

## Two Ditches and a Narrow Gate – Part 2

Last week we reflected on a proverb of the pioneer preacher N. L. Clark. “There’s a ditch on both sides of the road,” meaning that people are drawn to extremes on one side or another of an issue, but the truth is usually found somewhere between the extremes. We noted that one of the emphases of pioneer preachers like Clark and G. B. Shelburne and others was to avoid extremist thinking, especially imposing our own judgments and interpretations about matters which honest and sincere believers may reasonably differ about. We also noted that this was consistent with the great mottos of our heritage in the Restoration Movement, mottos like “In faith unity, in opinions liberty, in all things charity.”

This morning I want to look at a particular passage that I think has often been taught in ways that reflect the kind of extreme thinking we should avoid. It’s a passage found in Matthew 7 and it is about a narrow gate, ferocious wolves and false prophets. I have come to interpret this passage in a way that is different than what I often heard growing up. Before you listen to my interpretation I should remind you again of one of my favorite cautionary tales I’ve shared with you before, about the Mexican bandit Pancho Villa and the Texas Rangers.

Pancho Villa used to come across the border and steal gold from people in the United States. Then he would run back into Mexico with the Texas Rangers hot on his trail. The Rangers finally surrounded him in a Mexican village. They told

him, “We want you to return all the gold you have stolen. If you do not, we will kill you.” Poor Pancho did not speak any English. He could only respond, “Lo siento mucho, no hablo ingles.” But none of the Rangers spoke Spanish.

A boy in the village saw the problem. He went to the Ranger captain and said, “Excuse me sir, but I speak Spanish and English. I will translate for you.” “Great,” they said. “You tell Pancho that if he doesn’t tell us where all the treasure is, we are going to kill him.” So the boy turned to Pancho Villa and said in Spanish, “Sir, if you do not tell them where the gold is they will kill you.” Pancho was a bad man, but he wasn’t stupid. So he told the boy, “There is a cave south of town. Tell them to go to there and they will find all the gold we have stolen.” Then he gave the boys instructions on how to find the cave. The boy smiled and turned to the Rangers and said. “Pancho is a very brave man. He is not afraid of you. He will never tell you where the gold is. He says go ahead and shoot him.”

There is an important lesson in this story. Be careful about letting others interpret for you. I think that is particularly important when we read the Scriptures. What people tell you a passage means, may or may not be true. I think that was the case for me in trying to understand a passage from Jesus’ sermon in Matthew 7. Beginning in verse 13. *Enter through the narrow gate, for wide is the gate and narrow is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life and only a few find it.*

*Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?... (vs 21) "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" (Matt 7:15-23)*

Growing up I sometimes heard preachers use this text to condemn other Christians who loved the Lord and followed Christ sincerely as best they knew, but who, in some of their understandings of scripture, were wrong, at least as we understood the Scriptures. It was not a question of their sincerity, but, as I heard so many times, sincerity alone is not enough. You can be sincerely wrong.

I remember preachers describing Judgment Day as a terrible and tragic day because the Lord would gather before him these honestly mistaken believers and announce their condemnation. These mistaken believers would cry out, "Lord, Lord, didn't we do all these good things?" Yes, they did do good things, but unfortunately they didn't do all the *right* things. Yes, in my name you fed the poor, and you welcomed the stranger and you visited the sick and you proclaimed my name to people all around the world and you gave your money and your

possessions and your very lives to serve me. But you were wrong about... and here one would fill in the blank depending upon which group of wrong Christians we were talking about. Because of their error, the Lord would tell them, “I’m sorry, but you did not do the will of my Father, so you are condemned.”

Even as a boy I remember thinking, this can’t be right. It’s not fair. Honest and sincere followers of Christ should not be condemned even if they are mistaken about some things. How could Jesus condemn people who served him in love and were devoted to his teachings but were mistaken about some of his teachings. He’d have to have condemned his own apostles who at times had trouble understanding Jesus’ teaching. So how do we understand this passage. What does Jesus mean by the narrow gate and who are these false prophets who are really wolves in sheep clothing? I think if we would understand Jesus’ meaning of the narrow gate we must first understand who he thought were these false prophets.

So, what did Jesus mean when he referred to “false prophets.” What is the biblical definition of false prophet? One of the most important principles of interpreting the meaning of a particular passage of scripture is to ask the question, “What would these words mean to the people who first heard them.” More to the point, “Who would Jesus be thinking when he used the term “false prophet?” As I was reconsidering this passage I remember having one of those “aha” moments where you suddenly become aware of an obvious truth that was right in front of

you all the time. Jesus was Jewish. That may seem obvious, but what it meant, that I had not previously considered, was this. If I want to understand who these false prophets were and what it was about their teaching that was false, the best way to do that would be to understand what Jesus and people in his day would have thought a false prophet was. Well, like all Jews, Jesus had grown up in the synagogues studying the Law and the Prophets. Is there anything written in the Law and the Prophets about false prophets? As a matter of fact yes, Jeremiah 23.

*Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; they fill you with false hopes. They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. They keep saying to those who despise me, 'The LORD says: You will have peace.' And to all who follow the stubbornness of their hearts they say, 'No harm will come to you.' But which of them has stood in the council of the LORD to see or to hear his word? Who has listened and heard his word? See, the storm of the LORD will burst out in wrath, a whirlwind swirling down on the heads of the wicked. (Jer 23:13-22)*

There is a similar passage in Ezekiel 13:1-12.

*The word of the LORD came to me: "Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel who are now prophesying. Say to those who prophesy out of their own imagination: 'Hear the word of the LORD! This is what the Sovereign LORD says: "Because they lead my people astray, saying, "Peace," when there is no peace, and because, when a flimsy wall is built, they cover it with whitewash, therefore tell those who cover it with whitewash that it is going to fall. Rain will come in torrents, and I will*

*send hailstones hurtling down, and violent winds will burst forth. When the wall collapses, will people not ask you, "Where is the whitewash you covered it with?"*

Reading these passages it became obvious that Jesus' famous sermon echoed the teaching of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Jesus was speaking in the tradition of these two great prophets. He was doing what he said he was going to do at the beginning of his sermon; fulfill the law and the prophets. Note how similar the Jerusalem in Jesus' day was to Jerusalem in the days of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Those prophets were raised up to warn the Jews to repent or else experience Babylon's destruction of Jerusalem. Jesus warned the Jews of a similar catastrophe that was coming, the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. Pointing to the temple Jesus tells his disciples, *You see all these things? he asked. Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.* In both cases Jerusalem was filled with teachers, prophets who were teaching falsely. And in both cases true prophets were raised up by God to proclaim His will and His heart to them, John the Baptist and Jesus himself.

Another thing that caught my attention were the similarities in the messages of Jesus' to those of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. In both cases the same thing is said concerning these prophets: *Don't listen to them. Why? Because they speak their own words. They speak visions from their own minds* (Jer 23:16); *they prophecy out of their own imagination* (Ezek 13:2). And what are these false prophets

saying? They say *peace, peace, when there is no peace* (Ezek13:10) and *You will have peace, no harm will come to you* (Jer 23:17).

But the most important thing to understand about these false prophets is that they were **not** good teachers who were honest and sincerely mistaken. They were false, dishonest, insincere and corrupt teachers. Jeremiah describes them this way, *Among the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen something horrible: They commit adultery and live a lie. They strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from his wickedness. They are all like Sodom to me; the people of Jerusalem are like Gomorrah.*" Ezekiel is no kinder: *Will you ensnare the lives of my people but preserve your own? You have profaned me among my people for a few handfuls of barley and scraps of bread. By lying to my people, who listen to lies, you have killed those who should not have died and have spared those who should not live... Because you disheartened the righteous with your lies, when I had brought them no grief, and because you encouraged the wicked not to turn from their evil ways and so save their lives. (13: , 18-19, 22)*

For Ezekiel and Jeremiah, false prophets were not good men who were mistaken about the Word of God. They were wicked men who had mistakenly become Israel's teachers. They were using their influence and power to line their own pockets and promote their own perverse agendas. Jesus is concerned about the very same problem with the teachers of Israel in his day. Notice the similarity between Christ's words and those of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Like the false prophets of old, these new false prophets spoke their own words, not the words of God.

They were guilty of *teaching for doctrines the commandments of men* (Matthew 15: 9). In Jesus day Jewish teachers had compiled a collection of teachings and commentary called the *Mishna*. These interpretations of the Law became more important than the Law itself. In Jesus' sermon when he says, *You have heard it said* he was referring to these traditions. When Jesus said, *But I say unto you*, Jesus was re-emphasizing with authority the true spirit and meaning of the Law.

And what was the evil false teaching of the scribes and Pharisees? Well it's pretty clear what upset Jesus most in his sermon: hypocrisy and internal corruption. He condemns how Israel's teachers perverted the purposes of the Law by allowing them to essentially ignore the law's demand for a pure heart and instead focus on external rituals and ceremony. They were suggesting that peace with God comes from rightness of form rather than righteousness of heart.

