

How do we tell the difference between a true and false prophet?
How do we tell the difference between somebody who is the kind of shepherd we should follow or whether they are kind of a pastor that we should avoid? This is one of the great questions that we have, and it's a very important one.

It's especially hard when there are so many who claim to be followers of Jesus and claim to be his apostles, his prophets, his shepherds, his elders, his teachers. You can look just in Duncan which has close to 100 churches. That's a lot of people who claim to be leaders. And they're far more whose books and podcasts and videos and content come across our screens our paths every day.

And it can be overwhelming at times to figure out how should and shouldn't we act.

This morning we will turn to Jeremiah 23.

Here in this passage God has some words and a prophecy that is directed towards the false prophets who oppose Jeremiah. And I think his words are helpful for us as well. They can help us be able to tell the difference between true and false shepherds. And when we know this difference, it can help us have stronger and healthier churches.

I. False shepherds live ungodly lives, true shepherds live righteous lives (v. 9-15).

This is the main difference between true and false shepherds.

Normally, we just think about doctrine.

We evaluate teachers and shepherds based on their teaching and what they say.

But throughout all of the Bible, the main criterion is their lives.

This is why Jesus says to look at the fruit.

Verse 9, **"Concerning the prophets: My heart is broken within me; all my bones shake; I am like a drunken man, like a man overcome by wine, because of the Lord and because of his holy words."**

Jeremiah is sometimes called the weeping prophet.

And he is heartbroken when he thinks about the spiritual state of his country.

When he looks at all the leaders and shepherds around him, it breaks him. Because of what God's word says and what he sees.

The sin of the shepherds overwhelms him.

Verse 10, **"For the land is full of adulterers; because of the curse the land mourns, and the pastures of the wilderness are dried up. Their course is evil, and their might is not right."**

The whole place is filled with sexual sin.

The economy has tanked.

There is a spiritual crisis.

Those in power misuse it for their own ends instead of God.

Any of that sound familiar?

It sounds like our country to me.

And God says part of the reason this happens is not because of ungodly national leaders, but ungodly shepherds lead to an ungodly people.

Verse 11, **"Both prophet and priest are ungodly; even in my house I have found their evil, declares the Lord."**

The prophets and the priests.

The people of God who should shepherd and lead the people.

They are ungodly.

They don't just sin in private.

It is not just that they are hypocrites.

It is that they are so wicked, they sin even in the temple.

It is like a shepherd abusing a child in the sanctuary.

Or looking at pornography in his study.

Verse 12, **"Therefore their way shall be to them like slippery paths in the darkness, into which they shall be driven and fall, for I will bring disaster upon them in the year of their punishment, declares the Lord."**

And their sin is a slippery slope.

It has led the people into darkness.

And it will slide them all the way into judgment and hell.

Verse 13, **"In the prophets of Samaria I saw an unsavory thing: they prophesied by Baal and led my people Israel astray."**

Here Jeremiah mentions the prophets and shepherds of other nations. So these prophets are not the ones who claim to follow God.

They prophecy and lead God's people astray.

And this is terrible and wrong.

It is wrong that God's people would fall away from the true faith and instead worship counterfeits.

Verse 14, **"But in the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen a horrible thing: they commit adultery and walk in lies; they strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from his evil; all of them have become like Sodom to me, and its inhabitants like Gomorrah."**

This is what is even worse.

God is saying that immoral and ungodly shepherds are worse than prophets of other gods.

Their sin is a horrible thing.

There are shepherds who commit adultery.

There are shepherds who live lives of lies.

There are shepherds who do not help the weak and poor.

Instead, they help the powerful.

They encourage sinners to continue in their sin.

Verse 15, **"Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts concerning the prophets: "Behold, I will feed them with bitter food and give them poisoned water to drink, for from the prophets of Jerusalem ungodliness has gone out into all the land."**

God says this is what He will do to these prophets.

Instead of being fed and sustained by God.

God will give them bitter food and drink.

Because the ungodliness of these prophets is spreading all over the land.

