

Beware of False Prophets

You Will Recognize Them by Their Fruits

Scripture: Matthew 7:15-20

Sermon Series: Matthew

Topic: False Teachers

Matthew 7:15-20 (ESV)

Reader: Liz Albano

¹⁵ "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁸ A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

Introduction

In these words, Jesus continues his conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount. In the previous paragraph, which we considered last week, Jesus issued one command. In this paragraph he does the same. Last time the command was, "enter by the narrow gate." This time the single command is,



"Beware of false prophets, who outwardly look like sheep, but inwardly are ravenous wolves."

Last time Jesus issued a warning that centered on two gates and two different ways of living, but only one of which leads to eternal life. This time his warning focuses on how to distinguish false prophets from true prophets. Jesus uses the analogy of two kinds of trees that yield two different kinds of fruit, but only one of which is helpful toward entering into and enduring in the kingdom of heaven. It's as if in Jesus' mind he sees his disciples standing before the two gates, which we considered last week, and he is warning his followers that there will those who would hinder you from entering into the narrow gate and from continuing on the narrow and hard way. He warns us that they will look nice, but their aim is malicious. You must be on the lookout

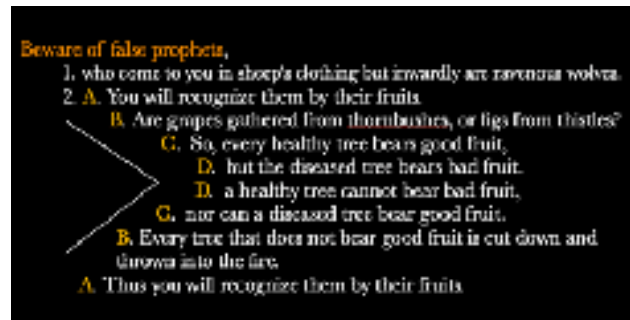
for such people. These are not sent from God. These are sent from the enemy. Jesus aims to equip his disciples to be able to identify these wicked wolves.

A Similar Structure

Just as we saw last week, Jesus again issues only one command that is supported by two facts. The command, “*Beware of false prophets,*” is supported by two facts. The first, is an exposition of their true nature (i.e. that they are wolves) and second, that they can be discovered by an analysis of the fruit they produce. Jesus spends more time on the second than on the first.

Structure Points to Primary Test

The structure of the argument points us to the primary test. The second fact forms a *chiasm*, which comes from the Greek letter X (or chi[ki] the twenty-second letter of the Greek alphabet).



A chiasm refers to a literary structure where parallel syntactic elements or phrases relate to each other in an inverted order.

You'll see that line A is repeated, in verse 15 & 20, “you will recognize them by their fruits.” This is repeated for emphasis.

Line B begins with a question, aimed at exposing the nature of the tree, which is answered in the corresponding line that exposes the destiny of diseased tree.

Line C positively states that a healthy tree only bears good fruit, while the corresponding phrase negatively states that a unhealthy tree cannot bear good fruit.

Line D forms the center by stating that “a diseased tree bears bad fruit and a healthy tree is unable to bear bad fruit.”

The primary point of the passage is that Jesus is calling his disciples to be alert to and stay away from “false prophets.” Jesus desires that his disciples be discerning. The key test for discerning whether or not a prophet is false has to do with the “fruits” he produces. If one is from God he will produce good fruit. If he is not from God, then his fruit will be diseased and bad. Therefore, pay close attention to the fruit. If we are to watch out for and avoid false prophets, then we must analyze their fruits. False prophets are to be avoided just as wolves are. Just as Wolves are physically dangerous and destructive, false prophets are spiritually so. They will be judged by God in the end, for Jesus says their destiny is “to be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

But Shouldn't We 'Judge Not?'

It should be noted that Jesus is here commanding his disciples to make a kind of judgment. Back at the beginning of chapter seven when Jesus said, "Judge not, so that you will not be judged," he was not forbidding *all* kinds of judgment, which so many people wrongly assume. Jesus was not commanding that we *never* make any kind of judgment, but rather that we ought never to make any kind of judgement that **a)** we have not first applied to ourselves and **b)** that does not make allowance for the grace of God to work and change a person.

