BEING WISE AND GREAT

1. False prophets

a. Last time we saw Jesus warning us to choose the narrow gate rather than the wide gate that leads to destruction. Even though the narrow gate is the difficult way it leads to life. He warned that many would choose to go through the wide gate and then exhorts us to beware of false prophets, to take notice of them and be cautious.

Matt.7:15-20 *[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 thorn bushes, or figs from thorn bushes? [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.*

b. Jesus compared false prophets to wolves because their ideas are extremely dangerous. They are dangerous to people's spiritual life because they convince them that the narrow way is much broader than Jesus taught. They present the broad and easy way as the "narrow way." They contradict the words of Jesus by presenting the broad road as the way of grace.

c. We may think it is easy to identify false prophets because we believe that a false prophet is one who does not look anything like a Christian. Yet Jesus describes the false prophet, not as one who is from a false religion, but as a wolf who comes in sheep's clothing. The words, "false prophet," literally mean one who is a fake or an imposter of a true prophet, someone pretending to speak the word of the Lord (prophesy) but in fact is phony (an imposter), acting as a wolf in sheep's clothing Outwardly, he looks like a true prophet, manifesting signs and wonders, yet his inner life exposes the truth of who he really is.

d. Many are so enamoured with power ministries that they have no lens to discern false prophets from true prophets. They believe that the manifestation of power in a person's ministry is the key feature that determines authenticity in Christ. Jesus makes it clear that there are those who will look just like real prophets and associate themselves with the sheep, yet inwardly they are like "ravenous wolves."

e. The word "ravenous" can also be translated as "one who is a swindler or greedy." Therefore, false prophets can be identified as ones who are greedy for money. They want to swindle people by the use of the gospel.

f. The word, "ravenous," can also be translated "rapacious." This gives the picture of an animal that preys and lives off other animals. A false prophet is one who uses the name of Christ and uses his sphere in ministry for <u>his own benefit</u>. He does not look out for the good of the people but only for his own interests. He uses the ministry as a means to financial gain and personal prowess.

g. This is what Paul warned the elders from Ephesus of in Acts 20:29–30. He told them to beware of men who would not look after the good of the flock but would draw them after themselves for their own benefit.

h. Jesus further tells us that the fruit of the false prophet is what will make it easy to identify Him. He says that a good tree will bear good fruit and a bad tree will bear bad fruit. How do we assess whether fruit is good or bad? Many believe that power manifestations are a sign of good fruit.

However, false prophets are able to manifest power in the name of Jesus. We are only able to identify them as false because they bear bad fruit.

i. The false prophet bears the bad fruit e.g. selfish ambition, greed, the desire for personal gain at the expense of others and often sexual sin. He does not bear the fruit of righteousness. The fruit he bears is the exact opposite of the value system of the kingdom and the character of Christ. Its not about what he can do, its about the value system that is evident in his life.

j. We can only test or know a ministry by its fruit—words and deeds (Mt. 7:16, 20). We do not treat others based on what we discern is wrong without evidence of fruit. In this way, the Lord protects the Body of Christ from a culture of accusation and slander.

k. Most false teachers are not aware they are false because they do not read the Scriptures enough to understand their error. This is often due to emphasising experience over scripture Do not be dazzled by their popularity, charm or stories. Scripture requires God's people to take a stand against compromising trends or doctrines in the Church without dismissing the whole Church as participating in them. There are millions of faithful believers worldwide who boldly refuse compromise.

l. There are times to bring judgment to ministries that have destructive doctrines and behaviour (Mt. 18:15-17; 1 Cor. 5:1-11; 2 Cor. 11:12-15; 1 Thes. 5:14, 21; 2 Thes. 3:6-14; Rev. 2:2, 14-15, 20). However, we must do this in the right way and with a right spirit. In Revelation 2-3, Jesus identified compromise in five of the seven churches. We must take a stand against issues that Jesus took a stand against without assuming that entire denominations or "streams" in the Body of Christ are all in error.

m. Loving the Church is not the same as agreeing with the practices of each local church in the Body of Christ. It is a biblical expression of love to identify major compromises that are hurting the Church (but without criticising specific ministries by name unless going through the biblical process).

Matt. 18:15-17 *15 "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*

2. I never knew you

a. Many who profess Christ do not seriously embrace obedience in their private lives.

Matt.7:21-22 *21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord', will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' 23 And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'*

b. Obedience to Jesus does not earn our salvation, but gives evidence that our faith is genuine. We express our faith with works of obedience to Jesus. To exalt works as that which earns God's love greatly undermines the grace of God. However, to exclude good works as unnecessary is to deny the life empowering influence of grace. Salvation by works and salvation without works both rob Jesus of His glory.