This is what happens in our country.
We do not care about character anymore.
We care far more about winning or destroying our enemies.
We care about whether or not someone is a great preacher.
And there are far too many places that will overlook sin in their shepherds if they can draw a crowd.
They don't mind if a pastor is abusive and angry if he can preach.
And the more talented the pastor, the more likely churches are to forgive and ignore even sexual sin under the guise of giving second chances.
This cannot and should not be.
The main mark of a true shepherd is that they are godly and like Christ.
They live out what they actually say.
There is a judgment for these shepherds.
But there will also be a judgment for those of us who allow it.
Those who put up with these shepherd's sins.

II. False shepherds speak their own words, true shepherds speak God's words (v. 16-32).

This is the source of where messages come from.
When shepherds speak, when pastors speak.
Their words have to come from God.
They cannot come from themselves.
They cannot be their own message or own ideas.
It cannot come from newspapers or books.
It must from God or His Word.

Verse 16, **"Thus says the Lord of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord."**

We are told to ignore these false prophets.
These shepherds give us vain and foolish hopes.
Why?
Because their words, visions, and dreams come from themselves.
They do not speak from God.

They do not speak for God.
They just say whatever it is that they want.

Verse 17, **"They say continually to those who despise the word of the Lord, 'It shall be well with you'; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, 'No disaster shall come upon you.'"**

Those who despise the word are unbelievers.
It is those people living in sin who do not love God's Word.
And these shepherds only speak encouragement to these people.
They tell sinners not to worry that God is love.
They tell people stuck in their sin not to worry because there is no such thing as hell or God's judgment.

These false shepherds never rebuke sin but only encourage.
And they never proclaim the gospel.
They tell people the ungodly way they talk and treat immigrants is great!
They tell those in sexual sin that they can do what they want.
They encourage those who struggle with their gender, that they can be who they want.
They tell those who are struggling with different sexual desires to love whoever they want because God does not care.
They are lying.

Verse 18, **"For who among them has stood in the council of the Lord to see and to hear his word, or who has paid attention to his word and listened?"**

The problem with these shepherds is that they do not speak for God.
They don't stand and listen to His voice.
They do not heed or read the word.
They do not study it diligently and seek to explain it.
They might read it sometimes.
They may even quote it from the pulpit.
But they do not speak God's Words.

Verse 19, **"Behold, the storm of the Lord! Wrath has gone forth, a whirling tempest; it will burst upon the head of the wicked. 20 The anger of the Lord will not turn back until he has executed and accomplished the intents of his heart. In the latter days you will understand it clearly."**

God is going to punish these prophets.

The false shepherds will have to answer to God.

We will talk about this later on in point 3.

But the main thing we need to see is that God does not approve what they have said.

Their message does not come from His mouth.

This is the reaction you would have if someone claimed to speak on your behalf and was telling people things that were the opposite of what you believed and thought.

Verse 21, **"I did not send the prophets, yet they ran; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied."**

God makes it clear that false shepherds are not sent by him.

They can claim to speak for God, but they don't.

There are plenty of people who say they have been called by God to ministry and are wrong.

There are those who claim to speak for God and are mistaken.

Verse 22, **"But if they had stood in my council, then they would have proclaimed my words to my people, and they would have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their deeds."**

If they actually stood for God.

If they were true shepherds, then they speak God's Words.

True shepherds turn from their own sins.

And they try to turn other people from their evil ways.

But false shepherds only encourage more sin.

Verse 23, **"Am I a God at hand, declares the Lord, and not a God far away? Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see**

him? declares the Lord. Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the Lord."

This is God saying that He sees.

He notices.

He is not absent or not paying attention.

He made the entire heavens and Earth.

He can tell what people claim to say in his name.

Verse 25, **"I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, 'I have dreamed, I have dreamed!'"**

God hears all of them lying.

He hears their made-up dreams when someone claims "God told me to get a private jet."

"God told me to run for President and you had better give me money."

God hears all of that.

One day He will deal with it.

Verse 26, **"How long shall there be lies in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart,"**

This is the cry of godly.

We should ask and worry about how long this goes on?

How long will God put up with those who claim to speak for him?

Verse 27, **"who think to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, even as their fathers forgot my name for Baal? "**

This is what happens when people speak their own message.

Eventually God is forgotten.

His name is no longer worshipped.

And people begin to worship and call after other gods and idols.

