



Matthew 7:15-23: Warnings about False Prophets.

Introduction:

At such a time as this, it seems urgent that we should remind ourselves of the things Jesus said concerning False Prophets and the tests that we should apply. The teaching firstly looks at the tests of prophecy and other miraculous 'gifts' of the Spirit, and then explores large movements that have affected the church in the last 50 years, setting these in the context of culture.

v21: *"Not everyone who says to me "Lord, Lord" will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father in Heaven".*

What then is the will of the Father? Being forgiven and baptised (Acts 2:38), confessing with the lips that Jesus is Lord, and believing in the heart that God raised Him from the dead (Rom 10:9), continuing then to follow all that He commands us in a living relationship with Him. This is our start point for all valid ministry.

vv22-23: *"Did we not prophesy in Your Name ... and perform many miracles '... I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evil doers"."*

How can this be, for those who did such things? Remember it is not the use of 'Gifts' that saves us. Jesus said: "He who is not gathering with me is really scattering" (Luke 11:23). Those who set themselves up with powerful ministries without the 'walk' with Him in obedience, which is required as the origin of ministry, will be judged with severity.

vv 15-20: *"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit shall you recognise them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, 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. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus by their fruit will you know them."*

What are the main issues? The false prophets come dressed as sheep - in behaviour, outward appearance, way of speaking - all plausible. Remember again that powerful gifting is not the first test. Note Rev 13:11: The beast who has the horns of a lamb, but spoke like a dragon. He was able to do great signs, even to command fire from heaven, and he deceived all the people of the earth. Note also what Jesus said in Matthew 24:4: That false Christs and false prophets would arise and lead astray *even the elect* if that be possible. Signs and wonders are not the authenticating factor, if taken in isolation. Christians need to be on watch.

Does this mean that we reject all signs and wonders? Not at all! Note 1 Thess 5:20: *Do not despise prophesying, but test everything, hold fast the good, abstain from every form of evil.*

Note also that the Gifts of the Spirit are listed in 1 Cor 12:8-10, as good gifts to be expected in the church for the upbuilding of all. The exhortation is not to reject these gifts, but where they are encountered, to test them ... not to reject just because there might be error, but equally not to blindly accept because what is happening is miraculous in nature.

The primary test in the text above is "The Fruits", but other tests would be: The exercise of the Spiritual Gift of "Discernment of Spirits" (1 Cor.12:10), realising that spirits can be human, demonic, or Divine. We need to know which and that is why this gift is given. Next we ask, is what is being done scriptural? The Holy Spirit as author will not contradict Himself! Then there is the weighing of what is said or done by the others present (1 Cor.14:29). There is a corporate wisdom in the assembly of the saints. Finally, is what is being prophesied in line with what has already been discerned in the Spirit, in line with other prophecies or other guidance? That is also helpful. Something "out of the blue" would need much more rigorous testing. Jesus in this passage makes "The Fruits" the main test. So let us ask: How much do we know of the life of the one bringing this word or performing this miracle? Is the person in good standing with his/her church? They may not be perfect, but are they 'working out their salvation with fear and trembling'? Let us ask, what is the fruit of this ministry? Is it drawing people



closer to the Lord or closer to the prophet performing the 'sign'? Is any prophecy bringing 'edification, exhortation and comfort'? (1 Cor 14:3). Is the fruit of this ministry bringing about a Godly result?

What of big movements, such as Toronto? Here we need to look both 'macro' and 'micro'. Macro: is the movement in essence a move of God?, and Micro: Is the particular manifestation in front of me correct? Failure to look at these movements at both levels leads to sweeping errors, either to accept everything, good and bad, as 'spiritual', or to reject everything as demonic on the basis of certain errors. Neither is a mature reaction. Jesus said: "Where the body is, there will the eagles gather". There is often a mixture, and often some confusion. For an example from scripture, let us study the '1st Century Middle East Revival' - ie the New Testament. Was it basically essentially a move of God? Yes! Was everything that happened correct? Consider 1 John 2:19: *They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us...* Consider also that Jesus said that there could be wheat and tares in the same field. What about the warnings in the letters? The Galatians in law, or the Corinthians in license? Does this invalidate the whole movement? No, it means that local correction is needed in an essentially correct move of God. Let us therefore look at three 'movements' from the last 50 years.

- The Charismatic Renewal (Circa 1961-1982/3): A restoration of Gifts of the Spirit to historic mainline denominations. Was it of God in essence? We would say yes. What was the fruit: Every member ministry, Gifts of the spirit, New 'streams', Personal Renewal. Were there problems, things not right? Absolutely! There were many excesses.
- The Toronto Blessing (Mid 1990's): A 'refreshing' to the church. Appears to have had personal renewal as the main focus. Was it of God in essence? What was the fruit? Personal renewal of many, and a big positive effect upon the Prayer Movement. Were there problems, things not right? Absolutely! A lot of uncorrected excesses and errors.
- Lakeland (2008): A short-lived 'healing revival', centred upon Lakeland in Florida, spread rapidly by much (Christian) media focus. Was this of God in essence? There will be much confusion and disagreement on this. Let us again look at the fruit: A lot of attested healings, personal renewal, faith rising in a discouraged church (at least until the problems of the main leader). Were there problems, things not right? Very much so! Reported conversations with angels extremely suspect, unwise involvement of previously discredited leaders, personal problems of the main leader. This is where the two level examination helps us a little to see through the confusion.

Note a trend: There has been an increasing level of errors within these three movements, if we are to assume that they all started out as moves of God. There has been an increasing lack of 'micro' discernment exercised by those taking part within these movements and there has been an apparent increased reluctance to exercise any corrective actions.

We need to remember that revivals reflect the culture into which they come. Movements are coming into a changing culture in the Western World, and some aspects of this are potentially a problem. Looking again at the three movements above:

- The Charismatic Renewal: Came into a church that was largely locked in 'Modernity'. This meant a culture that was still basically happy with concepts of 'right and wrong'. It meant a church culture still basically ready to take everything back to scripture, a church culture as content to look for meaning and explanation as to look for experience, and a church culture still familiar with the idea of dogma.
- Toronto: Came into a church in transition, partially in modernity, partially in post-modernity.
- Lakeland: Came into a church that is striving to identify itself with, and is indeed partially made up from 'Post-Modernity'. That leads to a church that is suspicious of dogma, questioning of concepts of 'right and wrong'. A church where response to and knowledge of scripture is patchy, where there is an increased unwillingness to submit to or recognise authority. A church where there is an increasing lack of knowledge of, or interest in the past, or thoughts of the future, but lives in an eternal present, tending to seek experience over truth. This is not to indicate that "Modernity" was a more godly culture or one to which we should seek



to return, merely to point out that some aspects of Post Modernity are leading us to a situation where there is an increased tendency to disregard discernment about right and wrong in the church, and to abstain from and reject any need to accept correction. Therefore we must remain vigilant in our discernment at this time, since many aspects of the culture in which we all live, and from which it is very difficult to escape, mitigate against the discipline which needs to be incorporated into any movement in order to keep it safe.

What are the main issues?: Let us always remember the reasons why the Spirit is given to the church, reasons which are always true in any general movement. The Spirit is given to recall the words of Jesus, to be our counsellor, and to be the empowerment for service, especially mission. True prophecy and true signs and wonders are wonderfully upbuilding to the church and are powerful pointers to the truth. On the other hand, false prophecy and miracles undiscerned, are powerful signposts away from the Kingdom. Let us therefore test everything, hold fast the good and reject the evil, as commanded.

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