Beware of False Prophets

Let's begin with the command itself.

Matthew 7:15 (ESV) "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves."

The first word is **beware**. The word (*prosechō προσέχω*) means

"to be in a continuous state of readiness to learn of any future danger, need, or error, and to respond appropriately—to pay attention to, to keep on the lookout for, to be alert for, to be on one's guard against."¹

Jesus is calling his disciples to a state of alertness that is attentive for spiritual danger and theological error and is also ready to respond when such things are discovered. He is calling his disciples to active, spiritual engagement. In this regard, spiritual passivity is unacceptable. Of what must we beware?

What is a false prophet?

What is a false prophet? Before deterring what a false prophet is, we must first understand what a prophet is. A prophet, in the most basic sense, is a **duly appointed person who speaks for or on behalf of another**. For example, the White House Press Secretary is the duly appointed spokesperson of the president of the United States. In the second book of the Bible, we learn that God called and appointed Moses to be his prophet.² However, Moses complained³ about his poor speaking skills, and after arguing with God a bit, he then appointed Aaron to speak on behalf of Moses saying, "Aaron shall be your prophet" (Ex. 7:1). So Moses spoke on behalf of God, while Aaron spoke on behalf of Moses (Ex. 7:2; cf. 4:16).

¹ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 332.

² Exodus 3:10; 4:12; Deuteronomy 18:15-18.

³ Exodus 4:10.

As time progressed, the term 'prophet' came to mean specifically 'one who spoke on behalf of God.' Thus, a true prophet is one whom God *has* chosen and appointed to speak for him, while a false prophet is one whom God has not chosen to speak for him but has instead appointed himself as God's spokesman. There have always been and always will be those who falsely claim to speak the word of God. Just as there were false prophets in the Old Testament (OT) so there were false prophets in the New Testament (NT).

2 Peter 2:1 (ESV) But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies...

Notice that Peter equates "false prophets" of the OT with "false teachers" in his day. Thus, the term "false teacher" is synonymous with "false prophets." Such false teachers were a constant problem in the early church. They were a problem during Peter's ministry and Paul also struggled against false teachers.⁴ It was false teachers among the church in Galatia that motivated Paul to write the letter that we now have as one of the books in our Bible. Paul also wrote warning Timothy about them.

1 Timothy 1:3 (ESV) As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine...

Thus, a *false* prophet is one who claims to speak on behalf of God, but who truly does not. A false teacher is one who claims to rightly teach the will and word of God, but whom truly does not. A false teacher claims to be sent by God, but God has not actually sent him. False teachers twist the true doctrine of God. They corrupt and distort the gospel of Jesus. Thus, Jesus warns us to, Beware of false prophets and teachers.

The Nature of False Teachers

Jesus warns of two facts about false teachers. The first has to do with their nature and the second has to do with their behavior.

Matthew 7:15 (ESV) "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves."

The first problem with false teachers is that outwardly they do not look threatening. They appear just fine. They look like everyone else. They present themselves as one of the flock. They identify as disciples. In other words, they claim to be a followers of Jesus. If you were to ask them if they were a Christian, they would gladly say yes.

And not only do they claim to be disciples but, they claim to speak for God and rightly teach his word. They claim to be leaders in the Christian community. They claim to be God's duly

⁴ They were a problem in Colossae, Ephesus, Asia Minor, and the churches to whom John and Jude wrote.

appointed teacher. But these claims are far from true. Outwardly they look nice, but Jesus sees what we can't. He can see the heart and he says, "... *inwardly they are ravenous wolves.*"

Proceed With Caution, But Proceed Still

Here we must exercise caution and admit our own limitations. Jesus is the only person who perfectly, accurately, and truly "*searches the mind and heart*" (Rev 2:23). God is the one who "*looks on the heart*" (1 Sam 16:7).⁵ We look only on outward appearances, while our Lord is the only one who genuinely and truly is able to rightly discern the motivations of the heart and the thoughts of the mind. Thus, we must not assume that we are able to truly see another's heart and mind with complete accuracy. However, while admitting this limitation, Jesus still calls his disciples to discern who is and who is not a false teacher. We need to know who is a "ravenous wolf" and who is not. Jesus, how do we do this? How should we make such discernment?