Verse 28, **"Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let him who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? declares the Lord."**

What should happen is people teach God's Word.
We cannot preach our own messages and own ideas.
It must come from God and His Word.
Because God's Word has very little in common with the ideas of men.

Verse 29, **"Is not my word like fire, declares the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?"**

God's Word is like a fire.
We should be able to tell the difference between true shepherds and false ones.
Because God's Word should burn in us.
Hearing it should feel different.
It should fall on our sins like a hammer.
It should warm our cold hearts like a fire.
The most gifted speakers on earth cannot hold a candle to the worst true shepherd who teaches God's Word.

Verse 30, **"Therefore, behold, I am against the prophets, declares the Lord, who steal my words from one another."**

These false shepherds don't just speak their own words.
They also steal from others.
Because the problem is you run out of stuff to say.
And so they begin to listen to other prophets or priests and just copy them.
And this happens today all the time.
Especially among the most famous shepherds and preachers in our day.
They plagiarize and steal their sermons.
Some pay young interns to just write them for them.
Some just steal from each other.
Or they steal from commentaries and old sermons.
Some now even just have AI write their sermons for them.
God is not fooled or mocked.
Our words have to come from Him alone.
They cannot come from other people.

Verse 31, **"Behold, I am against the prophets, declares the Lord, who use their tongues and declare, 'declares the Lord.'"**

God is against these false shepherds.

He is against any who just speak their own words for themselves.

He is against those who claim to speak for God.

Verse 32, **"Behold, I am against those who prophesy lying dreams, declares the Lord, and who tell them and lead my people astray by their lies and their recklessness, when I did not send them or charge them. So they do not profit this people at all, declares the Lord."**

He is against those who lie.

People when we speak from ourselves.

When shepherds do this, they are leading the people of God astray.

They are lying.

And they are reckless.

And they will not help the sheep of God develop and become more like Christ.

They will only consume them.

What shepherds do we listen to?

Do we listen to those who speak God's Word?

Or do we just listen to the ones who say what we like?

Just because some reads from the Bible, does not mean they are teaching the Word.

And do we despise God's Word?

That is Israel's problem is that they are bored by the Bible.

They don't like God's message.

They want to change it to make it more modern.

III. False shepherds will perish, true shepherds will be appointed (v. 33-40, 1-4).

This is the final destiny of false shepherds.

One day, God will take care of them.

He will deal with them.

And they will get the judgment and justice they deserve.

On the flip side there is some encouragement, that God ordains faithful shepherds and prophets.

Verse 33, **"When one of this people, or a prophet or a priest asks you, 'What is the burden of the Lord?' you shall say to them, 'You are the burden, and I will cast you off, declares the Lord.'"**

This is probably the funniest verse in the middle of a serious chapter.

Another and probably better translation of "burden" is "oracle."

So, when they ask things like "What has God told you?"

You are to respond that God is going to get rid of you.

Verse 34, **"And as for the prophet, priest, or one of the people who says, 'The burden of the Lord,' I will punish that man and his household."**

And the next time anyone says the phrase "God told me"

God is going to punish that person and his whole family.

Because the false teaching must end.

Verse 35, **"Thus shall you say, every one to his neighbor and every one to his brother, 'What has the Lord answered?' or 'What has the Lord spoken?'"**

Instead of searching for new things and new words.

They are to return to the old.

They are to look at what God has already spoken in his word.

They are to see how God has already told us His answers.

Instead of trying to invent new ones.

Verse 36, **"But 'the burden of the Lord' you shall mention no more, for the burden is every man's own word, and you pervert the words of the living God, the Lord of hosts, our God."**

God is sick of everyone claiming to hear from Him.

So many people are claiming to be prophets that it has lost its meaning.

And people are claiming their own ideas are God's.
They have perverted His Word and their office.

Verse 37, **"Thus you shall say to the prophet, 'What has the Lord answered you?' or 'What has the Lord spoken?'"** 38**"But if you say, 'The burden of the Lord,' thus says the Lord, 'Because you have said these words, 'The burden of the Lord,' when I sent to you, saying, 'You shall not say, 'The burden of the Lord,'"** 39**"therefore, behold, I will surely lift you up and cast you away from my presence, you and the city that I gave to you and your fathers."**

This is just God saying He is sick of it.

