

How many of you this past week turned on your television, radio, smart phone, or computer and thought to yourself, “Am I listening to a false prophet?” I would venture to say, not many of you. In fact, I would go so far as to guess that there are more than a few people in this room who have never had that thought before. Who have never even considered that question.

And the few who have probably had something that clued you in. Maybe it was the person's title. Or the venue in which they were speaking. Or the subject they were discussing. Or something of that sort. They were a Mormon elder or they were speaking on an bizarre YouTube channel or they were spouting off about some outlandish conspiracy theory. Occasionally, false prophets are obvious.

But more often, they're not. They look rather ordinary. Respectable. Wise. They present themselves as experts. As leaders. As thoughtful commentators. They fly under the radar. They say things that make sense. Sometimes they even call themselves Christians. They throw out a few quotes from the Bible. They do nothing that raises a red flag.

And so they gain your trust. They gain your time. They gain your eyes and your ears. And pretty soon, the things they've said are rattling around inside your head alongside of God Word. And you're having trouble distinguishing between the two. Because what they said was all so sensible and agreeable to you.

A prophet, as I've said before I think, is anyone who delivers the Word of the Lord. Whether that's a new word like the prophets of old. Or an old word, like the pastors of today.

And a false prophet is anyone who delivers the Word of... well... anyone but the Lord. Satan. The World. Our sinful flesh. A false prophet is anyone who delivers a message to you that you begin to learn and apply to your life with the same enthusiasm and diligence as you apply God's Word.

And the Bible is filled with warnings about false prophets. It is one of the major themes of God's Word. Moses warns about false prophets during the conquest of Canaan. Elijah and Isaiah warn about false prophets during the time of the kings. Jeremiah warns about false prophets before the exile. Ezekiel warns about false prophets after the exile. Jesus warns about false prophets in the Gospels. And the Apostles warn about false prophets in the early church.

It's everywhere. The warning is constant. Perhaps that's because the very first sin was the result of a false prophet. Adam had acted as a true prophet to his wife. He had delivered God's Word to her. And the serpent came as a false prophet. Made her doubt God's Word. Convinced her to listen to a new message. And so brought both her and her husband down into sin.

And from that time forward, God's people have struggled to distinguish a true prophet from a false prophet. Discern a true message delivered by God from a false message delivered by the devil, the world, or our sinful flesh.

That all seek to cloud our minds. Distract us and destroy us. Until we don't which way was up. A false prophet told Eve he could give her the power to know right from wrong... and her children haven't been able to figure out right from wrong ever since.

So how do we distinguish between a true prophet and a false prophet? Is it a hopeless cause? Does our sinfulness doom us to being led like sheep to the slaughter? Will we never see the wolves among us until it's too late?

Well... sometimes, yes. Truth be told, the temptation to follow a false prophet is just like every other sinful temptation. So I can give you every single bit of information I know on how to avoid them. I can teach you every technique I know to spot them. I can give you every response you will ever need to confront them.

But in the end, it still comes down to your frail human mind and your frail human flesh standing up to the lie of sin. And there will be times you fail. And there will be times you have to admit that you failed. And there will be times you throw yourself on God's grace. And hear him say, "Yes, I died for that sin too."

So don't take my words today as some sort of magic formula that will keep you from ever being led astray. They're not. They're just the words of a man much more wise than I. A man delivering the true Word of God because he was one of the greatest true prophets the world has ever seen. And his name is Jeremiah.

Jeremiah knows a thing or two about false prophets. His country was full of them. And in our Old Testament Lesson today, he kinda pulls out four key things that are red flags to watch for. That identify them as false prophets. They may not all do all of them. But they all do some of them.

And the first is probably the most obvious, but also the most difficult to detect: they tell you what you want to hear. They fill you with vain hopes. With empty promises of peace and good times. They don't have a true Word of the Lord to preach, so they speak visions of their own minds. They preach personal opinion as Gospel truth. They let their own sinful desire for a crowd cause them to proclaim whatever will draw the largest following.

