

Old Testament: Nehemiah 9:26, Jeremiah 35:15, Jeremiah 37:15, and Jeremiah 38:6
New Testament: Matthew 21: 33 - 46

Please join me in prayer. And now Lord God may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be pleasing and acceptable in Thy sight our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

In the same way that there are such things as false teachers, so are there such things as false prophets. Claiming things about God, wisdom and insight into the Divine that “no else has”, or a new message from on High, is a powerful tool. As such, it is no surprise that any number of charlatans and pretenders would desire to leverage such power for their own nefarious purposes. People take the name of God in vain everyday and no, I’m not talking about using profanity. So, once again, we are left to discern who is truly prophetic and truly teaching and who is doing so falsely in pursuit of their own power and agendas. I understand why so many of us would much prefer that it was easy; that we could simply take what people say about God, or in the name of God, at face value and trust them when they say it. I would prefer that too. But both history and the Bible are filled with people abusing and misappropriating the good name of YHWH. What I want to submit to you today is that this discernment work is not simple, though it is actually pretty darn easy. And this desire for simplicity has weakened our faith in God.

The parable of the tenants that was read this morning falls on immediately after last week’s parable of the two sons. We learned last week that Jesus was directing his parable at the chief priests and elders and, as this parable follows on, he is directing this one at them too. Please note the wisdom of the parables. In contemporary society and “debate” we seem only to have one tool at our disposal. We take a bludgeon to our opponents and whoever is a less bloody pulp by the time that all is said and done is the “winner”. In both last week’s parable and today’s Jesus is able to make it such, through the powerful tool of the question, that the chief priests and elders condemn themselves! Both times Jesus does not have to bludgeon them into submission to recognize their wrong. He simply has to ask them a question. This right here is the first way that we can discern between true and false prophets and teachers. Easy, not simple. If a prophet or a teacher is trying to bludgeon you into submission through threat, intimidation, fear mongering, condemnation, they are likely a false teacher or prophet. Jesus, the money changing tables in the temple courts being the lone exception, didn’t operate that way. Jesus didn’t bludgeon the chief priests and elders, the Pharisees and Sadducees, with his words. Jesus helped them to see the error of their own way.

Another tool at our disposal for discerning between true and false prophets and teachers that both last weeks and this week's parables reveal is looking at what work people do. In the parable of the two sons, the chief priests and the elders, as well as everyone in the congregation, were clearly able to answer Jesus' question. Which of the two sons did the will of his father? The one who refused with his words and then went and did the work? Or the one who agreed to go with his words and then did not go and do the work? In today's parable Jesus takes this clarification one step further. What do you all think? Are there good works and bad works? Then it is incumbent upon us to understand and discern the differences. So Jesus asks the chief priests and elders what should be done when the work that is done is the beating, stoning, and murdering of the landowner's servants culminating in the murder of his son? That is not good work they say. The landowner should get others to work the land. Jesus agrees. And both the chief priests and elders and Jesus further agree that the new tenants should be measured by how well they produce the fruit of the vineyard. (Brief excursus). In the parable, the fruit of the vineyard is obviously the grape harvest. But is Jesus talking about the grape harvest when he talks about people producing its fruit?

The chief priests and Pharisees, interesting that Matthew changes from elders to Pharisees here in his narrative, certainly perceived that Jesus was not talking about the grape harvest. They wanted to arrest him when they figured out that he was talking about their lack of fruit production. So if Jesus wasn't talking about grapes, and the chief priests and Pharisees knew it too, then what fruit was he talking about? The Apostle Paul talks about the fruits of the Spirit being love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. If this is the case, and if this is what Jesus was referring to, that Paul so helpfully fleshed out for us, then our work of discernment between true and false teachers and prophets is as easy as I submitted to you back at the beginning of this sermon. It is not simple, but it is easy. True prophets and teachers of God exhibit and teach, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. False prophets and teachers who falsely claim God exhibit and teach, hate, anger, division, hastiness, meanness, nastiness, harshness, and do whatever they please when they please regardless of consequences.

So which prophets and teachers are you listening to? I hope and pray that we all have the courage to listen to and follow those prophets and teachers who are producing the fruits of the Spirit and not telling us what we already want to hear. Amen.