

“The Prophet, Part 2: The Person”
Deuteronomy 18:9-22
November 10, 2024
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We return again this morning to the Book of Deuteronomy, where Moses is instructing Israel on how they are to live as God’s people in the land.

Two weeks ago we came to the section on prophets. And we return to that same passage again this morning, as we turn to Deuteronomy 18:9-22.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

Moses said to the people:

^{18:9} “When you come into the land that Yahweh your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations.

[...]

¹⁵ “Yahweh your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen— ¹⁶ just as you desired of Yahweh your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of Yahweh my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.’ ¹⁷ And Yahweh said to me, ‘They are right in what they have spoken. ¹⁸ I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. ¹⁹ And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him. ²⁰ But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.’ ²¹ And if you say in your heart, ‘How may we know the word that Yahweh has not spoken?’— ²² when a prophet speaks in the name of Yahweh, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that Yahweh has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

We praise you, Lord,
and we ask you to teach us your ways and your truth.
Help us to take your Word into our hearts and onto our lips.
Make us to delight in your testimony more than in riches.

Help us to meditate on your precepts,
and to fix our eyes on your ways,
Grant us to delight in your truth,
and to never forget your Word.
In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:12-16]

Introduction

Our text this morning is about the role of the prophet in Israel.

Now, two weeks ago, we spoke from this text about how God speaks to us, and why he speaks to us mediated through others, and how we were made to listen. And that sermon is on our website.

But today, we're going to focus on the kind of person God uses in a prophetic way.

God establishes several layers of overlapping authority structures in Israel. There are judges, and priests, and Levites, and sometimes kings – all forms of institutional authority among God's people at that time.

But here God adds one more layer. He adds the layer of the prophet ... who is not so much a part of the authority and institutional structures already in place ... but rather, an outside voice who might step in to call those institutions and authority structures, along with individuals, and really the whole of the people, back to faithfulness to Yahweh.

And to consider that dynamic, we're going to ask three questions.

We'll ask:

- First, what is a prophet?
- Second, what do prophetic acts look like today?
- And third, how do you identify true prophetic voices?

What Is a Prophet?

So, first, what is a prophet?

And here I find the work of Mike Williams, from Covenant Seminary, especially helpful.

Williams points out that the foundational role of the prophets – the heart of their ministry – is often different than we tend to assume.

We can tend to think of prophets primarily as predictors – individuals God uses to predict the future. And God did use the prophets to tell his people what would happen, and to give them new revelation – that's true.

But Williams points out that if you actually study the ministry of the prophets in the Bible, the heart of their work was not really about prediction. It was about enforcement.

The prophets, were God's "covenant enforcers." They were individuals that God sent to his people, to call his people back to a right relationship with God – to call them once again to obey his laws and to trust his promises.

When God's people had strayed from faithfulness to him, God sent his prophets to call the people to obey God's law and repent. When God's people were struggling or suffering, God sent his prophets to call the people to trust God's promises, and be comforted. In both cases, the primary work of God's prophets in the Bible was to call God's people back to God: to call them to live according to his Word, and to trust in his Word.

The prophets, at root, took what God had already spoken, and applied it to the lives of God's people, when God's people had strayed from it in one way or another.

And God might call a range of people to that role.

Some prophets were priests, and others were not. Some held positions of authority, and others did not. Some were men, and some were women [Exodus 15:20, Judges 4:4, 2 Kings 22:14, Luke 2:36, Acts 21:9, Isaiah 8:3].

But whatever their background, their core message was the same.

At a foundational level, a prophet was someone whom God used to call his people back to faithfulness to and faith in him.

That's what the Bible shows us. That's the first thing we see in the Scriptures. That's what a prophet is. [For more on this, see Williams,188-205]

What Do Prophetic Acts Look Like Today?

That then leads us to our second question: What does this look like today?

And here, we need to consider both the continuity and the discontinuity with how God relates to his people throughout redemptive history.

At a foundational level, there is continuity with how God relates to his people from age to age. God remains the same. Fallen human nature remains the same. Salvation by grace alone through faith alone, through Christ alone, remains the same. All that is constant throughout redemptive history.

