

## **Sermon: False Prophet or True?**

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Jan 28, 2024)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts  
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

During my seminary study, I had once attended a bible study group, led by a respected elder of a church. We weren't told ahead of time what we will be studying, but only that we will be watching a video first, then have a discussion afterward. The video turned out to be a documentary film titled "The Secret" by Rhonda Byrne, which to my understanding is based on a 2006 self-help book of the same name. It promoted a pseudoscientific belief of the so called 'the law of attraction', which claims that thought alone can influence circumstances within one's life. So think positive thoughts, then energies carousing through these thoughts will somehow attract others positive energies or people, I am not too sure. But the end result is a positive improvement in one's life, towards the goal one sets of oneself.

The film cited a three-step process of ask, believe, and receive. It provided examples of historical persons who have allegedly achieved this. It even alluded to a quotation from Jesus, as recored in Matthew 21:22, "Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive."

Back then I was only a seminary student, having only a year or so of theological study under my belt. But I knew already, or at least enough to understand that the film is junk. Whatever the Christian faith is, it does not teach its follower to shake God like shaking a money tree. The film was just another insidious form of the prosperity Gospel, that ought to be confronted and debunked.

However, to my horror, instead of critiquing the film, the elder leading the bible study went on to praise it, and counselled those in the group to practice it. Oh he was very convincing, persuasive even, and no one in the group objected. I was but a guest that evening, and it really was not my place to question that elder, so I kept quiet initially. But at last, I couldn't hold back my tongue, and finally challenged him openly. I don't think it went particularly well. I won't bore you with details of that outcome, but suffice to say that was the first time I had to openly confront false teachings of a false teacher. Certainly not something I enjoy doing, but I guess it had to be done.

False teachers, preachers and prophets abounded in the time of Jesus. Judaism has long taught of a coming redeemer, or in Hebrew *moshiach* (the “anointed one”), who will bring salvation to the Jewish nation. Keep in mind that in the context of the Bible, this title can be and was conferred to more than one person. Priests and kings were anointed to lead their people in their respective roles. Even the Persian King Cyrus (who was not a Jew) who freed the Jews from Babylonian captivity was referred to in the Book of Isaiah as *moshiach*.

By the late Second Temple period, references to the Messiah had proliferated throughout Jewish writings. As the Roman Empire increasingly subjected the Jews to harsh and anti-Semitic decrees, there was a renewed sense of urgency for a leader to rise up against Rome, bringing to the people liberation and salvation. It was in such a context, many did come even before Jesus, preaching, teaching, prophesying, with some claiming to be *moshiach*.

So on that fateful Sabbath day, a travelling preacher accompanied by an odd band of disciples of dubious backgrounds, Jesus of Nazareth entered the synagogue of Capernaum and simply taught. The people were astounded at his teaching, for as the author of Mark informs us, in chapter 1 verse 22, “*he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes.*”

Now the term ‘scribes’ should not to be understood as those who merely copied manuscripts by hands. The term is a catch-all phrase that refers really to the religious authority of Judaism at the time, including Rabbis, Pharisees, Sadducees and even priests. They were the gate-keepers of God’s flock, to interpret the words of God, and to enforce its obedience amongst the people.

Yet we have this unknown preacher from Nazareth, teaching in a synagogue, and people were amazed at not only what he taught, but how he taught it, as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Salacious! Scandalous! How could this be?

It has always been somewhat difficult, in either ancient time or present days, to distinguish a true teacher, or a true prophet from false ones. The Old Testament reading of Deuteronomy 18, takes us to the time of Moses, at the tail-end of his life, instructing the Israelites to stay faithful to the Lord God. He had warned them in the earlier part of chapter 18, to stay away from vile practices of the Canaanites, including child sacrifices,

divination, magic, or commune with ghosts and spirits. For in so doing, God will surely punish them by driving them out of the Promised Land.

Starting from verse 15, Moses spoke of a different and better way that the people were to relate to God, that is through prophets, *“The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. This is what you requested of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.’”*

A prophet is someone who speaks on God’s behalf, who acts as the voice of God. It is a high calling, a calling that can only originate from God. A prophet ought to be raised among the people, for he or she (yes it could be a she) must have a basic understanding of the people and be integrated to the people. That is not to say that God cannot send a prophet to another nation, or to another people, but to say that a prophet’s first and foremost duty is to his or her own people. But the most important, the most fundamental quality of a prophet is to speak only of words that God sends, as in verse 18, God said *“I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command.”*

Furthermore, anyone who presumes to speak in the name of God, whom may not have been commanded by God to speak, shall be punished most severely, that is by death. I guess even at such an early stage of Israel’s walk with God, Moses had already foresaw the coming of false prophets, those who would speak out of their own imaginations, and had warned the people of its consequence.

Nevertheless, I don’t recall from the Scripture, any false prophet who was actually put to death based on this prohibition. I think part of the problem is how could one be sure if words spoken from a prophet (conferred or self-proclaimed), be true. How are we to discern a false prophet from a true one?

There is an answer provided in verse 22, that is *“if a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken.”* At first glance, that seems simple enough, but in actual application it proves most difficult, for sometimes, it does take a long time, even a life-time or several, for the words of God to be become true. For with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day (2 Peter 3:8), and waiting upon the Lord is

a virtue to be cultivated, for the way of God could and has in the past, taken us all by surprise.

So Jesus came to that humble synagogue in Capernaum, in a almost forgotten corner of the world, far far away from Jerusalem, the centre of religious authority of Judaism, and he taught. To some his authority was in plain sight; to others, they struggled—scratching their heads, crossing their arms, struggling to comprehend what was taking place before them. They asked themselves, is this Jesus a false prophet or true? Is he the long awaited *moshiach*, the anointed one sent by God to redeem Israel.

Of course for us, hindsight is always 20/20. We know who Jesus was and is. But imagine, to those in the synagogue, those who first heard his call, those who first taught by Jesus, their confusion, their faith, or lack thereof.

For me, the irony of this whole story is the words of the man with unclean spirit, hiding in plain sight, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?” Then the unclean spirit (or should I say spirits in plural) made this startling proclamation, not in faith or fear, but in clear recognition, “I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”

Yes, the Holy One of God, no doubt!

**In the name of the Father, the Son, the Spirit. Amen.**