

Fruitful Discernment
Matthew 7:15-20

Please open your Bible s to Matthew 7. In chapter 7, Jesus is closing out the Sermon on the Mount by providing points of application. In chapter 7:1-6, followers of Jesus seeking to live as his kingdom disciples, are not to inappropriately pass judgement on others. They need to first deal with the log in their own eye, so they can then assist someone else with the speck in their eye. To live out the teaching sections of chapters 5 and 6, Jesus says in 7:7-11, ask and it will be given, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened; come in an attitude and position of prayer and God will give you what you need to live as His kingdom disciple. Then two weeks ago, Pastor Mike spoke to us from Matthew 7:12 about the Golden Rule, whatever you wish others would do to you, do also to them. No do so you can get, do because it's what you'd want done. Then last Sunday, Pastor Matt spoke to us about the first of four warnings Jesus gives in bringing His sermon to a close.

You see the Sermon on the Mount is not a nice collections of teachings that we should do to make the world a better place. Don't mistake me, as followers and disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, as Christians, the Sermon on the Mount tells us the high calling and expectation that living in the kingdom of God in this world and the world to come is. So Jesus presses on us as His people, make sure you are mine; because life is in the balance. As Pastor Matt taught last week, Jesus makes it very clear we come into this kingdom through Him and Him alone, **Jesus is the gate, the narrow gate which leads to life**. But the question every human being needs to ask is, **which gate will you enter?** The narrow, difficult gate leading to eternal life, or the wide, easier gate leading to eternal death? Today we'll continue looking at Jesus' warnings as he says, **I am the source of truth, but will you be nourished by me** and produce good fruit, or will you seek nourishment from other claims to truth, and produce only what can be used to keep the campfire going? In a few weeks, we'll look at this passage again, as Jesus says in verse 21, **I am the only Lord and Savior for mankind, but do you truly know Me?** And ending this sermon, Jesus gives a final warning saying in verse 24, **I am the true and secure foundation for your life, what are you building on?**

Today we're looking at Jesus' second warning as we find it in verse 15. It's a warning that is echoed throughout the Bible from, Genesis to Revelation – and the warning is, be careful who you listen to, be cautious of who you call teacher, beware of false prophets. Jesus says, *“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.”*

Before we go much further, we need to stop and ask, when Jesus says prophet, what is meant. In the language of the Old Testament, **a prophet was a foreteller**, someone who speaks for God by divine inspiration, like Moses or Elijah, or Isaiah, or Amos, or Daniel, or Jeremiah, or Malachi to name a few. They were specially used of God to deliver His word, or perhaps to speak about a future time in which God would act, or to warn the people to come back to faithfulness to God or suffer judgment. Prophets are understood to be foretellers, but **prophets also forthtell**, they teach the people of God what God has said, declaring God's truth and calling God's people to faith and belief. I believe the New Testament teaches that the office of prophet as a foreteller is done, there is no new revelation God has for His people, His word is complete, and we have all we need for life and godliness now. But the role of being a forthteller, well, and I say this with the weight of humility, that is what I doing right now. Taking the revealed word of God and teaching God's people to understand it and obey it. This office or role of prophet will be in force until Jesus returns to bring history to a close and reign forever with His people. But as with all good things, they can be used for evil and false purposes.

False prophets, false teaching, those who would come in among the people of God and seek to lead them astray is nothing new. **The Bible gives a history of abuses and deceptions among God's people**. It was a problem in the days of Moses – think of the spies returning from scouting the Promised Land with a negative report, the people said *“Our brothers have made our hearts melt”* ; in the time of the prophets like Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel God says in Ezekiel 13:8, *“Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: “Because you have uttered falsehood and seen lying visions, therefore behold, I am against you, declares the Lord GOD. My hand will be against the prophets who see false visions and who give lying divinations”* it was a problem in the days of Jesus, it was a

problem in the early church – Acts 20:28-30, Paul speaking to the Ephesian church echoes nearly verbatim Jesus’ warning saying, *“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them”*, and it remains a problem today. Jesus’ warning is as relevant and necessary today as it has ever been. So Jesus says in verse 15, **beware, be alert, don’t be surprised** if and when false prophets come among you. The Apostle Paul gives us a reason to beware but not be surprised in 2 Corinthians 11:13, speaking of teachers who have infiltrated into the church in Corinth and are teaching a Jesus opposite of what Paul and the other apostles taught says, *“For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.”* Jesus says beware, and be aware.

Now, it would be nice if false prophets and false teachers had some kind of marker on them that made them easily identifiable, but as Jesus says, what makes false prophets and false teachers hard to identify and why we have to use caution before we label someone as a false prophet or false teacher is because they come in sheep’s clothing, **they look, sound, and act like you, like Christians, outwardly**. The fruit, if you will looks great, but internally it’s a different story. And that’s what Jesus says, they come to you in sheep’s clothing looking like you and sounding like you, but inwardly, they are ravenous wolves, meaning the **intent of the false prophet, the false teacher is to destroy and devour**. (Picture) These are not well meaning misguided folks, they are wolves in sheep’s clothing, and the implication Jesus is giving is that they are fully aware of their deception and desires to mislead for their own gain. So Jesus says beware, be aware, be alert, but don’t be surprised – verse 16, because *“You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes or figs from thistles?”* Jesus is using common sense reasoning, food doesn’t come from weeds, thornbushes no matter how hard you might try, don’t produce grapes. Likewise, thistles don’t produce figs. To illustrate this common sense concept further Jesus reiterates the principle in verses 17 and 18.