But over time, in his wisdom, how God administers his covenant to his people may vary. And we see this in a whole host of ways throughout the Bible, from Abraham to Moses to David, and into the early Church.

And two key changes in covenant administration bear on how we apply this text today.

One is the completion of God's revelation in the Scriptures. When Moses spoke these words, Israel had maybe four and a half books of revelation recorded in its Scriptures. The process of God's

revelation – of his speaking his Word to his people – was not yet complete. Today though, for us, that work is complete: We have not four and a half books, but 66 books of God’s Word, given to us through the prophets, and recorded in the Scriptures. And with the completion of that Word to us, God’s work of speaking new revelation to his people has come to completion. God does not speak to us new words, but he now directs us to his written Word.

So that’s one change: The Holy Spirit is no longer speaking new revelation to his people.

But that said ... that doesn’t mean that the Holy Spirit has stopped working among his people.

Instead, that work simply looks different. Where the Spirit’s work of revelation has reached completion, his work of illumination continues.

If revelation is the Spirit speaking new words, then illumination is the Spirit turning on the lights, as it were, in our hearts and minds, so that we can rightly understand God’s Word, rightly perceive our own hearts, and rightly comprehend the realities of the world around us ... and then bring those things together, applying God’s Word to the situations God has called us to.

The Spirit does this in general, for all believers, but sometimes he does it in more pronounced ways, giving a believer a helpful insight into a Word of Scripture, or a sudden clear perception of their own heart, or an understanding of someone else’s heart, or the ability to better see a dynamic they’re trying to navigate.

Sometimes these insights dawn on a believer gradually, and other times suddenly ... sometimes the perception feels deductive and other times it feels more intuitive ... but in each case, it’s not a work of revelation, but illumination – it’s not that God sends us a brand new message, but that he helps us see and grasp what he’s already put in front of us, in his Word, in our hearts, in our lives.

And rightly used, that illumination should lead to application: the application of God’s Word to our lives, and to the lives of others, so that God’s people help one another to better obey God’s commands, and trust in his promises.

So that’s one key adjustment in the prophetic act today: from a gift of revelation to a gift of illumination.

A second key adjustment is that while God continues to work through what we might call “prophetic acts,” the office of prophet has ceased.

God ministers to his people through his servants, and that is true throughout redemptive history. But as that remains a constant, we also see specific offices come and go, while others change in significant ways. The Church no longer has kings ruling over it, as it did in David’s day. And it no longer has Apostles in it, as it did in Paul’s day.

And in the same way, with the completion of the Scriptures, the Church no longer has the office of prophet, any more than it has the ongoing office of Apostle.

But that said ... though there is no “office” of prophet ... God still works among his people by prophetic acts – by which I mean acts in which God uses one of his people to call others back to his Word: to repent and believe it, when they have strayed from it.

He might do that on a large scale at times. We recently celebrated Reformation Day. The Reformers did not hold an office or title as “prophets.” But the Reformation was a prophetic act, in the sense that God used his servants to call his people back to faithfulness to his Word and his gospel. There have been many such prophetic acts throughout Church history – not acts of new revelation, but of special illumination concerning God’s Word, and application of it to contemporary needs, through servants who boldly confronted God’s people. They didn’t arrive with a new message and say “Thus sayeth the Lord ...” but they did point people back to the Scriptures and say “Thus sayeth the Lord ...”

And God does that not just on a large scale, but often on a personal level. He sends other believers to us at times, who feel a burden to speak to us about how God’s Word applies to our lives. Sometimes their words are words of comfort, with an exhortation to believe God’s promises. Sometimes their words are words of correction, with an exhortation to obey God’s commandments. Sometimes their observations seem ordinary and obvious. Other times, it can feel as if the Lord has especially opened their eyes to a need we have, or a word we needed to hear. Sometimes it’s through a pastor or church officer, but other times it’s through a friend, or just a fellow congregant. And in these ways, sometimes big and sometimes small, God continues to work in our lives through prophetic acts – not acts of new revelation, but acts of illumination and application in our lives, through his servants, and by his Spirit.

And when that happens – when God sends such a speaker to us ... then as Moses reminds us here, we need to listen.

