of the deal for themselves. It doesn’t matter how kind or winsome or well-intentioned they appear – these are dangerous people who will be “hewn down, and cast into the fire” (Matthew 7:19), taking you along with them.

Wolves are smart, stealthy, tenacious, and patient hunters. They are opportunists who watch the sheep closely, looking for any signs of weakness or vulnerability, and strike at just the right moment. They wait for one sheep to break rank, stumble, or make one wrong move. They are also collaborative animals – they generally work in packs and perform well-planned, coordinated attacks. Once a wolf sinks its teeth into a sheep’s neck, the sheep is absolutely defenseless. Its only hope is for someone else to save it.

This is what you’re dealing with when you’re dealing with a false prophet...except it’s a lot harder, because he is an expert at disguising himself. He doesn’t announce himself as a wolf – he passes himself off as one of the sheep. Paul tells us that these deceivers have transformed themselves into the apostles of Christ, even as Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:13-14). At first blush, he looks right, sounds right, acts right...but if you look closely at his fruit, you’ll see something terribly wrong.

So, false prophets are known by their fruits. He uses an agricultural metaphor here. It is axiomatic that if a plant produces fruit, the fruit that it produces will be according to its nature. Thorn bushes do not produce grapes. Thistles do not produce figs. Good trees produce good fruit, and bad trees produce bad fruit. The trees may look the same, and the

fruit may even look the same, but one is good, and the other bad. But what does He mean here by fruit? Shockingly, I can't get a consistent answer across the commentators. Some say it is only talking about the doctrine of the false prophet but not his behavior. Others say it is only the behavior of the false prophet but not his doctrine. I say that it's always been pretty clear to me that it includes those things, and anything else that the false prophet produces.

Some false prophets are so easy to detect because of their blatant heresies and notorious sins that you know almost immediately what you're dealing with. If a Mormon, for example, shows up at my door and tells me that before God the Father became God the Father, He was a mortal man, and just like Him, I have the potential to become a god, I know that I'm dealing with a heretic. I don't need to hear a whole lot more. If a Jehovah's Witness tries to convince me that Jesus Christ is not God, I know I'm dealing with a heretic. If a Catholic tries to tell me that if I confess my sins to a priest and then say a few Hail Marys and Our Fathers and maybe give some alms, then those are meritorious works that will get me to heaven; and just in case my own works aren't meritorious enough, they'll top it off with some merit out of the "Treasury of Merit"...I know I'm dealing with a heretic. If I see an Episcopal bishop claiming to be married to another man, and telling me that sodomy is a sacrament, I know this is a false prophet who is living in open rebellion against God and His Word. If I'm in a church with a female preacher, I know I'm dealing with a selfish rebel who couldn't care less what the Word of God says (see 1 Timothy 2:11-15).

In my eyes, these are obvious heresies and outrageous sins – this is a no-brainer! Without a doubt, these are dangerous false prophets, and you should stay away from them in matters of religion lest you get tainted by their heresies (don't become arrogant and think you're immune – a lot of people have been deceived by them). But if you know anything about the Bible, they're pretty easy to spot. These types of false prophets are certainly included here in the Matthew 7 passage, but I think Christ's main focus in this passage is on those false prophets who are particularly clever and deceptive. And some of them are so deceptive by nature that they've even deceived themselves! Alexander MacLaren said about this passage: "It is not a test to detect heretics, but rather to unmask hypocrites, and especially unconscious hypocrites." These people can be hard to discern, because their fruit might look really good at first blush. And it might take awhile – I don't want to take the metaphor too far, but fruit doesn't grow and ripen overnight. But Christ tells us twice in this passage (to emphasize the importance of it) that we will know them by their fruits. We must look at their fruits!

So, for the remainder of this sermon, I'd like to go over just a few of these "fruits" that we are called to examine. I've tried to break this up into categories to make it easier to follow, but there is going to be some overlap between them. And I'd like to say a few cautionary things up front. First, if you'll recall, what comes right before this passage of scripture is the passage

on censorious judgments, so remember that when you're trying to discern whether or not you're dealing with a false prophet, you're setting up a standard by which you will be judged - keep it Biblical, and have a proper spirit about it. Secondly, remember that "the path of the just *is* as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day." (Proverbs 4:18). In the history of this little church, we have learned and made corrections as God has been pleased to give us more and more light on this or that matter, and if Proverbs 4:18 is to be believed, He's not done giving us more and more light. If there is a sincere preacher/church who is in that same situation, we cannot immediately write them off as a false prophet/false church just because they have something wrong (of course, this depends on the severity of what it is that they have wrong – for example, denying the sovereignty of God, denying the wrath and hatred of God, saying that salvation is by our own free wills and works – these are all deal breakers). With that said, we are duty-bound to hold everyone (including ourselves) to the standard of the Bible, and we cannot neglect to call a false prophet a false prophet when all the evidence points to it.

