

Get Real

The Prophets and Vital Faith

Detailed outline from the Sermon on December 9, 2007

<p>What is a prophet?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. <u>Someone who predicts the future.</u> This can be true, though it's a narrow view of prophet.2. <u>A prophet speaks for God.</u> A prophet tells the truth, sometimes about what will be, but usually about <i>what is</i>.3. Usually, this is <u>hard truth</u>. Yes, prophets give good tiding, especially the Old Testament prophets who predict the coming savior. But usually the prophet is the one you don't want at the party because he'll ask why you spent two thousand dollars on that suit instead of going to Men's Wearhouse and giving \$1500 to the poor.	<p><u>Prophets</u></p> <p>Matthew 10:41: "Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet receives a Prophet's reward.</p> <p>1 Thessalonians 5:20: "Do not treat prophecies with contempt."</p> <p>1 Corinthians 14:1: The gift of prophecy is especially to be desired among the spiritual gifts. 14:39: Be eager to prophecy.</p> <p>Romans 12:6: "If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith."</p> <p>2 Peter 1:21: People speaking for God as they are carried along by the Holy Spirit.</p> <hr/> <p><u>False prophets</u></p> <p>1 John 4:1: If someone doesn't acknowledge that Jesus is from God, this person is not prophetic.</p> <p>Matthew 24:24: Jesus warns of false prophets deceiving and pretending.</p> <p>2 Peter 2: False prophets, destructive, heresies, denying God's sovereignty, exploiting vulnerable people.</p> <p>1 Corinthians 14 indicates that even prophecy should be done in an orderly way and that prophets, like others must be subject and accountable to others, while false prophets are arrogant, bold and unaccountable.</p>
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Prophetic truth is so often a strong, passionate appeal to remember God's values, God's agenda, God's commands, and God's dictates. Prophets are viewed as negative or unrealistic or out of touch. When they are actually quite in touch with reality and would rather not see us sleep through it, or live in denial of ultimate reality. Prophets are often pesky, frequently reviled, often dodged and don't usually make great pastors.

Yes, the pastor has a prophetic role. But typically a pastor is an optimist; seeing the best, imparting grace, believing in potentials and celebrating every forward step of progress and development. Most prophet types view pastor-types as soft, too patient and altogether too optimistic about the church in the world. A prophet would tell me that the world is going to hell in a hand basket as culture gets increasingly crass, etc. I'd counter that more people in the world are coming to Christ today than at any time in history, and I'd ask him if he heard Tim Tebow's Heisman reception speech (which glorified God.).

So in the spirit of the prophets, I've intentionally phrased the key points in the negative.

If faith isn't active, it isn't real.
If it isn't obedient, it isn't useful.
If it isn't loyal, it isn't love.
If it isn't fervent, it isn't reciprocal.
If it isn't clear, it isn't true.

1. If it isn't active, it isn't real.

The Old Testament prophets make a big deal out of doing justice, extending kindness, help and relief to the poor and oppressed and alien and outcast. If we aren't doing this, then the calisthenics of religious ritual is empty; so much smoke and noise. Pick your prophet and the theme is there – do good; stand up for what's right; help the helpless. This validates faith. It proves it. It enacts it.

2. If faith isn't obedient, it's useless.

If our faith isn't attentive to God's voice, respectful of God's preferences and responsive to God's promptings, then it's a useless faith.

The prophets use so many colorful images:

Isaiah and Jeremiah: the stubborn donkey.
Isaiah: The fruitless oak and the barren garden.
Jeremiah: The clay pot that has to be lumped and reformed.
Ezekiel: The dry, lifeless bones.
Isaiah and Jeremiah: The obstinate children.

All these images paint word pictures of people who say they believe but who don't obey God, or respect God's word or authority or sovereignty. The prophets have a pretty simple theme – obey God and enjoy the benefits. Disobey God and suffer the consequences.

One more image from Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Hosea: The prostitute. The dysfunctional marriage (Jeremiah 3:1b-5).

3. If faith isn't loyal, it isn't love.

The whole relationship has been built on the notion that there is one God, who wants loyal love and a two-way relationship; not to be one of many, or to share affection with gods that don't actually exist, or with objects or philosophies that don't deserve our loyalty.

Love, Old Testament and New Testament, can only be defined as willful and stubbornly loyal; not as the flimsy, feel-good thing that our generation (and other generations) has made it. Yes, it's passionate, but that's because it's determined.

4. If it isn't fervent, it isn't reciprocal. Because God is fervent.

The one who calls himself I Am clearly wants something better than isolation, separation and the distance that His standing and identity could easily justify. He crosses the vastness between Him and us and extends relationship.

Our response apparently matters to God. Not that God is needy; but God is hopeful and has designed us to live in fellowship in a way that reveals something of God's makeup.

So if we don't care and brush God off, then God is *out there*, so to speak. A jilted lover, or worse, someone stuck in a relationship where the other claims to share the love but can't produce any heat.

Malachi uses offerings as the example of heartless relationship.

Jeremiah 29:13: "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart."

5. If it isn't clear, it isn't true.

- The problem of syncretism – people mish-mashing the faith with other religions and philosophies.
- Possessions and idols – inanimate material things replacing God.
- Moral confusion – Isaiah 5:20 calling evil good and good evil.

The prophets cry out for clarity, real understanding of God's nature and wants from us and for us.

So, over and over, the message is “return, you faithless people, and I’ll clean you of your backslidings.” (Jeremiah 3:22)

And Circumcise your hearts (Jeremiah 4:4) it’s not a great image to talk about but it’s graphic and effective.

Jesus on topic

Jesus said that he didn’t come to abolish the law or prophets, but to fulfill them. He fulfilled them by living out all the ultimate values of God, and by living into the predictive words of a coming Messiah.

As for active faith, Jesus started out by quoting the prophets and finished by laying some heavy accusations on people who claim and even teach faith but don’t live it.

As for obedience, Jesus says, “If you love me, you’ll obey me.”

Clarity? “I am the way, the truth and the life, and no one comes to the Father but by me.”

Fervency? Pick your scripture. He doesn’t want casual believers but actual followers who are willing to lay down their lives.

Returning? The prodigal.
The lost sheep.

As for the condition of our hearts, Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:3-9).