

**Principles for Changing the World: #5 – Beware of Deceivers**  
**From the Series, “The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe”**  
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**Introduction**

I remember the phone call well. It was back in the days when most phones had a cord that went into the wall. It wasn't quite as far back as rotary phones, but we're talking late 1980s.

I was living in the state of Michigan at the time. While I was working on something, the phone rang. This was before caller ID, so I was obligated to pick up the phone to see who was calling. The person who was calling was one of the reasons we later came up with caller ID - It was a salesperson.



She was selling home water filters. Now, I don't know how she got my name, but at the time, I had been thinking about buying one. So, I said I was interested.

She told me this was my lucky day. This was not just about a water filter. If I bought this filter, I would be entered into a drawing for a prize. The smallest prize was a diamond watch. At the other end were two grand prizes. One was a new car. The other was a check for a lot of money.

This was being offered through the mail, so if you wanted to buy the water filter, the company needed your name and address. But, the way the salesperson asked, it seemed to be something much more generous. This lady had a very positive, buoyant voice. With this very positive and buoyant voice she asked me, "Should you win the grand prize of a check, what name should appear in the 'Made out to' line?" Then, getting even more positive and buoyant (if that was possible), she asked, "If you were to win the car, what address would appear on the vehicle registration?"

After getting the info, she quoted a price for the filter. Let's say it was high. At this point, the wheels are going around in my head. This salesperson caught me at a time when I wanted a water filter. At that time, I had no idea where to buy one (This is back before the days of the Internet and Amazon). The smallest prize was a (quote) "diamond" (unquote) watch. This could be a cheap watch with one piece of piece of glass in it. But, at least it was a watch. And, it was guaranteed. Further, maybe this was legitimate. Maybe the watch was a genuinely good watch? Or, I could win one of the grand prizes. So, I consented to pay a lot of money for a water filter.

After hanging up the phone I began to think more. This all went very quickly. During the call, I thought that in the least, I had something I had wanted, a water filter. In addition, I was getting at least a watch. But what if this was a total scam? Was I even going to get a water filter, much less a watch? Maybe this person would take my credit card info, run up big bills, and disappear?

A week later I got a bit of relief when a package arrived. It contained a water filter and a watch. As I suspected, the watch was cheap, with one tiny piece of something shiny in the minute hand. The water filter was very small. And, I realized, I had no guarantee that it really worked.

So, as it turns out, I had been moderately scammed. I say 'moderately' because at least I got something - Even if I paid way too much for it.

A couple of months later I got another call. It was the same salesperson. This time, she wanted to sell me vitamins. I just said, "no thank you", and hung up.

So, I was lucky. I had been cheated, but not so much that my life was ruined. I would live to see another day. On that day, I was reminded of a very important truth that everyone should know.

***The world is full of people who want to take advantage of us.***

Part of the reason I was lucky that day is that the person who took advantage of me only took some of my money. We're going to learn today that there are forces in the world who are much more dangerous.

We're in our series, "The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe." We're working systematically through the book of Mathew. In Chapter seven, Jesus teaches us "Principles for Changing the World". Today, we're going to learn principle number 5: ***Beware of Deceivers***. Let's Read.

15 "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. 16 By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? 17 Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. (Matthew 7:15-20)

To understand this passage, we're going to consider how it was understood by three groups of people spread over time.

1. People who were listening to Jesus.
2. The early church
3. Us today

Before we do that, let's consider one vital point: We just read from the "New International Version" or NIV. To make this point, I'll read from the "Man on the Street" version of the Bible. The "Man on the Street" or "MOTS" version, shows us what most people **think** is being said, rather than what is really being said. Let's compare this to what we just read in the NIV.

Then Jesus said, "Watch out for false prophets". "Wait a minute!" Jesus said. "Why am I saying this?" Jesus went on, "I was about to explain all about false prophets. But, you're all so smart, you would recognize a false prophet if you saw one. What was I thinking? Clearly, you all don't need this. Let's move on to the next topic." (Matthew 7:5-17, MOTS)

Is that what you saw in the previous version? Here's my point: Clearly, Jesus thought this was very important. There is something called a false prophet. And they're bad. How bad? They're like ferocious wolves. A ferocious wolf has one thing in mind: It wants to eat you. Jesus is taking the time to tell us this, because he does not want you to be eaten. So, let's give this special attention.