The Fruits of False Teachers

Jesus answers our question in vs. 16-20. He calls us to pay attention to "fruits."

Matthew 7:16-20 (ESV) ¹⁶ "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. ¹⁸ A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will recognize them by their fruits."

Jesus points our attention to the notion of "**fruits.**" He opens and closes this section with the same admonition, "*You will recognize them by their fruits*" (v.15 & 20). The true nature of all teachers and preachers can be recognized and revealed by the "fruits" of his life. If we are to rightly discern who is and who is not a false teacher, then we need to understand what Jesus means by "fruits."

The Greek word is *karpōs* and primarily means the fruit produced by a tree of the earth⁶ but it can also refer to the young of animals or of human children⁷, as when Elizabeth said to Mary, "blessed is the fruit of the womb" (Luke 1:42). In general, the word means "product or result."⁸ This is how we should think of the word in this case. Jesus is commanding his disciples to discern the true nature of the false teacher based upon the "fruits" of his life. This entails at least two things; the *content of his teaching* and the *conduct of his life*.

⁵ See also Psalm 7:9; Jeremiah 20:12.

⁶ Friedrich Hauck, "*Καρπός, Ἀκαρπος, Καρποφορέω,*" ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 614

⁷ *Ibid.*, 615.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 614.

The Content of His Teaching

First, we look at *the fruit of teaching and its content*. Since Jesus is commanding us to beware of false prophet/teachers, the first point of analysis ought to be the teaching itself, or the content of what the person is saying. Does he speak the truth. Jesus said while paying to God the Father, “Your word is truth” (Jn 17:17). The primary product of a teacher is teaching. The primary task of the prophet is speak for God. Thus, the most important question is does this teacher adhere to God’s standard of truth. Does he rightly teach God’s word? Does he truly speak God’s word? God never contradicts himself, therefore does the words of the teacher agree with the words of God?

1) Does He Affirm the Narrow Way?

This test is administered through doctrinal agreement. Given the immediate context of this passage, we must ask, “Does the teaching of this teacher align with the teaching of THE Teacher, that is with the teaching of Jesus?” For example, Jesus—in the previous paragraph—told us that the way to heaven is a narrow and hard way. As we explored last week, we saw that Jesus himself claimed to be the only door into the kingdom of heaven (Mt 16:24-25; Jn 4:25-26; 8:23-24; 10:1-7; 14:6; Luk 24:47; Acts 2:32-33, 36; 4:12; 10:42-43; Gal 1:6-9). The false teacher will deny this.

The false teacher will embrace the wide, easy way rather than the narrow, hard way. His denial will be subtle. He will likely not openly deny this so much as that he will never publicly affirm it. He most likely will only preach and teach about the love of God without ever admitting that there is such a thing as the wrath of God. He will talk much about heaven, but will never mention hell. The key to analyzing the fruit of the false teacher is doing your homework and listening for he does not say, rather than for what he does say.

The false teacher/prophet will preach only half the truth. It is true that God is love, but it is also true that God is also wrath. God loved this world and sent his Son into this world to save those who trust in his death and resurrection. However, those who reject this life-sacrificing love, will rightly and justly experience the wrath of God for having looked upon the suffering and death of Jesus and concluding, “I don’t need that. It’s not for me.” It was the love of God that made a way of salvation, but it will be the wrath of God that make a way for justice to be enacted upon all who have refused God’s loving grace.

2) Does He Affirm Jesus as God’s Christ in the Flesh?

A second and related doctrinal truth is the *fully human and real nature of Jesus of Nazareth as God’s only messiah*. The apostle John said it this way,

1 John 4:1-3 (ESV) ¹ 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. ² By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in

the flesh is from God, ³ and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist...

Here is one more doctrinal tests to discern whether or not a person is truly from God or not. Does this person profess that Jesus is God's Christ, come in the flesh. Did Jesus appear to be a human or was he actually and genuinely a fully human being? Is Jesus of Nazareth God's anointed messiah, and yet also fully human. Did he actually exist? Did he possess flesh and bone? Was he actually crucified? Did he actually die? Did he physically rise from the dead? And is he now God's only Christ? Who now reigns with him, seated at the right hand of his throne. Anyone who denies these things is a false prophet or a false teacher.