But how do we know if we should listen? How do we know if the person coming to us is truly coming to us in this prophetic way ... or if they’re speaking falsely, or presumptuous?

Well, that’s the question that comes up in verse 21, and the next one for us to consider.

Identifying True Prophetic Voices & Acts

So third, we need to ask: How do we distinguish truly prophetic voices from false or presumptuous ones?

And this question is important in three ways, because it bears on how we listen, how we speak, and whom we follow.

It bears first on how we listen. Because at various times in our lives, a fellow believer will come to us and seek to confront us or comfort us with God’s word. But not everyone who does that is always right. So whom do we listen to? The guidelines of this text are not a simple flow chart that gives us a certain answer ... but they are important guidelines that we must wrestle with, and seek to wisely apply, as we consider how we hear and evaluate such words that others speak to us. So, it bears on how we listen to others.

But second, it also bears on how we speak. Because sometimes we may feel as if the Lord is putting us in a situation to speak prophetically into someone's life – to comfort or confront them with God's Word in a specific way. And while there is, again, no flow chart to discern that with certainty, there is biblical guidance here on how we can evaluate our own heart when we sense that prompting. So this question bears on how we speak.

And then, third, it bears on whom we follow. Our world is filled with voices that claim to be prophetic. Whether Christian or secular, liberal or conservative, political or therapeutic, in all sorts of areas of life, public people are speaking words of confrontation to some, and comfort to others, and whether they use the word or not – they are claiming to be prophetic with their words. And we are often drawn to reject some of them and follow others. And Moses's words here on how to evaluate a prophet bear on whose words out there we should take to heart, and whose words we should view with more suspicion. So this bears on who we follow.

Moses gives us these guidelines for evaluating prophetic words and actions in verses 18, 20, and 22. There he gives us three concrete criteria for how to identify a false prophet ... as well as an important (though easy to miss) model-based guideline for identifying a true prophet.

The positive criteria for identifying a true prophet comes in verse 18 when God says that these prophets he will send will be like Moses.

God says that the prophets he sends ... will be like Moses.

Now, of course this does speak to their function. But Old Testament scholar Christopher Wright pushes us to see much more contained in that little phrase. He sees it also pointing to the kind of character we should expect in those God sends in this way. And that bears out – because if we think of Moses's key character traits, we soon realize that we see those same character traits show up again and again in the faithful prophets that God sends to his people in the centuries that follow. [Wright, 217-218]

And so, with the three concrete criteria Moses spells out here, along with the character-based criteria we get from God, rooted in the model of Moses, let's consider a series of questions we might ask to help us distinguish a truly prophetic voice from a false or presumptuous one.

Are They Faithful?

First, we need to ask: Are they faithful?

Moses reminds us here that a true prophet will be faithful to God, and faithful to God's people.

First, they'll be faithful to God. We see this in verse twenty. If a prophet speaks in the name of other gods – if he is not himself faithful primarily and exclusively to Yahweh, the God of the Bible – then he should not be heard as a prophet.

Second, Moses tells us that a true prophet will be faithful to God's people. We see this in verse eighteen – Moses says that a true prophet will come from among their brothers – meaning he will be a faithful member of the believing community, faithful to God's Church.

That's the first thing Moses tells us here, and it's a non-negotiable: a truly prophetic voice will be faithful: faithful to God, faithful to God's people.

Are They Truthful?

Second, Moses tells us we need to ask: Are they truthful?

We see this in verse twenty-one. Now there, the focus is on the truthfulness of a prediction, but there is a broader underlying concept, I think. A truly prophetic voice will speak the truth about God's Word and the truth about the world around them. They will not teach falsehood about God's Word, or presumptuously speak as if something comes from God's Word when it's not really found there, and it's just their opinion. But also, with that, they will not speak falsely about others – either vindicating them in their sin, or condemning them by slander. And if such a self-proclaimed prophetic voice fails to be truthful – if they show themselves to be liars in one form or another ... then we need not fear them when they speak to us ... and we should not follow them in the world or in the Church. And we certainly should not speak like them ourselves.

We cannot accept a claim about God's Word, or about others, or about ourselves, simply because it feels true. We need to consider whether it is demonstrably true. And if further investigation reveals it to be false, then we must not heed it or repeat it.

