

"HEAR YE HIM"

A Devotional Series For Radio

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World Headquarters: The Auditorium, Independence, Missouri

Program Number 191
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The Sermon: BEWARE OF FALSE PROPHETS

Scripture: Matthew 7:15-23

Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore, by their fruits ye shall know them. Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: (A better translation reads, "Ye never knew me.") Depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

And God hath set some in the church, first apostles,
secondarily prophets (I Corinthians 12:28)

All ancient prophets were once modern; and it has always been the fate of modern prophets to be anathematized, persecuted, and killed, and to have their message rejected by the very people who should have been most willing to receive it. It has been the fate of modern revelation from Noah until now to be disbelieved, reviled, and rejected by the men who need it most, by the very men who cling most stubbornly to their interpretation of ancient revelation, which has gathered respectability and sanction with its antiquity.

This condition has always obtained in the world. People have always seemed to believe that the only good prophet was a dead prophet -- one who lived hundreds of years ago, who condemned ancient sinners, but who couldn't be specific about modern sins and modern sinners. Like the people of Jesus' day, normal human beings reject and kill the contemporary prophets, and garnish the sepulchers of the prophets whom their fathers have killed in the long ago. That this condition would continue to the end of the world is indicated in Jesus' statement that as it was in the days of Noah, so also should it be in the days of the coming of the Son of Man. As the people of Noah's day rejected his prophetic message, even though it was preached for a hundred and twenty years, so also should people con-

tinue to reject God's prophets even until the end of time.

When Joseph Smith first put forward his claim of a prophetic revelation in the early 19th century, and proclaimed his message to the world, persecution was almost instantaneous. The fact that he encountered persecution does not necessarily prove that he was a true prophet; but it does prove that people were receiving and treating him as they have always received and treated true prophets. The religious leaders of his day warned against him, frequently using the words of Jesus: "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves." That text is still a favorite refuge for those who cannot or will not believe in the prophetic calling and mission of Joseph Smith, although they may be perfectly ignorant or grossly misinformed concerning the true and authenticated facts of his life, character, and ministry.

What did Jesus mean in this warning against false prophets? Those who believe that the only true prophets are dead prophets have always used this verse as a warning against all who profess to be prophets in modern, contemporary times. But Jesus was not issuing a blanket warning against all prophets; he was showing how to distinguish the false from the

true, and warning against the deceitfulness of the false.

The very existence of false prophets presupposes the simultaneous existence of true prophets. Without true prophets, there could be no possible standard by which to judge -- no basis of comparison between true and false. There can be no counterfeit imitation of true coinage or genuine currency unless there is a true coinage and a true currency which can be imitated. If there were no genuine silver dollars or dollar bills issued by the United States of America, it would be foolish for a counterfeiter to try to issue a counterfeit dollar. No one would take the counterfeit if he did not know the genuine. It is the true coinage which gives the false coinage its seeming value.

Similarly, if the line of true prophets has run out, if there are no more genuine prophets, if no one has seen or heard a true prophet for hundreds and hundreds of years, how would an imposter know how to act, or what to imitate? But because religious leaders have taught for centuries that all prophetic ministry ceased with the apostles, all in these modern days who claim to be prophets are suspect.

Jesus said that the false prophets would come in sheep's clothing, but that inwardly they would be ravening wolves. That is an excellent and a pointed metaphor. It suggests that a wolf who wanted to destroy the flock by appearing to be a prophet would put on a sheep's fleece in order to get among the flock where he could begin his work of killing and destruction. The object of the sheep's fleece on the false prophet would be deception. But sometimes we forget that sheep wear sheepskins too, and that it is perfectly natural and legitimate for a sheep to wear a sheep's fleece. Because there is a genuine, the wolf counterfeits the genuine. Genuine prophets were intended by God to be a part of the flock of Christ; for Paul says in the 12th chapter of First Corinthians that God has set prophets and apostles in the church. True prophets who were members of Christ's

flock would of course wear a sheep's fleece too. That is why the wolf adopts the sheep's fleece as a disguise.

In 1830 when Joseph Smith began the formal presentation of his prophetic claims, there was not a single flock in Christendom that claimed to have a prophet, or to believe in a modern, contemporary prophetic minister; not a single flock that had a true prophet in sheep's clothing. The only good and acceptable prophets were dead ones. When one appeared in sheep's clothing, the keepers of those flocks immediately began to cry, "Beware of false prophets!"

Let us consider and analyze this text still further. The false prophet assumed his sheep's clothing in order that he might appear like a true prophet, that he might be like all the other sheep, and deceive the people by his sheep-like appearance. Did Joseph Smith attempt to make himself as nearly as possible like all the other religious leaders of the city? Hardly! He imitated no one in matters of doctrine or church organization; his message challenged every sect in the Christian world. Such methods were scarcely calculated to insinuate him quietly and deceptively into the flocks of the religious leaders and teachers of his day.

Latter Day Saints believe that prophetic ministry still ought to exist, and still does exist in the church today. There are true prophets today, who are true sheep of the flock of Christ; and there are false prophets who appropriate sheep's clothing to deceive. Ye shall know them by their fruits. Fruits take a long time to mature, but they give incontrovertible evidence of the nature of the tree from which they grew. Beware of the false prophets who make merchandise of their followers and of the message they presumptively preach in Christ's name. But let us also accept the ministry of modern, contemporary prophets who tell forth the truth in God's name, who call sinners to repentance, who teach sound doctrine, and who warn a heedless world of the wrath to come. Such a one was Joseph Smith, the nineteenth century prophet.