What they say...and what they don't say

When false prophets talk, they may say a lot of true things, but you have to listen closely. They will openly reject passages of scripture, they will water down and interpret scripture to accommodate the sins of their congregants, they will introduce heresies, and/or they will leave out important truths altogether. Look carefully, and there will be something horribly wrong. Arminians, for example, are spot on about a lot of things. But in the final analysis, they teach that the determining factor of whether a person is saved or not is based on a work of the flesh. Anyone who truly believes and preaches that you are ultimately saved by the flesh (or any other perverse view of salvation) is a false prophet.

What is truly in the heart of a man will eventually come out of his mouth. It doesn't matter how carefully you guard your tongue, or how long you can deceive...what you really believe is going to come out somewhere and somehow. "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh." (Matthew 12:34). A false prophet may stand up and speak movingly and stirringly, but his hostility towards God and His plan of salvation is going to come out. The best example I can think of is Billy Graham (1918-2018). I hope we can all agree that one of the fundamental and necessary truths of the Christian religion is that you must believe in Christ in order to go to heaven. And to his credit, Billy Graham preached that. At least he preached that sometimes. In a 1997 interview with Bob Schuller, Billy Graham let it slip out what he really believed when he said, "They may not even know the name of Jesus but they know in their hearts that they need something that they don't have, and they turn to the only light that they have, and I think that they are saved, and that they're going to be with us in heaven."

I was talking to a young man about this once, and he excused it by saying, “Well, Billy Graham was almost 80 when he said that. He got caught off-guard and was confused due to his advanced age.” So I looked into the matter. In 1978, when Billy Graham was around 60, he let the following slip during an interview: “I used to believe that pagans in far-off countries were lost – were going to hell – if they did not have the gospel of Jesus Christ preached to them. I no longer believe that. I believe that there are other ways of recognizing the existence of God – through nature, for instance – and plenty of other opportunities, therefore, of saying ‘yes’ to God.”

When dealing with a false prophet, it is often the case that what they don’t say is far more important than what they do say. If someone is purposefully not preaching the whole counsel of God (that is, they are leaving things out on purpose), that person is a false prophet (see Acts 20:27). The commission is to “teach them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:20). Otherwise, you have absolutely no support for the claim that Christ is with you. These people, though, want to be chummy, say only inoffensive and comfortable things, be respected by everyone, etc. They throw out a lot of religious and orthodox sounding words, lots of vague talk about Jesus and the Spirit leading them to do this or that, but they leave important things out. Here are a few examples:

- They talk a lot about forgiveness, grace, and peace (as if God owes you those things), but not about the narrow way of repentance, obedience and holiness.
- They talk a lot about God’s love and mercy and Heaven, but not about His hatred and vengeance and Hell.
- They talk unclearly about sin, chuckling and excusing it by saying, “well, we’re all sinners...we’re not perfect, but we’re really not that bad,” but not about the sinfulness of sin. Nothing about the desperate wickedness and total depravity of mankind, and the need for brokenness and poverty of spirit and hunger and thirst after righteousness.
- They talk about believing in Christ and use phrases like “accept Jesus as your personal Savior,” “make a decision for Christ,” etc., but not about what it takes to actually be a disciple of Christ.
- They talk sentimentally about the cross of Christ, but want to have nothing to do with the offense of the cross.
- There is a lot of fluff and airy language, but very little substance. “They have healed the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace.” (Jeremiah 8:11).

Arthur Pink sums it up well: “Any preacher who rejects God’s law, who denies repentance to be a condition of salvation, who assures the giddy and godless that they are loved by God, who

declares that saving faith is nothing more than an act of the will which every person has the power to perform, is a false prophet, and should be shunned like a deadly plague.”

Their Character and Behavior

A man’s doctrines, character and behavior are all inextricably linked. What you believe, and what you are, will manifest itself in how you behave. Just like what comes out of your mouth, you may be able to hide it and put a show on for everyone, and you may be an expert at doing that, but your true character will eventually show itself. A false prophet isn’t only known by his words, but by his life. This one is a little more difficult than listening to words, because these people have an amazing ability to disguise themselves, often times only revealing their true character when they’re not in the view of the public, so if you’re not privy to what is outside of the public eye, you may not know what’s going on. A lot of times, though, this will erupt into some big public scandal, centered around lasciviousness, or money, or greed, or some other scandalous behavior (e.g., the Catholic Church, Jim Bakker, Ted Haggard).

If a person says one thing and then, as a matter of pattern, lives their lives opposite of that, you have a false prophet on your hands. Note that I’m not saying that a preacher must be sinless, and I’m not saying that a preacher can’t fall into grievous sin (think David). I’m talking about the general direction of their lives, just like with any other believer. Have they really repented? Then the direction of their walk in life would be like a person who has really repented. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

- They may exude pride, rather than what you would expect to see from someone who knows they’re a sinner saved by grace. You can’t fake this. Remember that a faux humility is just another form of pride.
- They might talk about the fruits of the spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) or the Beatitudes, but there’s very little to no evidence that they actually possess those characteristics (at least some of them).
- Look at their motivations, but be careful with this one, because attributing motives can be dangerous. But there are some common motivations to beware of. For example, do they appear to be entertainers rather than preachers? It’s probably because they want to be popular and well-liked. Have they made a fortune off the Word of God, or are they respecters of rich persons? They’re probably in it for the money or the prestige.