The second thing Moses tells us is that a truly prophetic voice will be truthful.

Are They Humble?

Third, we need to ask: Are they humble?

And here we turn especially to the character and example of Moses himself, highlighted in verse 18.

Moses was a humble man. In Numbers 12:3 we're told he was the meekest man on earth. As such, he had a humble reluctance to step into a prophetic role. [Exodus 3:11]. Jeremiah was similarly reluctant [Jeremiah 1:6]. Even Isaiah, who is known for his enthusiasm in taking up the prophetic role, before he said to God "Here I am! Send me." [Isaiah 6:8], he first said to him "Woe is me! For [...] for I am a man of unclean lips," [Isaiah 6:5]

Moses and the faithful prophets who followed him were not arrogant men. They were humble – shockingly humble, even.

Truely prophetic voices have a humble reluctance as they go to others, because they know their own sin and shortcomings. They still go when the Lord calls them to go. But they go in humility ... not in arrogance, self-confidence, or self-promotion.

We see that humility in Moses. We see it in the prophets. We should demand it in those who would claim to speak prophetically today. And we should seek to live it out ourselves if we want to be God's instruments.

God's prophetic servants are humble.

Do They Flatter?

Fourth, we need to ask: Do they flatter?

And here, we want a negative answer.

Because as we consider Moses and the prophets that followed him, we are reminded that a true prophet does not flatter, or pander to their base.

Moses confronted Pharaoh. But he also confronted Israel. Jeremiah spoke not just of the sins of the pagans, but even more so to the sins of Israel, to the extent that his own people sought to kill him.

And this is important to note ... because especially when it comes to those who speak publicly ... we tend to gravitate towards so-called "prophetic voices" who ... more often than not, tell us that other people are the problem ... and we are the solution. Other people are bad, and we are good.

In other words, we prefer speakers and leaders who flatter us.

But that's not how Moses spoke. And it's not how the biblical prophets spoke either.

While the prophets did deliver messages of comfort to the oppressed or vindication to the persecuted ... they did not flatter. They did not pander.

And so we should be highly suspicious of anyone who flatters us ... or panders to us – anyone who coddles us while skewering the people we don't like.

Because that's not the words of a prophet like Moses – or like any of the other prophets we see in the Scriptures.

Truly prophetic voices do not flatter or pander.

Do They Grieve?

Fifth, when considering whether a voice is truly prophetic, or may be false or presumptuous, we need to ask: Do they grieve?

What we see in the Bible is that a truly prophetic voice is grieved by the sins of others ... not smug about it.

Moses grieves Israel's sin. So does Jeremiah. So do the other prophets. They don't typically show up with a smirk, and a smug comment. And if they do use humor (which, at times they do), it's also accompanied by grief.

And that's again something we need to take into account in how we speak, whom we listen to, and whom we follow.

Too often those who claim to be prophetic, seem more like the Pharisee of Jesus's parable, looking down at sinners and saying smugly to themselves "Thank God that I'm not like those people ..."
[Luke 18:11]

But as John Piper has pointed out, the Bible tells us that God's faithful servants, even when they're angry over sin, were also grieved by the hardness of the hearts of sinners. Their ministry was marked by a holy grief, and often tears. [Piper, 24:02ff]

Truly prophetic voices are not smug, but they grieve over the sins of others, and over the hardness of their hearts.

Are They Lovingly Sacrificial?

Sixth, when evaluating a prophetic voice, we need to ask: Are they lovingly sacrificial?

Moses didn't just speak words and walk away. Moses sacrificed for God's people. In love, he suffered, and experienced personal loss, for their sake. And we see the same pattern among the biblical prophets.

A truly prophetic voice is not just a message delivery system. But they are characterized by sacrificial love. They are willing to suffer personal loss if it means the restoration or the healing of a brother or a sister. They're not detached, but involved.

A truly prophetic voice is marked by sacrificial love.

Where Is Their Hope?

Finally, we need to ask of such voices: Where is their hope?

What we see in Moses, and in the prophets that would follow him, is that despite the challenges they faced, they did not despair. They had hope.