### **I. How was this understood by Jesus' listeners?**

First, we'll look at how this would have been understood by people living in the days of Jesus.

The word 'Prophet' in the original Hebrew can be literally translated as "mouthpiece". A prophet speaks the words of God. A true prophet is a wonderful gift, because all humanity benefits from the words of God in some way. Sadly, for as long as there have been prophets, there have been false prophets. And God has been warning his people about them for years.

The greatest of the prophets, the true prophets, was Moses. Let's read about him:

10 Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, 11 who did all those signs and wonders the Lord sent him to do in Egypt—to Pharaoh and to all his officials and to his whole land. 12 For no one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel. (Deuteronomy 34:10-12)

Prior to Jesus, there was no prophet greater than Moses. But Moses said there would be others. Sadly, there would be true ones and false ones. So, Moses gave three rules to tell them apart.

***Rule #1: All prophets will say things that are consistent with previous revelation.***

But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, is to be put to death. (Deuteronomy 18:20)

If someone appeared before the people of God and claimed to be a prophet, they had to say things that agreed with the teachings of Moses. For the centuries that followed, this meant there would be a general collection of writings from the prophets that would be honored among the Hebrew people. We call that collection the Scriptures, or the Word of God.

Now, there's a warning here: In order to know whether a prophet is true or false, the listener has to know the Scriptures, the Word of God, well. Otherwise, someone claiming to be a prophet can say whatever they like.

***Rule #2: A true prophet encourages people to follow the one true God of Israel.***

“...or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods...”

It doesn't matter how much sense a prophet makes. It doesn't matter how wise they appear. They must encourage people to follow the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. If they don't, they're a false prophet.

How serious was this? Anyone who broke these rules was to be put to death. So, this was serious.

***Rule #3: True prophets in the age of Israel were given the ability to tell people what God was going to do.***

If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously, so do not be alarmed. (v 22)

Because a true prophet was in touch with the one true God, the prophet knew certain things about the future. That's because the future is in God's hands.

Notice something: It's not stated explicitly, but this implies 100 percent accuracy. If anything prophet says doesn't come to pass, they fail the test. And once again, failing the test called for a death penalty.

A good example of a true prophet was Moses himself. Moses was used by God to bring 10 great plagues on Egypt. Let's look at the time the water of the Nile was turned to blood.

17 This is what the Lord says: By this you will know that I am the Lord: With the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water of the Nile, and it will be changed into blood. (Exodus 7:17)

Because Moses was in touch with God, he could announce what God was going to do - Big things. Big things that would not otherwise happen. Big things like a major body of water turning into blood. Moses did things like this repeatedly. By these things, the people knew he was speaking for God.

So, people who were trained in the Scripture at the time of Jesus knew about false prophets. Let's read more of his statement.

"They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves."

Jesus often used the image of sheep. In this society, people saw sheep all the time. Sheep are very vulnerable creatures. They aren't too bright. Many aren't very strong. Older male sheep have horns, but they can be overcome when they're outnumbered by wolves, who sometimes hunt in packs. However, on the wolf's part, this is work. Who knows? A lucky ram could get a few good hits in before he goes down. What kind of a predator wants that? Females and young sheep, on the other hand, have no defense against attackers. So, one of the main jobs of a shepherd is to fend off attackers like wolves.

Imagine that one day you get a really clever wolf. If he can catch and eat one sheep, all he would have to do is hang on to the skin. He could wrap himself in it, then sneak up on an unsuspecting herd. They would think he's one of them. Boom! Before the sheep knew what hit them, the wolf could attack.

This could even be a warning for leaders. A wolf disguised in this way might even fool a shepherd. An unsuspecting shepherd might look the other way.

