

Beware! (Sermon on the Mount #17)
Matthew 7:15-23, I Corinthians 13:1-7
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I like to talk.

Wow! Tell us something we didn't know, Dave! Wake the kids – call the neighbors! Dave likes to talk!



All right – this isn't really news. You like to talk, too. At least some times, you recognize the value and the importance of the spoken word. You can get a lot done with words, can't you?

You can ask for directions when you're in a strange part of town. I can call my insurance agent when I've suffered a loss. Without words, we wouldn't have the chance to share that great joke. And you can bet that I use words when my granddaughter calls me and shrieks, "Grampy's available!"

In many, many situations, there is simply no substitute for talking. You just need a face to face conversation when you're covering important relational ground, don't you? Who wants to break up via text message, or hear second-hand about a friend's plans to move? Sometimes, you have to just sit down and talk – use words to express what is really happening in and with your life. We have to talk.



And yet, as you well know, talk can be cheap, too. This is really easy to point to in this year of the primary elections. How many times have you heard someone say, "My opponent is the biggest nincompoop in the history of nincompoops! I would not trust him to change the light bulb in the janitor's closet! I could not warm up to her if we were cremated together..." You know what I mean, right? I mean, they are attacking each other. With words.

And then two or three weeks later, the same person will say, “My esteemed opponent has clearly demonstrated the kind of vigor that makes our community great, and I am happy to endorse her... I am honored to be considered as his running mate...”

What happened to the nincompoop? How easy is it to change our tune so quickly? The words are meaningless here.

Or consider when politicians or preachers rail against greed or pornography or some other wickedness, only to be caught six months later in some sordid affair or deep shame of their own. Their words say one thing, and yet they act in a manner that is the direct opposite. And we shake our heads and say, “Well, talk is cheap.”



¹This morning we near the completion of our study of some of the greatest words ever recorded: Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. For several chapters, the Lord has given some concrete instructions as to how to live as a faithful follower in difficult times. Several weeks ago, we heard him discuss the “Golden Rule” and talked about the fact that discipleship can be a tough row to hoe.

As he approaches his conclusion, he looks at the twelve disciples and, with increasing seriousness, continues to use words to point to a great truth. And the words today are those of warning. Beware! Watch out! Danger ahead!

The threat to which the Lord points most vividly here in Matthew 7 is that of false prophets. If we’re going to consider that today, we need to remember what a prophet is in the world of the Bible.

¹ *Sermon on the Mount*, Karoly Ferenczy (1896)

A prophet is someone who tells the truth; a speaker who uses words to reveal something of God's intentions to the world or to a community. While we often think of the prophet's job as to foretell the future, the reality is that more often than not prophets in scripture talk about the paths that God's people ought to follow as well as the outcomes that our current behaviors and decisions are likely to produce.

In the bible, people like Jeremiah and Isaiah speak the truth of God in their prophecies, urging people to care for the poor, to stand up for the marginalized, to stay faithful to God, or risk the consequences. John the Baptist called people to turn their lives around and to embrace the reconciliation that God offers to those who seek it. The book of Acts tells of a man named Agabus who is called a prophet because he predicted a famine would encompass parts of the Middle East and he urged people to help those who would struggle.

Each of these men is revealed to be a "true prophet" because he tells it like it is and allows us to glimpse something of how our present behaviors intersect with future conditions and they offer us ideas as to how to plan our behaviors accordingly. That's what prophets – true prophets – do. They tell the truth. And then they live the truth.

And as he nears the completion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus cautions against a number of false prophets who will appear. Given our understanding of what makes someone a "true" prophet, then, I think we can understand that a false prophet is one who does not reveal truth, or who provides horrible advice about dealing with the truth, or who speaks contrary to the intentions and purposes of God.

Think with me, for a moment, about the astounding number of false prophets at work in the world and in your life today.

What about the financial planner who takes it as a given that your number one priority in life is to take care of number one? Who insists that it is impossible to have “enough” and who encourages you to invest your money in schemes that will indeed amass wealth – but only as a result of unfair treatment of workers or risking the health of the environment? Isn’t that person a “false prophet?”

What about the so-called “friend” who sees you going through a tough time and shares your pain for a while, and then invites you to escape that pain with just one little rush of heroin?

What about the co-worker who insists that you have nothing to worry about – because “everybody cheats on their time cards”?

Each of these, and a thousand others that you could name, are indeed false prophets – that is, they are people who pretend to know something about how the world works and offer you advice as to how to engage that world with your life. But as bad as these people are, they are not the targets of Jesus’ warnings here.

Jesus calls for particular vigilance when it comes to those who claim to be religious, who seek to speak for God, and yet whose character reveals them to be disconnected with the intentions of God in the world. The church leader who advocates humility but who craves glory; the preacher who thunders on and on about “family values” but is revealed as an adulterer; the person who uses gossip and innuendo and fear to breed doubt and distrust and racism among the body of Christ...

This is a little awkward for me to talk about right now, but I think that Jesus is saying that while you are listening to me or anyone else ramble on and on about what Jesus might say or where the Holy Spirit is moving in your life, you

need to be taking some time to think about whether I am a true or a false prophet.

When my mother was presented with a tidbit of information that she found to be either unsettling or implausible, she would simply say, “Well, consider the source...” She was not interested in taking advice on successful relationships from Elizabeth Taylor or Hugh Hefner, for instance (if you don’t know who those people are, think of Kim Kardashian or John Mayer). My mother taught me to look for evidence of character in the lives of people to whom I pay attention, and that advice has served me well over the years.

Who are the people to whom you listen when no one is looking at them? Do the things that they *say* line up with the things that they *do*? And if there is a consistency in their *saying* and *doing*, does that in fact point to the heart of God?

The bottom line is that, as you know, talk is cheap. Before you allow someone to influence you and your actions, pause to “consider the source”. Is that person someone with credibility and integrity? As that person speaks to you about what God wants you to do with your life, your energy, your money – is there any sign that he or she is being faithful with his or her life, energy, or money?

As he wraps up the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is saying to his followers, “Look, I’m using words – a lot of them – to try to emphasize the way that life is, or should be. When we get up from this mountain, watch me. Look at the fruit in my life. See how I live this life. Am I someone who can be trusted? Do I live into this ethic that I’m asking you to follow? If I do, then don’t seek merely to follow me or to be attentive to me – seek to know me. Don’t just listen to me. Don’t just repeat what I say. Come with me. Be like me. Know me.”

I think that's what Paul is getting at in the reading you've heard from his letter to the Corinthians. I know that when you hear this passage, it's most often at a wedding, but it's not about marriage, you know. It's about the people who claim to be part of the body of Christ but who do not act that way at all. The mark of a true Christian, says Paul, is love. I may talk a good game; I might have a slew of impressive receipts listed on my tax returns; I may be the most gifted person in the history of gifts... but if I don't live into any of that with love in my heart, then not only am I useless – I clearly know nothing of Jesus.

So by all means, beloved, consider the source as you listen to the ending of this week's sermon. Look at my life and see if you can discover evidence of love or grace or faith or hope or – most importantly – Jesus. And do this, not only with me, but with everyone else that you listen to, so that you might avoid false prophets.

But know this, dear friends; beware and be alert! The people who listen to *you* talk about what *you* believe and who *you* worship... they'll be doing the same thing. They'll want to know, before they listen to a word you say, whether you are moving in the direction towards which you are pointing. Or is it just talk?

Listen. Follow. And love. For God's sake, people, Love. Love Jesus. Love your neighbor. Love yourself. Show the world that you – and the One whom we are here to worship – can be trusted. Thanks be to God. Amen.