James 2:14–17 *[14] "…if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can [that] faith save him?..." [17] Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*

c. Many boldly profess allegiance to Jesus publicly by calling Him their Lord, but they lack the saving faith that must be expressed in the lives of all who genuinely love Jesus. They have many testimonies of their prophecies, exorcisms, and healing miracles and assume their popular ministry will be sufficient proof of their genuine faith.

d. However, they will stand before Him on the Day of Judgement and be told "depart from me". These will be the most shocking and terrifying words that they will ever hear. Their focus is mostly on their ministry and not in cultivating a life of obedience. They are described as they who practice lawlessness.

e. Scripture is full of warnings of false prophets at the end of the age. We need to take note and not be easily deceived by signs and wonders and charismatic messages. There is a clear plumb line – the word of God and the values of His Kingdom. We want to be those who are discerning and help others to avoid being drawn onto the wide path that leads to destruction.

f. Practical ways to avoid deception include regular, prayerful Bible reading; setting our hearts to obey the Lord; staying in close relationship with others; regular involvement with a body of believers that has leaders who uphold biblical doctrines and practices; and maintaining a teachable spirit—that receives instruction and correction from others.

3. Build on the rock

a. Jesus ended the Sermon by calling us to a lifestyle of consistent obedience.

Matt.7:24-27 *[24] "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. [25] And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. [26] And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. [27] And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."*

b. In this parable we see two types of professing believers. One was wise because he took the trouble to build his house on a rock foundation. The foolish one built it on sand. A casual observer cannot see the differences because foundations are not seen. Jesus tells us that the way to build on rock and to be found standing at the end of the age is by doing, or obeying, His teachings in the Sermon on the Mount

c. Here is a call to renounce the values of secular culture that are so popular in the Church. Nothing can substitute for our consistent obedience. Even a popular ministry cannot camouflage disobedience in one's private life (that is not repented of). Tragically, there are many in the Church who are deceived. We need to live in the fear of God knowing that our obedience will be tested.

d. Jesus invites everyone to be great in His sight without regard for their outward achievements or the size of their ministry. It will be based on the size of their heart in obedience and love to Him.

Matt. 5:19*[19]Whoever breaks [consistently] one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does [consistently] and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*

e. Jesus revealed a new paradigm for greatness. We focus on being great in His sight rather than in man's sight. This greatness will be fully manifest in the age to come.

f. Jesus warned that if we minimize the least of His commandments and teach others to do so, we will be least in His kingdom in the age to come. Many, in the name of teaching on grace, promote spiritual laziness and a lack of commitment to Jesus.

g. In the storm our love of Jesus must be tested and proven as genuine under the pressures of life. There is a two-fold application of storms that test our spiritual foundations. First, personal pressures in this life reveal the genuineness of our faith. Second, the evaluation of our life at the judgment seat of Christ will reveal the true character of our faith. Jesus tells us that the way to be foolish in God's eyes is by neglecting to obey His teachings in the Sermon on the Mount

Matt.7:26-27 *[26]Everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: [27]and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall.*

h. Jesus did not compare Christians with non-Christians, but only those who heard His sayings or teachings. Both groups read the Bible, went to church, listened to sermons and listened to Christian music. We cannot always recognise the differences between them because the "foundations" of their private lives are out of view. The main issue is whether they diligently sought to obey Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount.

i. The idea of blending into the secular scene with music, fashion, movies, etc. to win people *by becoming like them* is a great mistake. Jesus taught that believers who are indistinguishable from non-Christians are useless in bringing real change to the world.

j. Jesus' message is very serious and must not be ignored in light of its sober warnings. Which road are we going to travel? On which foundation are we going to build? What type of message will we proclaim? The biblical message calls forth humility, poverty of spirit, and makes people cry to God for mercy and to hunger for Jesus and righteous lifestyles.

4. Approved by God

a. If we are true followers of Jesus and citizens of His Kingdom then we need to live by the values of this Kingdom. Its not enough to know the Kingdom, or even to make the decision to step out of the kingdom of the world into the Kingdom of Heaven. We need to live by the values of that Kingdom if we want to see it established in our lives.

b. There is a coming clash of Kingdoms – the values of this world are becoming more and more opposed to the values of the Kingdom. There is a choice – do we want to be approved of by the world or by our heavenly Father? The evidence of one who has been approved by God is that he will live by the truth of the word and desire to bring glory to God not to himself.

2 Tim.2:15 *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.*

2 Cor.10:18 *For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.*

1 Thess.2:4 *just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts.*