3) Does He Affirm the Authority of Jesus' Apostles?

A third doctrinal point of analysis of false teachers is *whether or not they submit to the teaching of the apostles*. Jesus chose twelve apostles and appointed them to preach his gospel throughout the world. Anyone who rejects their apostolic teaching is a false teacher or a false prophet.

1 Corinthians 14:37-38 (ESV) ³⁷ If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord. ³⁸ If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized.

This is an amazing statement. Paul assumes that anyone who is genuinely sent by God will submit to his apostolic teaching. Anyone who denies what Paul is preaching or the gospel of Christ is false teacher and is not recognized as being sent by Jesus or his apostles. John says something very similar.

1 John 4:6 (ESV) We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

Again we see Jesus' apostles stating their authority. They and they alone authoritatively speak for Jesus. Anyone who comes along claiming to speak for Jesus and yet not affirming what Jesus has already said through this apostles, is a false teacher and a false prophet.

Summary

The very notion of fruit includes length of time. It takes time for fruit to grow and mature. Therefore, over time the *content of the teaching* will be discerned. Beware of false teachers for they will always at critical points refuse to fully embrace the teaching of Jesus and his apostles whom he duly appointed to proclaim God's gospel.

The Conduct of His Life

The second area of analysis has to do with *the conduct of the teacher's life* or *the fruit of behavior*. For the teaching can be right, but if a person's life does not agree with his teaching,

then he is a hypocrite and a false prophet/teacher. This is what Jesus highlighted about the Pharisees.

Matthew 23:3 (ESV) "...so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice."

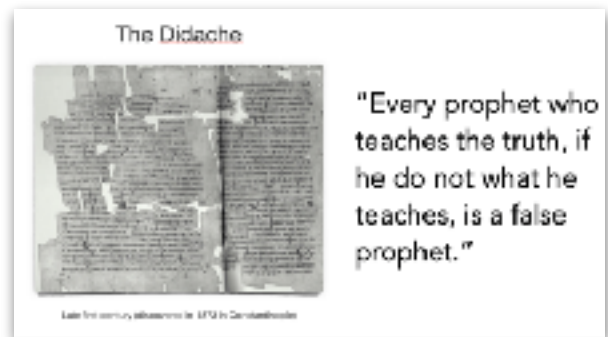
The Pharisees held rigidly to the teaching of Moses, but they excused themselves from doing it. They preached that everyone had to obey the law, but they themselves "*did not practice*" it. This is the mark of a false teacher. Thus, when you consider whether or not a person is a false teacher, you must ask does his lifestyle agree with what he is preaching. Jesus calls his disciples not only to pay attention to a teacher's doctrine, but also to the manner of life and personal conduct. Are the words consistent with their actions? This of course presumes that you're close enough to him to observe his actions.

The Fruit of Behavior

The **Didache** ("The Teaching" or "the Instruction," also known as *The Teaching of the Lord to the Nations Through the Twelve Apostles* discovered in 1873) is a late first-century document containing an organized application of Jesus' teaching to the life of the church. It is a very interesting document that provides insight into how the early church applied Jesus' teaching. There is one section (XI) on false teachers.

"Every prophet who teaches the truth, if he do not what he teaches, is a false prophet."⁹

In other words, any preacher who does not practice what he preaches is not a preacher sent by Jesus. The teaching goes on.



"**Not everyone** who speaks in the Spirit is a prophet, except he have the behavior of the Lord. From his behavior, then, the false prophet and the true prophet shall be known."¹⁰

Notice the emphasis upon *behavior* and conduct of life. Not everyone who says he's a teacher chosen by God actually is one. Saying you are Christian does not make you one. Knowing the Bible and being able to quote it does not make you truly a Christian. The devil can quote Scripture. What makes you a Christian is receiving the Holy Spirit of Jesus within you. It is HE who is within you who then transforms you. It is the Holy Spirit of God within you who

⁹ Pope Clement I et al., *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Kirsopp Lake, vol. 1, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1912–1913), 327.

¹⁰ Ibid.

transforms your behavior. A most important test of whether someone is truly of Christ or not is does he *behave* like the Lord he claims?

