

14. Deception

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.
Matthew 7:13-23

Dead end freeway

Traveling in the countryside and in foreign countries can acquaint us with disappointing roads. An attractive path traveling into the country appears to end at the corner of a field. A hopeful-looking mountain road can sometimes lead to nothing more than a difficult attempt to get the car turned around for the climb back down from a dead end. Actually we should have taken disappointments like this into account: that is the risk of the narrow road.

We would really be surprised if suddenly and unannounced a broad freeway ended without even a turn-off to a secondary road. Things like that don't happen. Given the intensity of the traffic and the generous width of the lanes, we don't even need to worry about such eventualities. That is the advantage of the broad road.

In order to reach a goal we generally try to avoid the narrow road while choosing the easy highways. But it is precisely the opposite if we intend to reach the heavenly goal. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus teaches us that a broad road travels to destruction while a narrow road leads to life (verse 13-14). This road to the sun is toll-free but very secondary. Many people have great trouble even finding it. In fact, most of them take the broad road which is simple and readily accessible.

Jesus' instruction concerning the broad and the narrow road is not intended to scare us or deter us. He is not talking about an impassable road full of treacherous breaks and potholes. But the route it travels is difficult to locate. Jesus uses the gate as a parallel image: a wide gate leading to destruction and a narrow gate leading to life. A gate, of course, is an entrance. Everyone can walk through it. A narrow gate provides just as much an opening to the inside as a wide gate. Most importantly, however, you must walk with precision to the entrance of a narrow

gate. Neither deviating to the right or to the left too much. We have to pay attention. That is the point of the symbol of the road. We cannot rely on the actions of others: like everybody else they are seeking admission via the broad road. But you must *find* the narrow road. Although criss-crossed by recognizable and well-traveled roads, the Palestinian hill-country also contained small paths to villages and fields, sometimes only marked by a couple of stones. Then it's necessary to be careful and pay attention to the marks in the sand or grass. While the wider road often travels around the village, that hardly traceable path leads to it. Whoever finds it, arrives at home.

Jesus' words represent a timely warning for the church which believes in Him. Wanting to be a Christian along with the others and wanting to come into heaven or onto the new earth later is insufficient. It is not enough to be believing or full of hope underway. We have to learn to read the road map and then to really put the map to use. Without looking for the right road ourselves, we can end up in perdition with a whole denomination full of people. On the way to God's kingdom the freeway is a dead end.

Faulty road signs

False lighthouses were once employed to cause ships to run aground in order to be subsequently plundered. Nothing is quite as treacherous on a journey as false road signs. This certainly applies to the road to God's future. Road signs and traffic policemen can be found there too. They are called prophets: in God's name they point the way. John the Baptist was the last prophet. A guide and pioneer without equal. He pointed the people to Jesus who came after him and in whom the forgiveness is to be found. Jesus Himself has also to warn the people of Israel about pseudo-prophets in the coming period. They are not genuine. They appear to be road signs, but they show the wrong road or at any rate fail to point out the good and the narrow way. These days many people follow the dead end, broad road in unsuspecting trust precisely because so many false prophets, pastors and theologians, are not presenting them with the narrow road God has chosen. The responsibility of pastors who take things too loosely is great.

Jesus' remarks about "false" prophets cause many to think in terms of mean and nasty people. But by taking a look around

at the church through the ages and at the vast Christendom of this century, we can see that things don't look so bad after all. We certainly encounter a variety of opinions but they are often represented by friendly, charming people with the best of intentions. Coming from churches which repeatedly warned against false teaching and heresy, young people are often later very impressed that these so-called heretics appear to be quite agreeable when personally encountered at work or in the neighborhood. Although having different beliefs, these Christians seem friendly in their contacts and just as concerned about the future of church and faith. But why should that surprise us? Jesus does not warn us about mean people: we keep an eye out for types like that all by ourselves. He is properly speaking about people who outwardly look like sheep. No one is maintaining that they purposely camouflage themselves. Jesus simply ascertains: their exterior is Christian. Perhaps uprightly meant. However, whether intentional or not, they are like ferocious wolves. Dangerous for the flock.

