

Followers of the Way

What are we looking for?

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Luke 7:18-35

Today, Muslims all over the world are commemorating the Hijra (Hegira) of AD 622, when their prophet Mohammed and a small band of devoted followers fled persecution in Mecca for sanctuary in Medina. It is Islam's year zero, the day which marks the start of the Muslim calendar. This year, which we call 2024 and Jews call 5784, is AH 1446. (Since the Islamic calendar is based on a lunar year, it has 354 or 355 days, not 365. Hence AH 1446 is not 1,446 of our years after the Hijra.)

Every age and every society look for a prophet. Every age and every society seek a deliverer, a guru – someone to tell them how to live and what to do. Prophets come in all shapes and sizes. Their religions may not mention a god at all: the prophets of Marxism-Leninism proclaimed themselves to be atheists; the prophets of secular humanism claim God has been disproved by science; the prophets of Star Wars-style Buddhism-lite speak only about an impersonal Force, or the workings of the universe. Other prophets devote themselves to the service of created things: the prophets of New Age make a goddess out of the Earth (Gaia), and revere Nature. Yet others openly embrace an old-style paganism: in 1930s Germany, Adolf Hitler, the prophet of National Socialism, spoke of how he was called by Providence, whilst simultaneously disparaging the Christian God, reviling Christianity as a weak, Jewish system of belief, and promoting worship of the Norse gods of old. There is never a shortage of prophets, it seems.

The Lord Jesus Christ is “the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6). He is “the true light that gives light to every man” (John 1:9), the “true vine” (John 15:1), who gives His followers “the true bread from heaven.” (John 6:32) His names include “Faithful and True.” (Revelation 19:11). As such, He is against anything false: He is against false testimony (Exodus 20:16), false reports (Exodus 23:1), false charges (Exodus 23:7), false witnesses (Psalm 27:12), false accusations (Psalm 35:20), false oaths (Hosea 10:4), false dealings (Deuteronomy 25:16, Leviticus 19:35, Jeremiah 22:17, Ezekiel 28:18), and false gods (Psalm 40:4). By contrast, Satan is “a liar and the father of lies. When he lies, he speaks his native language.” (John 8:44). He is utterly crooked, and his word can never be relied on. Like the saying goes, he could not lie in bed straight.

Just as God bestows gifts of prophecy (Ephesians 4:11, Romans 12:6) to build up His Church and use it as an instrument of blessing, Satan raises up false prophets to speak his lies into people's lives. Jesus tells us to “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.” (Matthew 7:15). He warns, “many false prophets will appear and deceive many people.” (Matthew 24:11). And just in case we failed to get this message first time around, He repeats that “false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect

– if that were possible.” (Matthew 24:24, Mark 13:22). These false prophets are “servants of Satan [masquerading] as servants of righteousness” (2 Corinthians 11:15), and we find them all over the place. False prophecy comes at us over the airwaves, and via advertising hoardings. It lurks in the manifestos of protest groups and political parties, and skulks around the corridors of power. It makes a home in the hearts of people who mean well, and it burrows into the foundations of institutions. And sadly, many people flock out to gawp at false prophets, and hang on their words.

False prophets bring false visions and lying divinations (Ezekiel 13:6, see also Jeremiah 14:14), false hopes (Jeremiah 23:16), false dreams (Jeremiah 23:32), and false oracles (Lamentations 2:14). These falsehoods leave a trail of devastation in their wake – of wasted effort, misspent lives, ravaged nations, broken communities, poisoned relationships, people alienated from each other and from God, and countless numbers headed for an eternity in hell. Small wonder that “everyone who loves and practises falsehood” (Revelation 22:15) is excluded from the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem.

In the passage we just heard read, Jesus answers a question put to Him by John the Baptist, then asks a series of questions of the crowd gathered about Him. These questions and answers tell us important things about challenges facing us today, as we seek to discern true from false, to help people turn away from the lying prophets of the age, and to bring them to the one true God.

Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed one, the Holy One of God (Isaiah 1:4 and elsewhere, Jeremiah 50:29, Hosea 11:9, 11:12, Habakkuk 1:12, 3:3, Mark 1:24), and “the Son of the living God.” (Matthew 16:16). Jesus the “Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (Hebrews 1:3), so that “anyone who has seen [Him] has seen the Father” (John 14:9). “In Christ all the fulness of the deity lives in bodily form” (Colossians 2:9) or, as another translation renders it, “In Him the fullness of God dwelt bodily.” (Colossians 2:9, NKJV). John the Baptist had an extraordinary revelation of all this when he baptised Jesus in the river Jordan, and gave public testimony about it: “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on [Jesus]. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptise with water told me, ‘This man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptise with the Holy Spirit.’ I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.” (John 1:32-34).