Here we get to a question of motivation. We understand why wolves do what they do. But, why would a false prophet do what they do? Well, it's certainly not about the good of the sheep. So, as we try to figure this out, let's start there. False prophets don't value the sheep. They care about something else. What they're looking for can be summed up with the words, "personal gain."

For example, one premier example of a false prophet was a man named Balaam. He's discussed in the book of Numbers. He lived during the time that the people of Israel had left Egypt and were travelling on foot to the promised land. In order to get there, they had to pass through the land of Moab. The king of that land, a man named Balak, was afraid, so he asked Balaam for help. Let's read about it.

So Balak son of Zippor, who was king of Moab at that time, 5 sent messengers to summon Balaam son of Beor, who was at Pethor, near the Euphrates River, in his native land. Balak said:

“A people has come out of Egypt; they cover the face of the land and have settled next to me. 6 Now come and put a curse on these people, because they are too powerful for me. Perhaps then I will be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land. For I know that whoever you bless is blessed, and whoever you curse is cursed.” 7 The elders of Moab and Midian left, taking with them the fee for divination. (Numbers 22:4-7)

So, we see this man Balaam. In the passage we just read, we see at least two motivations. One was money. There was a fee paid for his work. It was no doubt a big fee. Another motivation was prestige. This man is famous. Powerful people, like kings, come to him for help.

So, here we get an insight into what motivates a false prophet. There’s Personal gain - There’s money to be made. There’s prestige - Do your job right, and powerful and important people include you in their lives.

Sometimes, false prophets are happy for small amounts of prestige. They don’t need kings. The common people will do. The prophet Jeremiah had to contend constantly with false prophets.

30 “A horrible and shocking thing  
has happened in the land:  
31 The prophets prophesy lies,  
the priests rule by their own authority,  
and my people love it this way.  
(Jeremiah 5:30-31)

So, prestige can be as simple as working to please the crowd.

As Jesus warned: “They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.” Again, this is serious. False prophets are dangerous. Is there a defense against them? Jesus tells us that knowledge is our main defense.

By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.

So, we are to look for fruit. Again, this is an agricultural society. If you were walking down the road and didn’t see fields with sheep, you may have seen orchards with fruit. Not everyone could afford an orchard. That’s because you needed special trees. If you want figs, you need a fig tree. If you want apples, you need an apple tree. You can’t plant just anything and expect what you want to grow. Bad plants had to be removed for the good plants to grow. If you’re

hungry and you see a thorn bush, just move on. No point in even looking there. This is an easy illustration, based on common observation in the days of Jesus.

So, what does Jesus mean by fruit? We mentioned them earlier. A true prophet can announce what God is going to do with 100% accuracy. A true prophet will follow God and tell others to do so. A true prophet says things that comply with the establish revelation, the Scriptures, the Word of God - He will do these things even when it's hard to do. Note: To discern this, listeners must know the Word of God. You must know what good fruit looks like.

A true prophet does not look for big fees. A true prophet does not look for prestige - He says things that are right, even if it's unpopular.

As a final note to this section: Jesus met all these requirements perfectly.

## **II. How did people in the early Church understand this?**

So, now that we know how people in the days of Jesus would understand these statements, let's look quickly at how they were understood in the early church.

The Apostles of Jesus took this very seriously. Here's something the Apostle Paul said to his friends during one of his missionary journeys:

28 Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. 29 I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. 30 Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. (Acts 20:28-30)

Paul was very concerned about this, so he warned leaders to be on the watch. He used language much like what Jesus used.

The apostle Peter was also concerned about this:

But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves. 2 Many will follow their depraved conduct and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. 3 In their greed these teachers will exploit you with fabricated stories. (II Peter 2:1-3)

This passage is worth a whole message on its own, but let's hit some high points.

But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you...

Notice that in the Old Testament days, there were prophets. Here, Peter is using the word "Teacher". That's important. A prophet, as we learned earlier, speaks the words of God. A teacher takes what is known from the prophets, and explains it. A teacher should not come up with anything new. They explain and clarify what the prophets have taught.