It seems obvious to me that the words of Ezekiel and Jeremiah were in Jesus' mind as he preached because he uses the same images they used, though in somewhat different ways. Like Jesus, Jeremiah and Ezekiel both use the imagery of the storm of God's wrath and Ezekiel uses the picture of whitewashed walls.

*“When a flimsy wall is built, they cover it with whitewash, therefore tell those who cover it with whitewash that it is going to fall. Rain will come in torrents, and I will send hailstones hurtling down, and violent winds will burst forth. When the wall collapses, will people not ask you, “Where is the whitewash you covered it with?” I will*

*tear down the wall you have covered with whitewash and will level it to the ground so that its foundation will be laid bare. (Ezekiel 13:10-16)*

Jesus uses remarkably similar imagery of whitewash as a symbol of hypocrisy and storms as God's judgment in his own rebuke of the false teachers of his day. *“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, beautiful on the outside but on the inside full of dead men's bones and everything unclean... on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.” (Matt 23:27-28)*

*“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.” (Matt 7:24-27)*

These similarities lead me to believe that when Jesus referred to false prophets, he had in mind the same kind of people as did Jeremiah and Ezekiel, teachers that may seem okay externally, but internally are corrupt: wolves in sheep's clothing, whitewashed tombs with dead men's bones; trees that look okay but bear no fruit, people who say “Lord, Lord” and are quick to invoke the name of

the Lord to give their religious activity credibility, but who in fact don't know the Lord at all, don't care about his will and consequently are unknown to the Lord.

If this is what Jesus meant by false prophets, that helps us to understand what he meant by the broad and narrow gate and way. These are pictures of two ways of salvation. Jesus is not contrasting being religious and not being religious, but two different ways of being religious. The Jews were very religious; they certainly felt that they were on the straight and narrow way. But in his sermon Jesus exposes how permissive the Pharisees were. They emphasized externals but ignored the condition of people's hearts. You can hate, just don't kill. You can lust, just don't commit adultery. You can divorce just get a proper certificate. You can take vengeance just make sure its equitable. Jesus shows it is the Pharisee's way that was broad because its focus was on externals not the heart.

Jesus paints a picture of the common religious path, default religion. It is filled with people, crowded together, bumping into each other as they clutch on to packs stuffed with hypocrisy and sin; there is a gate so wide, a path so broad that one need not leave anything of the old life behind. This is a religion big on judgment, not so big on repentance. But there is another path, much less crowded, much less traveled with people content to travel light, people willing to fit through the narrow gate of repentance that strips us of everything but ourselves. People wanting to turn away from their hate, their lust, their greed, their vengeance, their

selfishness in all its forms. Those who travel this path have fewer companions but they are truer companions. Their conversations are deeper, not drowned out by the roar of the crowd. This is divine religion; the other is default religion. The religion of Jesus brings life; the default religion of humans leads to death. It is the religion Paul spoke of when he speaks of a “form of godliness that denies the power.”

It seems to me false prophets are those more eager to judge others by external standards, than by internal character, those who put more emphasis on their interpretations and traditions than the clear Word of God. It seems to me that those who say *Lord Lord* are not people who are sincerely mistaken, but people whose mistake is that they are not sincere at all, not people who teach the wrong interpretation of this or that scripture, but people who are false no matter how correct their interpretations. They are the teachers Jesus described in John 5: 39-40 *You diligently study the Scriptures because you think by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.*

To teach scripture incorrectly will of course have unfortunate consequences. Our misunderstandings keep us from working together as effectively as we could for the sake of the Kingdom. It is important that we strive to correctly understand the truth to enjoy the benefits the truth has for our growth and maturity. But to use Jesus' words as a justification to label fellow believers and disciples of Christ as false teachers or false prophets simply because we may disagree on various matters

of teaching in the scriptures is, in my opinion, a terrible misuse of this passage. In fact it comes perilously close to doing what this very passage condemns, *to make being externally right more important than having a pure heart.*

When Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment, his answer was not being right on every issue (a standard even the apostles could not keep) but being right in the heart: *Love the lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength.* That standard is formidable enough. That standard compels us to die daily to our selfishness, our hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, our lust and impurity and carnality, to our unkindness and dishonesty and selfish ambition. That standard sends us to our knees in humility, confessing our total dependence on grace of God and the blood of Christ shed on the cross. As the song says:

*Rock of Ages cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee.  
Let the water and the blood from thy riven side which flowed,  
Be of sin the double cure, save me from its wrath and power.  
Not the labor of my hands can fulfill the laws demands,  
Could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow,  
All for sin could not atone, thou must save and thou alone.  
Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling;  
Naked, come to Thee for dress; helpless, look to Thee for grace;  
Vile, I to the fountain fly; wash me, Savior, or I die.*