The Bad Fruit of Pride

A second fruit to be considered has to do with what the prophet/teachers thinks about himself.

“Let every Apostle who comes to you be received as the Lord, ⁵ but let him not stay more than one day, or if need be a second as well; but if he stay three days, he is a false prophet.”¹¹

This is a very interesting rule and perhaps you may want to share this with your in-laws, but I think the point is that a person who thinks too highly of himself, and expects to be served, seeks to take advantage of others’ generosity and so outstay his welcome. The teacher who does this is one filled with pride. He thinks, “These people are great. They serve me food every day, they appreciate my oratory skill, they take care of my needs, I think I’ll stay here for a while and settle in!” This is pride talking. Every false teacher thinks more highly of himself than he ought to. If you listen long enough, you’ll hear pride begin to seep through his sermons. Beware of the proud preacher.

The Bad Fruit of Greed

One final fruit mentioned in the Didache has to do with money.

“But whosoever shall say in a spirit ‘Give me money, or something else,’ you shall not listen to him; but if he tell you to give on behalf of others in want, let none judge him.”¹²

Every false teacher will eventually reveal his love of money and possessions. Listen long enough, the false teacher will begin talking about money or possession. This is apparently what drew Demas away from Paul.

2 Timothy 4:9-10 (ESV) ⁹ Do your best to come to me soon. ¹⁰ For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.

The love of money and possessions is very subtle. It can creep into anyone’s life, not only the life of false teachers. We must all be on guard against the affections of our hearts leaning too far and too deeply for wealth and possessions.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

Conclusion

Jesus calls us to a careful consideration to kinds of teachers to whom we listen. He calls us to be aware of and alert to the reality of false teachers and preachers. Not everyone who claims to be from God actually is from God. Just because a teacher/preacher says he is a preacher of Jesus does not automatically mean that he truly is. There are false teachers and preachers in this world and they and their teaching is not neutral. Beware. Outwardly they may look nice, but inwardly they are "ravenous wolves!" Wolves are to be avoided. Don't buy their books, listen to their podcasts, watch their TV shows.

How do you know who is a false teacher? Examine the "fruits" of his life. First, look at the **content of his teaching**. Does it agree with God's word? Does he teach that God's word is true and sufficient and that Jesus is God's Son and our only Savior? If not, then stop listening to him. If what he teaches does not agree with God's word, then he's a false teacher.

Second, look at the **conduct of his life**. Watch his behavior. How does he conduct himself? Does he have the behavior of the Lord Jesus? Is he holy like Jesus is holy? Is he humble like Jesus or is he filled with pride? Is he greedy? Does he love money and possessions more than he should?

You know, if you cannot assess the conduct of a teacher's life, then you ought to think twice about listening to his teaching. We live in an age where it is easy to watch any teacher on video. But how can you obey Christ's command to examine the fruit of teacher's life, if you only have access to him via video? If you know nothing about the fruit of a teacher's life, then you should seriously reconsider how much time you devote to listening to his teaching.

This calls into question the entire nature of virtual church. The NT knows nothing of a church community that is only "connected" virtually. I'm glad that we can livestream our services. This is beneficial to many of you when you're sick, or traveling for work, or on vacation. I'm glad you're watching from home. But if you are able to be with God's people in person and you've simply contented yourself to be lazy at home alone. That is not what Jesus has called his disciples to do. He calls his people to be together for corporate worship, both in large settings, such as this on the Lord's Day, and in small settings, like LIFE groups and small groups studies.

Perhaps some of you watching from home are doing so because you've been burned by a false teacher. I'm sorry for that. I too have been hurt by false teachers and bad preachers. But consider these words of Jesus.

Matthew 7:17-20 (ESV) ¹⁷ So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

False teachers "will be cut down and thrown into the fire." Jesus will not deal gently with "ravenous wolves." Jesus and Jesus alone can heal the wounds caused by false teachers. Jesus and Jesus alone can save your soul and forgive you if your sins. Jesus and Jesus alone is the perfect and pure teacher of God's word. The content his teaching was nothing but the truth. The conduct of his life was nothing but holy. Rest in him and in him alone. Trust in him and him alone. Worship him and him alone.