When Jesus appeared, he was the final great prophet. His followers, led by the Holy Spirit, spoke in God's name and wrote what they were told. Their writings make up the New Testament. We believe that once the New Testament was completed, from that point forward, the Church had all it needed. So, we don't need prophets for now.

The Scriptures predict a time period that we call the "end times." At that time, people will begin once again to prophesy in God's name. When that happens, people who prophesy will have to follow all the strict rules that Moses taught. Other than that, we have the completed Word of God, the Bible. So, we only need teachers of the Word.

Sadly, Peter says there will be false teachers. They will do all the terrible things the false prophets did. We're told they will:

- Introduce destructive heresies.
  - Rather than teach the Bible, they will teach other things.
- They will discourage people from following the Scriptures.
- They will deny the sovereign Lord who bought them.
  - That's referring specifically to Jesus.
- Many will follow them.
- They will have depraved Conduct.
- They will be greedy.
- They will exploit people.
- Rather than teach the truth of the Scripture, these teachers will make up things.

Because of their terrible behavior, they will be an embarrassment to all who love and teach the Word of God. People will say to believers, "Why should I take **you** seriously? There's one of your people and look at all the horrible things they do!"

So, the early church saw all the things Jesus warned about. It was happening then, and it's happening now.

### III. What this means to us today.

So, what does all this mean for us today? Sadly, everything Jesus warns about is out there somewhere.

Concerning greed: How about this headline from the Washington Post?

“A televangelist wants his followers to pay for a \$54 million private jet. It’s his fourth plane.” (May 29, 2018)

Here’s a man who claims to teach people about the Christian faith. But, here we see a horrible example of greed. This man is not content to travel the way average people travel. He needs to fly in luxury. And as you would expect, this has caused unbelievers to jeer not just at him, but at all the people who would send money to him. And from there the jeers go to the sensible people. In the minds of unbelievers, all people of faith are the same.

Concerning heresies: Sadly, there are buildings all over America, and all over the world, that look like churches. They have names like Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Methodist. They were built by people who loved the truth of the Scripture. But over time they were taken over by false teachers who did exactly as predicted: They introduced destructive heresies. Today, you go in, and you’re told that the Scriptures are merely a collection of fairy tales. Because they have the buildings, these people look like believers on the surface. But inside, they’re full of lies and distortions.

Of course, there are also churches with names like Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Methodist, with people who have remained faithful to the Word of God. But, you must be on the watch – you must listen carefully when the leaders speak.

Tragically, I could go on for a long time giving all the examples of false prophets and false teaches in our world today. We’ve only talked about those places that attach “religion” to their name. Our world is full of voices who would all tell us that we should forget the teachings from the Word of God and follow them. You only need to turn on the television to find them. You only need to turn on your device. They’re all over.

We’ll go into this in more detail at another time, but for now, let me say this: Sometimes I wish that I would see people give one-half the blind, childlike trust to Jesus Christ that some people give to the television set. To many people, if the TV says it, it must be true. Give that some thought, please.

Before we get too depressed about all that, let’s pull this all together.

## Conclusion

Today, we've learned the fifth principle for changing the world: Beware of deceivers.

The world is full of people who want to take advantage of us. If they only want our money, we're lucky. Sadly, many of them want far more.

Jesus warns us that they come to us like wolves in sheep's clothing. As we're trying to change the world, they will act like they're on our side. They'll act like they're one of us. They work hard to look like believers, but they want nothing less than to exploit us.

What is our defense? We must study and learn the Word of God. We must be watching. And certainly, we must ask for God's help.

If we stay vigilant, we can avoid being eaten by the wolves. We can move on to change the world.

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**Thanks for reading! Here are some helpful links:**

Trinity Church  
[www.TrinityTeaneck.org](http://www.TrinityTeaneck.org)

Phil's Site  
[PhilBrainerd.com](http://PhilBrainerd.com)

To learn how to begin a new life with Jesus Christ, visit Billy Graham's site:

[PeaceWithGod.net](http://PeaceWithGod.net)