This sounds strange to us.

But just think of someone saying, "God told me."

God is saying the next time someone says "God told me." They will be thrown as far from God as possible.

Verse 40, **"And I will bring upon you everlasting reproach and perpetual shame, which shall not be forgotten."**

But this is the longer consequence: that they will face eternal condemnation.

They will be punished forever because of their sin.

Because of their lies.

And because they dare to speak lies on behalf of God.

Verse 1, **"'Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!' declares the Lord."**

This is the judgmental proclamation of woe against these prophets.

Because they are destroying and scattering the sheep.

When shepherds are false it sends the sheep out of the church.

And unbelievers don't want to come and find the truth.

So, God will judge them.

Verse 2, **"Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people: 'You have scattered my flock**

and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the Lord.

And God will punish all of these shepherds.

One day God will hear their case.

Verse 3, **“Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply.”**

But this is the blessing and reminder.

God will not leave His sheep alone.

They will not be left alone to be mistreated by false shepherds and taken advantage of.

One day, God will gather up all His sheep and bring them back home.

Verse 4, **“I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the Lord.”**

And God will appoint shepherds over them.

These will be true shepherds who can care for them.

Who will not lead them astray and will keep track of the sheep.

There is something in this promise we should see.

True shepherds are a gift from God.

They are not just something we should take for granted.

We should recognize that God appoints and allows them.

And so when we have them.

When we see them in our church or in other places in the kingdom of God.

We should be grateful for His gift.

IV. Jesus is the good shepherd (v. 5-8).

This is the most important thing we should see.

I don't know about you, but studying this chapter makes me long for Jesus.

And it makes me grateful I am not the chief shepherd.

Verse 5, **“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.”**

We have a beautiful promise.

That one day someone will come from David.

One Day Jesus will be born and reign as King.

And He will be a good king.

And when He is on the throne, the land will be righteous.

One day when Jesus comes, our place will no longer be a place of sin and wickedness.

It will be a land flowing with justice and righteousness.

Verse 6, **“In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness.’”**

God promises to save His people.

That no longer will they have to worry about their enemies destroying them.

No longer will they be threatened with the possibility of exile.

Imagine getting to live in a place where Jesus is King.

Where the government is run not by Christians.

Not by people who claim to be Christians.

But it is run by Christ Himself.

Verse 7, **“Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when they shall no longer say, ‘As the Lord lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt,’”**

And in that day it will not just be said, “Hey remember the Exodus?”

For Israel that is their origin.

They remember it and retell it in the way Americans talk about the Revolutionary war.

It was the greatest act of God in their history.

God is saying He will do something even greater.

Verse 8, **"but 'As the Lord lives who brought up and led the offspring of the house of Israel out of the north country and out of all the countries where he had driven them.' Then they shall dwell in their own land."**

It is the promise to Israel that He will bring them out of exile.

They will be restored after they are sent to Babylon.

This is good news for them.

But there is also good news for Christians.

As God restored Israel, He will restore us.

He will bring us out of the many places we have been thrown.

And Jesus will gather us together.

We will be brought into the Kingdom of God.

And there we will be with Him forever.

As Jesus tells us, He is the Good Shepherd.

Ever true shepherd on Earth is just a pale reflection of Jesus.

He is the shepherd who goes after the sheep who is lost.

He is the shepherd who does not get rid of the weak sheep.

He is the shepherd who loves the sheep who seems worthless and sickly.

He is the shepherd who protects us from wolves and lions.

He is the shepherd who heals our wounds and leads us by streams of still waters.

He is the shepherd who dies in our place.

He lays down His life for the sheep.

1. False shepherds live (ungodly) lives, true shepherds live (righteous) lives (v. 9-15). 2. False shepherds speak their (own words), true shepherds speak (God's Words) (v. 16-32). 3. False shepherds will (perish), true shepherds will be (appointed) (v. 33-40, 1-4). 4. Jesus is the (good shepherd) (v. 5-8)

When we think of shepherds on earth, they should look like Jesus.

And whenever the ones down here fail, we can be reminded of the good shepherd who never does.