But their hope wasn't based in a vague optimism. And it certainly wasn't based in their own ability to fix the situation.

Rather, Moses and the biblical prophets placed their hope in God.

The prophet's message is never without ultimate hope. However dark things might be, the prophet always remembers that God is in control, and God will be victorious.

And so, the true prophet puts his hope in God's ability to bring people to repentance, God's ability to provide true comfort, and God's ability to make all things new.

Truly prophetic voices act, and act boldly – but even as they do, they place their hope in God.

Faithful, truthful, humble, not flattering, grieving over sin, sacrificial in love, hopeful in God. This is the biblical sketch of a faithful prophet.

When someone like that comes to us ... whether to confront us, or to comfort us ... even if we're resistant to what they have to say, if they have those attributes ... we cannot simply dismiss them. We must at least consider their words seriously. That must shape how we listen.

And if we want to be God's instruments in the lives of others, then these are the attributes we should be seeking. This should shape how we speak.

And when we look for someone to follow, to instruct and to guide us, whether in the Church, in a podcast, or out in the culture, these are the attributes we should look for, if we want to follow someone who is truly prophetic.

This is how, Moses tells us, using wisdom, we might discern the difference between a truly prophetic voice, and one that has spoken falsely or presumptuously.

Conclusion: The Truest Prophet

And God provides those kinds of voices – those kinds of servants – to his people. They correct his people ... they comfort his people ... they guide his people.

Though, of course, the servants God calls to speak these words to his people, are always imperfect. They always fall short of the sketch we're given here.

Though ... not always.

There is, of course, one exception.

While Moses did speak here of a succession of prophets to come to Israel, and the ongoing prophetic acts we may experience today ... he also spoke of more than that here.

He also spoke of something greater. He also spoke of a singular prophet, who would embody this description like no one else. He spoke of a Prophet who would come ... and who would be more like Moses than even Moses was – who would be the perfect Moses, the ultimate Moses.

As the Apostle Peter [Acts 3:22-23] and others in the Apostolic Church [Acts 7:37] make clear to us, with these words in our text this morning, Moses and the Holy Spirit were also pointing forward to something greater: they were pointing forward to Jesus.

Jesus is the truest prophet that this text points us to.

Where others fall short, Jesus was truly faithful, to God, to God's people, and to the truth – for he himself is the Truth. Where others are arrogant, Jesus was truly humble. Where others flatter, Jesus speaks difficult truths to his people. Where others sneer at sinners, Jesus grieves for his people's sin. Where others stand at a distance, Jesus offered himself as a loving sacrifice for his people's salvation. And where others despair, Jesus offered his people true hope, both now and for eternity.

This passage spoke to the life of ancient Israel, and it speaks to specific situations in our lives today – that’s true.

But this passage also finds it’s ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ, the Greater Moses, the Truest Prophet. And as we consider this text, we must ultimately see him in it.

We are called on to listen faithfully to the men and women God may send us, as they prophetically speak God’s truth into our lives.

But we are called on most of all here, to listen to Jesus. He is the True Prophet. He himself is the Word of God. And he fulfills this picture like no one else. He is the One, above all others, whom Moses calls us to listen to.

And as we listen to him, let us also listen to those he sends us in our lives.

Let us hear God’s words to us, of comfort and confrontation.

Let us respond with faith and repentance.

And let us place our hope in the promise that he who has begun a good work in us will in fact bring it to completion, as we place our trust in him.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Alter, Robert. *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary*. New York, NY: Norton, 2004.

Block, Daniel I. *The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012.

Piper, John. Comments at the 2000 Ligonier National Conference.

<https://youtu.be/lnBCeCJzJSc?si=SWklGwX6Yg3MW997&t=1442> (starting at 24:02).

Theopolis Podcast. “Episode 677: Abominable Practices (Deuteronomy 18, Part 2)” October 11, 2023.

<https://soundcloud.com/user-812874628/episode-677-abominable-practices-deuteronomy-18-part-2>

Williams, Michael D. *Far as the Curse Is Found: The Covenant Story of Redemption*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2005.

Wright, Christopher. *Deuteronomy*. NIBC. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church’s core value of “Reformed Catholicity”), and also (following the Apostle Paul’s example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.