Even if that means going so far as to condone sinfulness. To tell those who despise God's Word, "You're fine. Go ahead and ignore what God said." To tell the selfish and self-righteous, "You've got nothing to worry about." They don't preach consequences to actions. They don't preach hell and damnation. They don't preach God's Law. They preach... emptiness. Vapor. Whatever the crowd wants to hear.

Of course, they really never could preach God's Law, because knowing God's Law means knowing God's Word. And they don't know that either. That's the second thing to watch for. They've never stood in the council of the Lord. They've never spent any time seeing or hearing God's Word. They don't pay attention to God's Word or listen to it.

Have you ever heard a pastor like that? Maybe you did and you just didn't realize it. Because often times, they're very good at quoting scripture. At taking little, tiny choice nuggets of proverbial wisdom from the Bible and spreading them throughout their sermon like sprinkles on a cupcake. Completely out of context. Absolutely meaningless to their message. But attractive enough to make you forget that they were nothing more than sugar on top of sugar.

But sugar tastes good. Which is how they stay in the pulpit. By peddling sugar. In fact sometimes, outside of the Missouri Synod at least, they do more than innocently peddle it. They barge right into your home and put it on your table. They show up in communities, set up a church, and say, "You all need to listen to me because I'm a prophet." Which is exactly what Jeremiah lists as the third sign of a false prophet. They're not called.

God did not send them, yet they run around like he did. God did not in any way speak to them or indicate that they should be a prophet, and yet they pretend to prophesy. God did not call them to be a prophet.

The Church, the body of Christ on earth, the one place we can be sure His Spirit dwells, did not say, "Hey, you should be our pastor." The Church did not say, "Hey, we've got friends in the town nearby who haven't heard God's Word. Would you go preach to them?" The Church did not say, "You know, you should be a missionary. We're gonna make sure you become one."

No. No one called them to be a prophet. Not God. Not His Spirit. Not His Church. They simply got up on a soap box and started preaching. And that's dangerous. Because it means you've now put your own selfish, sinful desires ahead of God's Will. And the harsh reality is that those sinful desires will always be in conflict with God's will.

Which is the fourth and final indicator of a false prophet. They always work against God. Whether they intend to or not. Whether they realize they are or not. A man who prophesies lies in God's name cannot call himself a godly, righteous man. He is prophesying the deceit of his own heart. And if he's successful, he will cause the people who hear him to forget the one true God.

Because a false prophet always has a false god behind him. The lies that he's preaching will eventually take the form of a god all their own. And the people will worship that god and forget the true God just as easily as they worshipped Baal long ago. A false prophet always works against God and he always leads you into idolatry. Even if that idol is the prophet himself.

No, in the end, Jeremiah tells us that there's only one real way to distinguish a false prophet from a true prophet. A false prophets has dreams. A false prophet preaches about those dreams. A true prophet has God's Word. And a true prophet speaks that Word faithfully.

Sometimes they may look the same. From a distance, a field of straw and a field of wheat may look a lot alike. But examine them closely and you realize they have nothing in common.

So it is with prophecy. A false prophet preaches vain hopes. Emptiness. Vapor. Dust in the wind. A true prophet preaches a fire that burns. A hammer that shatters rock. A true prophet preaches God's Word.

A true prophet preaches the Law of God, the Gospel of God, even if it gets him nailed to a cross. He endures the cross and scorns its shame. Because he know that the Word he preaches leads to eternal life. That the Word he preaches leads to the throne of God itself.

The false prophets of this age would like you to believe so many things that are contrary to God's Word. But the one true prophet, the one true God and Savior of us all, has already given us something sure and certain to cling to. A message that forgives sins and raises the dead. A message that perfects our faith. As we run with endurance the race set before us. And receive the crown of eternal life. Amen.