And yet, falsely imprisoned by Herod the tetrarch (Luke 3:19-20, see also Matthew 4:12, Mark 1:14, John 3:24), assailed by doubt and despair, John began to wonder if he had been mistaken. And so, “he sent [two of his disciples to Jesus] to ask, ‘Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?’” (Luke 7:19). Jesus’ response was to point these men to evidence of what He had been doing (Luke 7:21): “he replied to the messengers, ‘Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is he who does not fall away on account of me.’” (Luke 7:22-23). What we see and hear at first hand, or hear reliable witnesses attest they have experienced first-hand, is testimony we can rely on. But we should be wary about hearsay, that is, people repeating tales of what they have not themselves seen and heard. And we should also be very careful about things that come

from sources we are unfamiliar with, or from people whose life and character are inconsistent with being true followers of Jesus.

The messengers were able to return to John the Baptist and tell him Jesus was fulfilling the Messianic mandate of Isaiah 61:1-2, which Jesus Himself quoted at the start of His earthly ministry: “the Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” (Luke 4:18-19, quoting Isaiah 61:1-2). Hallelujah! But since we live in days of great deception, it is right to delve into this further and ask, given that “false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect” (Matthew 24:24, Mark 13:22), how could John the Baptist’s disciples know what they saw and heard was not a counterfeit? After all, the Bible warns us to be on guard against “counterfeit miracles” (2 Thessalonians 2:9), counterfeit anointing (1 John 2:27), and servants of Satan who “masquerade as servants of righteousness” (2 Corinthians 11:14-15).

As well as being a liar, Satan is a counterfeiter. He cannot create as God does, but he can mimic certain aspects of God’s activity. This happened with the first three plagues of Egypt, when Egyptian magicians “did the same things by their secret arts” (Exodus 7:11, 7:22, 8:7). This satanic ability to counterfeit is limited, though, so “when [these] magicians tried to produce gnats by their secret arts, they could not” (Exodus 8:18), and “said to Pharaoh, “This is the finger of God.”” (Exodus 8:19). The Egyptian magicians repeated harmful plagues which God sent in judgment on Egypt. But it is important to understand that Satan will on occasion do things which *seem* good. There is no good thing in him, and his aim always is “only to steal and kill and destroy” (John 10:10), but for tactical reasons, he is quite amenable to producing the *appearance* of goodness if this enables him to rob us of the best. If he can persuade us follow a wrong track in this way, he reasons he will get us in the end, and that is worth any number of reverses and feigned retreats.

Consider an example of how this might play out. A servant of the evil one may appear to heal someone, causing us to rejoice and attribute this work to God. We might reason from Scripture that it could not be otherwise, since “every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand?” (Matthew 12:25-26, see also Mark 3:24-26, Luke 11:17-18). But what if the disease was caused by demonic oppression, and the demon merely chose to lift this oppression for a while – not being driven out, but simply lying dormant, waiting for “an opportune time” (Luke 4:13) to reassert its stranglehold over this person’s life? What seemed to be a God-given healing would in fact be no such thing.

Or perhaps someone with a supposedly prophetic gift or what the world calls “second sight” might accurately speak about another person’s past or present in a way no-one could know naturally, and then purport to predict what will happen to this individual in the future. But telling about what is or has already been is the easy bit – a demon could simply have observed what was going on. The test of biblical prophecy is whether it is correct in what it says about the future. And before testing a prophecy, it is always

advisable to test the prophet. If someone is truly a prophet, their words will line up completely with the Bible (1 John 4:1-3), what they say about the future will come true (Deuteronomy 18:20-21), their character will be Christ-like, and their lives will display the fruit of the Spirit (Matthew 7:16-20). No matter how plausible it may seem, any so-called prophecy that comes through a medium, spiritist, diviner, witch, or tarot reader – all of which the Bible condemns – cannot be good.

Or what about the claims of other religions and philosophies, and their alternative solutions to the questions and problems of this troubled world? In greater or lesser degree, they are bound to be a mixture of truth and falsehood, whereas Jesus is the unalloyed Truth (John 14:6).

Let us turn back to what Jesus said to John the Baptist's envoys. He referred to evidence of powerful miracles, but miracles can be counterfeited. However, as well as recounting these miracles, Jesus also said, "the good news is preached to the poor." (Luke 7:22). This is a vital component that will help us discern whether what we are seeing is counterfeit, or not, and whether it is pleasing to the LORD. When we speak of the good news, we mean the Gospel, of course. The basic Gospel message is so simple a child can understand it – that Jesus is God made man for our salvation, who died to save us from sin and death, who rose from the dead, and offers eternal life to all who put their trust in Him. The four-square Gospel is Jesus as Saviour, Baptiser, Healer, and soon-coming King. But in the widest sense, when we speak of proclaiming the Gospel, we are talking about standing on the entirety of the Word of God in the Bible. And here is the rub, because in modern Christendom, many do not preach the full, unadulterated Word, but instead leave out parts they do not like, and mix in things that are taken from the world. What they say might sound good to the untrained ear, but it will not stand up to rigorous testing against the plumb line (Amos 7:7-8) of God's Word. If we see miraculous signs, but do not hear the full Gospel being preached, we should be on our guard. Jesus said, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation ... [and] these signs will accompany those who believe... [driving] out demons ... tongues ... [healing the sick]" (Mark 16:15-20). So, we should look for the preaching of the Gospel with signs and wonders following, not signs and wonders that may cause the unwary to gawp and gasp, but which are not accompanied by the Gospel and do not bring godly fruit.