“So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” I don’t really need to instruct farmers on the necessity of healthy trees producing good fruit, and unhealthy trees producing bad fruit. In this area we know some of the most important work we do is walking our fields and assessing the health of the tree, the nourishment it gets from the ground, and we see the result in the fruit produced. The proof of the root in is the fruit. If the root’s good, the source of nourishment and strength for the tree is good, the fruit will be good. If the root’s rotten, diseased, pulling nourishment from a poisoned source, Jesus says, the fruit is no bueno – the fruit and the tree is good for nothing more than firewood. And so Jesus assures again, verse 20, *“Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.”* So what are some of the fruits we will recognize false prophets and false teachers by? Jesus doesn’t tell us specifics here, but thankfully the rest of the Bible is full of instruction. I want to look at three categories for recognizing deceptive fruit.

The **first category concerns the doctrine they teach**, what are the beliefs they’re teaching, where do these beliefs come from, what are the foundational supports of their beliefs. First, false prophets **speak from their own delusion not divine command**. Jeremiah 23:16 says, *“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.’”* False prophets will often speak and teach their own thoughts, and speak to vain hopes – hopes rooted in what it does for me, rather than hope rooted in the work and glory of God.

As you look at the beliefs they teach, false prophets will often **deny God’s word rather than proclaim it**. Again Jeremiah 23:17 says, *“They say continually to those who despise the word of the LORD, it shall go well with you; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, ‘No disaster shall come upon you.’”* False prophets are not concerned with the soul’s of men but rather the applause and praise of men. Rather than teach men the hard truths of God, that they are sinners in need of God’s saving grace, that the trials and troubles of this life may be the means God uses to guide you as His child. The New Testament describes this in 2 Timothy 4:3 saying, *“For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.”*

And in the doctrine of false teachers **Jesus is not the center of their message**. That's not to say Jesus will not be talked about, He will be, but the Jesus of false prophets and teachers is often a means to an end and not the end Himself. 2 Peter 2:1 says, "*But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.*" And friends, don't believe it just because someone who calls themselves pastor, or bishop, or apostle, or reverend says it. And don't believe it just because they have a big church, or write lots of books, or are popular conference speakers, or teach on the radio or internet. We need to do as the Bible says in 1 John 4:1-3, "*Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.*" What is the fruit of the doctrine, the beliefs being taught? Is it making faithful followers of the Lord Jesus Christ as we find in the scriptures, or does the doctrine and beliefs eschew or shun Christ making us mere followers and practitioners of men?

The second category to look at the fruit of is the **effect of the false prophets in the lives of others**. Romans 16:17 provides two tests, two guides we can use as we discern someone's teaching and message. Paul writes, "*I appeal to you brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them.*" This second category of looking at the effect that a teacher's teaching has in the lives of others is twofold. Does the teacher **cause division**? Is the teacher dividing Christians one from another? Is the person seeking to build a following centered in themselves, or in their teaching? If so, that may be an indicator of bad fruit, and we are told explicitly, avoid them. The other fruit could be a **rejection of biblical authority**. Paul says these false prophets create obstacles contrary to the doctrine you had been taught. Often false prophets and false teachers cannot be questioned. Their specific interpretations and teachings cannot be questioned or challenged in any way. They not only tend to reject biblical authority, but will reject any authority over them; be it from other Christians, a denominational entity, or a local church body. And the effect in the lives of others is a rejection of this authority as well. And again, the Bible's command is avoid them.

And this leads us to the third category we can look at as we seek to recognize false prophets by their fruit; the **evidence of their own moral character**. Eventually the nourishment present in the ground, which the roots tap into a feed from, will be evidenced in the fruit produced on the tree. Galatians 6:7-8 reminds us, "*Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.*" The proof of the root is in the fruit.

What is some of the fruit produced in the moral character of false prophets and teachers? Jude 10 and 11 says, "*But these people blaspheme all that they do not understand, and they are destroyed by all that they, like unreasoning animals, understand instinctively. Woe to them! For they walked in the way of Cain, they walked in pride, ... and abandoned themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam's error*". Balaam was literally a prophet for hire, for the right price willing to bless or curse whoever you desired. False prophets are often **known for their greed**. And Jude says false prophets and teachers will perish as in Korah's rebellion; **they are given to rebellion** against man and God and rebellion is a hallmark of their personal character.

Further, the fruit of so many false prophets and teachers is the fruit of immorality and moral failure. 2 Peter 2:2 warns, "*And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed.*" How often the true saving gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is maligned, marred, and blasphemed because of the moral failures of false prophets and teachers.

Friends, false prophets are always among the people of God. This is not something to be afraid of, but as Jesus says, to beware of and look for the fruit that is produced in your own life, and the life of others. Counterfeits, fakes, are not discovered by studying other counterfeits, **counterfeits are discovered by knowing what the real is**.

If we want to discern good fruit from bad fruit we need to be nourished by the fruit of God's word, in close relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, and fellowship with His people.