How does that become manifest? In the fruits of their work. Jesus says: "By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles?" (verse 16). Some expositors apply this to the behavior of false prophets. They might speak well, but they live falsely. This cannot be the case. Not only does Jesus say that they have a sheep's voice, but that they look like sheep too. Thus their actions and behavior give no indication of bad fruit in their own lives. But the issue does not center on the fruits in their own lives, but in the lives of others. They intend, of course, to be prophets and a prophet attempts to influence others with his word. Good prophets bring about sanctification in the people. When large groups of Jews went out to the Jordan to let themselves be baptized after confessing their sins, one could see therein the fruits of the prophet John the Baptist. The prophet was recognized by these fruits: a real man of God. Naturally the Old Testament knew many false prophets who preached peace while allowing the people to remain in their sins. They brought a message of "cheap grace." The fruits of their work were also apparent: church-goers brimming with injustice and arrogance. The fruits revealed the false prophets. Pious people, but in the meantime the flock took a beating.

Jesus teaches us to test the road signs. They may look good

and mean everything well and they may speak frankly and freely about the way to the kingdom of heaven; but when they do not tell the travelers about the narrow road which everyone must obediently follow, then they have become nothing than false lighthouses, and thereby the ship of the church runs aground. Even when everyone marches in unison towards a large Christian ecumenism, uncritical breadth can be just as deadly for God's children as the wolfsclaws of atheistic enemies. For whenever Christ's narrow road and the obedience to His commandments are not proclaimed as absolutely entrance requirements, we will end up in the valley of death. For that reason Jesus' disciples must be prepared to deal with unsound pastors.

The guide

The narrow road which we must find in order to go in is the road of Christian sanctification. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven" (verse 21). Jesus now speaks without reservations concerning His authority as the Guide. The whole of the Sermon on the Mount is immersed in Jesus' authority. The tone betrays it: He rules in the church of God ("But I tell you"). Up to the end of the Sermon on the Mount He avoids speaking specifically about this authority. Now, however, He does. Jesus considers it proper that we call Him "Lord, Lord." Since the Jews at the mountain did not stand in a position of human subservience to Jesus (He was not their earthly employer), the title "Lord, Lord" must then indicate that Jesus wants to be addressed as divine law-giver. No wonder the Jews were quite shocked by what He said, "Hear O Israel, the Lord is God, the Lord Alone." Is this Jesus the Lord in our midst? John the Baptist had already said that the Lord Himself would come: now Jesus lets it be known that He is also Israel's God: He and the Father are one.

In verse 22 Jesus openly speaks about prophesying and performing miracles "in my name." Prophets then always spoke in the name of the Lord, prophets now shall speak in the name of Jesus Christ.

Moses in Egypt did wonders and signs in the name of the Lord; the apostles shall now do great miracles and cast out demons in Jesus' name. God's authority and power are working in and through His Son Jesus.

For that reason the decision about entrance into the kingdom

of heaven lies in Jesus' hand too. His Father's kingdom belongs to Him as well. Jesus is the one who shall soon say to some publically that they are not welcome with God because He, Jesus, never knew them (verse 23).

Why does Jesus speak so frankly about His divine majesty at the end of the Sermon on the Mount? Because He is now placing the full weight of His authority in the scales over and against deceptive pastors. When hired-hands allow the flock to get lost in the wilderness, the Good Shepherd stands up and lets His voice be heard. Over and against the false lighthouses stands Jesus who is the Light of the world. Whenever we hear His voice and love Him, we will follow Him and not men, even when they are many in number or are lead by Christian-looking pastors.

Only one thing can help against the danger of deception: that we know Jesus and that *He* knows us. He knows all those who exert themselves to find the narrow but continuous road of the commandments which His Father has given us. Others may fail to appreciate this and consider it to be old-fashioned or legalistic, but God's Guide recognizes His worshipers and seekers. He gives them more than a Christian appearance. He gives them entrance to the Father. Acquaintances come inside. The road which leads to life is narrow but whoever does the will of Christ's Father will find it and be let inside. God's good guide is also the gracious doorkeeper.