Satan knows the Bible much better than most Christians, and quoted it when trying to tempt Jesus in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11). Paul cautions, "The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons." (1 Timothy 4:1). Demonic doctrines, in other words, are being released into the Church, to cause it to veer off course, to render it powerless, and to lead its members astray. Satan's tactics have not changed over the ages. He will do just as the serpent did with Eve, tempting us to doubt God's Word (Did God really say?), add to it (you must not eat from any tree in the garden), take away from it (you will not surely die), or direct our attention to what looks attractive (good for food and pleasing to the eye, and desirable for gaining wisdom) but which God has forbidden for our protection (Genesis 3:1-6).

Some are following doctrines of demons because they have been badly taught or disciplined, and do not know any better. But some are in a different position, and they are playing a dangerous game. In this context, we can more readily understand how Jesus could say, “Many will say on that [judgment] day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’” (Matthew 7:22). So, where miracles are apparently being performed, but the full Gospel is not simultaneously being preached, we are on dodgy ground, and should be alert to the possibility that what we are seeing or hearing is counterfeit.

Other clues to look out for are where a prophet comes from, who and what they associate themselves with, and how they respond to the prevailing culture. Jesus told the crowd they should not be looking for a man dressed in fine clothes, because, “those who wear expensive clothes and indulge in luxury are in palaces.” (Luke 7:25). Anyone whose interest is wealth, and who spends time cosying up to the famous or influential is someone we should treat with great caution. Likewise, anyone who trims with the wind, and adapts their message to what they think people want to hear. Such a person is “a reed swayed by the wind” (Luke 3:24), saying what “itching ears want to hear” (2 Timothy 4:3). By contrast, John the Baptist came out of the desert, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Luke 3:3). He spoke harsh words to the religious establishment of the day, calling them a “brood of vipers” (Luke 3:7), and was not afraid to take the despotic ruler Herod the tetrarch to task for his sinful behaviour (Luke 3:19). John’s lifestyle was simple to the point of being spartan – his “clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey.” (Matthew 3:4). Sharp suits, swanky homes, and fancy hairstyles seldom fit well with being a servant of the living God.

And, of course, Jesus gave us a simple but effective way to test for false prophets: “by their fruit you will know them.” (Matthew 7:16, 7:20, KJV). This means, *all* the fruit, not just some of it, and it means end results, not just initial appearances. It means fruit that comes from following the orthodoxy of a belief system and what its governing texts teach, not what might otherwise have arisen in a culture. So-called Christian countries have indulged in aggressive war, slavery and slave trading, oppression of minorities, and countless other crimes. But they have done this in direct contravention of the Bible’s teaching. The same cannot be said of other religions and ideologies. As Jesus said, “Wisdom is proved right by all her children.” (Luke 7:35). All her children, not some of them.

To summarise eight ways we can help prevent ourselves being taken in: (1) do not rely on hearsay; (2) seek out reliable witnesses giving first-hand testimony; (3) do not let miraculous signs cause us switch off our critical faculties; (4) be on the look-out for mixture – partly good and partly bad is not God’s way; (5) use the failsafe check of the full, unadulterated Word of God; (6) test the prophet as well as the prophecy; (7) carefully examine the fruit by reference to end results; (8) look at *all* the children – what something gives birth to.

There were diametrically opposed reactions to what Jesus said: "All the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus' words, acknowledged that God's way was right, because they had been baptised by John." (Luke 7:29-30). Hearts and minds that have been cleansed by repentance are able to receive a message of truth. By contrast, hearts and minds that remain seared by sin find it difficult to do so: "But the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptised by John." (Luke 7:30). What a tragic sentence this is. God has a purpose for every single human being. It is a good purpose, a beautiful scheme to bring us into a place of everlasting joy and ultimate fulfilment with Him. It is scarcely conceivable that anyone would want to reject this. Yet many do. As Jesus said, "they are like children sitting in the market-place and calling out to each other: 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not cry.'" (Luke 7:32). There are people who constantly flip from one emotional extreme to another, driven by momentary whims or changing fashions, expecting everyone to dance to their tune. Such people are usually quick to criticise. Followers of Christ will be attacked for one thing, as John the Baptist was for "neither eating bread nor drinking wine" (Luke 7:33), then pilloried for doing the opposite, as Jesus was for supposedly being "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and 'sinners'" (Luke 7:34). This is par for the course and we must expect it, but it helps show the kind of characters we are dealing with.

Jesus asked, "What did you go out into the desert to see?" (Luke 7:24). It is a question every human being needs to ask themselves: what are we looking for, where are we looking for it, and from whom are we looking for it? There is true and false prophecy. There is a true and false Church. There is a true and false Messiah. Be alert and watchful, so you are not deceived. But be expectant and full of joy, too, for the LORD, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ says, "You will seek me and you will find me when you seek me with all your heart." (Jeremiah 29:13). Jesus says. "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock." (Revelation 3:20). If you have never let Him into your life before, why not open the door to Him today?

Amen