The fact is, if they’re corrupt and unregenerate (and there are a LOT of preachers in this category), they might be able to pull off a relatively moral life, but they’re doing it for all the wrong reasons. If you don’t live like a Christian because you are a Christian, then even your good works are corrupt fruit.

Look At Their Church

One way to know if you're dealing with a false prophet is to look at his church. Look at the oversight of it, if there is any oversight. Most churches have removed the ancient landmarks (Proverbs 22:28) to one degree or another. Some have completely removed them; some have just nudged them to the side a little bit. Either way is deadly, and is characteristic of the broad way. Note that I'm not going to go into all the "denominations" today (which there are so many of it makes your head spin), but needless to say, you know right up front that if you're looking at a Catholic, Episcopal, Methodist, Eastern Orthodox, Pentecostal, etc., church, it's almost a guarantee that you're dealing with false prophets. Of the nearly 2.5 billion people who are claiming to be "Christians" today, very few of those are actually Christian.

Here are some things to look for:

- Are they obsessed with the number of people in the church? Do they keep and publish detailed records on the number of baptisms, for example? They are likely more concerned with numbers than they are souls; quantity is more important to them than quality. More people, of course, means more money. "Few" people are on the narrow way. People who teach damnable heresies are followed by "many" (2 Peter 2:1-2). We have this phenomenon nowadays called "megachurches," and it's not necessarily dispositive, but in today's climate, it's almost a guarantee that there's a false prophet at the helm. He's either preaching some ridiculous self-help prosperity gospel, or engaging in some fraudulent "healing," or he's just arrogant and domineering and likes to have the control and the prestige. People are generally attracted to these churches because they can be entertained, it makes them feel holy because they're "going to church," but they can still hide in the crowd and continue sinning.
- Do they practice church discipline? Some churches talk about it, but don't actually practice it. They have divorced and remarried people as members in good standing. They have unmarried people living with each other as if they were married. All manner of rebellion is enabled, and for one sinful reason or another, the church does not address it. They may say a lot of true things, but holy living is not required.
- How do they perform the ordinances? The scriptural pattern is full immersion for baptism, and one loaf and one cup of the "fruit of the vine" for the Lord's Supper. It is supreme arrogance and rebellion to do this in a manner different than what Christ showed and commanded.
- How do they deal with the God-ordained differences between the roles of men and women? The scriptural requirement is that elders and deacons be male. And the pattern that we see in 1 Corinthians 11 is for men to have short hair and women to have long hair, and wear a head covering during the worship service "because of the angels." (1 Corinthians 11:10). Why would they intentionally not do this?

- What types of people are members of the church? If they attract the natural and carnal man, it's because they are preaching something that is pleasing to the natural and carnal man.

A false church (with a false prophet) compromises on the moral standards of God ("we don't want to cause division in the church"), will not preach publicly against sin ("we'll offend people and destroy our platform to advance the kingdom"), strives to be culturally relevant ("we need to be like the world in order to reach the world"), and sees their goal as being to fill pews, raise money, and entertain.

Follow the Money

To finish up, it seems that making merchandize of the gospel is a widespread problem. The common cry you'll hear is "Blessed be the Lord; for I am rich." (Zechariah 11:5). Gift shops with marked up prices are inside many churches today (see Matthew 21:12, Mark 11:15, John 2:15). Preachers are making outrageous salaries. Special concessions are made for their rich members (see James 2:1-4). Dishonest and unfaithful bribes and sweetheart deals are happening behind the scenes. Decisions on issues like church discipline are made depending on how it will impact the bottom line. They fleece the flock and "devour widows' houses" ("if you help pay for my private jet, I'll pray for God to bless you" or, "if you bequeath your life savings to me, you'll be helping me preach against the guy that wants you to pay for his private jet"). The Word of God has become big business...a profit-making endeavor.

"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." (2 Peter 2:3)

"For we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ." (2 Corinthians 2:17)

The word "corrupt" there means "to peddle, make money by selling, to get base gain, to corrupt, adulterate." The idea is that you keep careful watch and modify the Word ever so slightly, or withhold just enough of it, to make it palatable, so you don't say something that's going to dry up the money stream.

Making money off of the Word of God was a problem when Peter and Paul wrote their epistles. It was a problem in the first century church (people were warned of someone being a "Christemporos," which means "Christ merchant" – one who makes a gain out of the name of Christ). And it seems to me to be a rampant problem now, and one of the key ways of identifying a false prophet. I love you. Amen.