

Understanding The Two Trees and Fruits
Matthew 7:15-20
Gerry Andersen
Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School

The Sermon on the Mount is the first of five extensive messages delivered by Christ in the Gospel of Matthew, covering chapters 5-7. The sermon corrects the teaching of the religious leaders (chapter 5) and the practice of the religious leaders (chapter 6). The first half of chapter 7 guides our ministry to others and the second half of the chapter involves the most important aspect of life, our eternal destiny.

In Matthew 7:13-27, we see a repetition of contrasts. Each contrast regards the eternal destinies of mankind. Specifically, there is a progression that moves from path to life to the characteristics of those on the path to life.

- The two gates and paths (Matthew 7:13-14)
- The two trees and fruit (Matthew 7:15-20)
- The two claims and practices (7:21-23)
- The two houses and foundations (Matthew 7:24-27)

Matthew 7:13-14, Jesus commands us to “*enter by the narrow gate.*” The reason why we must enter through the narrow gate is because it leads to life as opposed to destruction. There are only two eternal destinies and we must go the way of the few unto eternal life rather than the way of the many unto eternal destruction.

Matthew 7:15-20 expands on one reason why there are few on the path to life and many on the path to destruction. False prophets will arise to thwart people entering by the narrow gate. Jesus commanded His disciples to beware of them. Beware means to turn one’s mind to and to pay attention.

The danger of false prophets (7:15a)

Israel was warned about false prophets in the Old Testament:

“If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder spoken of takes place, and the prophet says, “Let us follow other gods” (gods you have not known) “and let us worship them,” you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer”
(Deuteronomy 13:1-3).

“When they say to you, “Consult the mediums and the spiritists who whisper and mutter,” should not a people consult their God? Should they consult the dead on behalf of the living? To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn” (Isaiah 8:19-20).

“The word of the LORD came to me: “Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel who are now prophesying. Say to those who prophesy out of their own imagination: ‘Hear the word of the LORD! This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing!’” (Ezekiel 13:1-3).

Obviously anyone who claims to speak for God, but actually does not, is a danger. Since prophecy is by its very meaning and nature is one speaking revelation from God, we must recognize that the gift of prophecy and the function of a prophet ended with the close of the New Testament canon.

The New Testament considers itself complete. *“I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for **the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints**” (Jude 3).*

The New Testament prophets founded the church. Once the foundation is laid, the role of the prophets ceased. *“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household, **having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone**” (Ephesians 2:19-20).*

1 Corinthians 13:8-10 explicitly says that prophecy will be done away and connects the end of prophecy with the completion of the New Testament. The word translated “perfect” is better understood as “complete” or “mature.” *“Love never fails; but **if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away**; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away.”*

The understanding that direct revelation from God exists today only in the Scripture has been the longstanding view of church history and should be the only conclusion in observing the grave debacle of modern day “prophecy.” This makes the identification of false prophets easy and protects the church. Specifically, if someone in the church age claims to be a prophet, they can be dismissed as a false prophet.

However, if someone wishes to consider whether the one claiming to be a prophet and to speak revelation from God, then they cannot be mistaken in anything they say. *"But the prophet who speaks a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he speaks in the name of other gods, [m]that prophet shall die.'* You may say in your heart, *'How will we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?' When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him"* (Deuteronomy 18:20-22).

There also must be accompanying miracles that are well attested to and are undeniable in nature. *"After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will."* (Hebrews 2:3-4).

Anyone can claim to speak on behalf of God but we are warned by Jesus to beware of those who do so falsely. In Matthew 16:11-12, Jesus instructed His disciples to *"beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Then they understood that He did not say to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees."* It was the wrong teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees that Jesus warned about.

2 Peter 2:1 gives evidence that the problem of false prophets will become the problem of false teachers in the church age. *"But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves."*

Therefore, the warning of Jesus to beware was primarily related to the misleading words of the false prophets since later He and other New Testament writers warned about being turned away from sound doctrine by false teachers.

"For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths" (2 Timothy 4:3-4).

“ Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:28-30).

The description of false prophets (7:15b-19)

False prophets are described by two types of imagery, an analogy from the animal world and an analogy from the plant world. From the imagery of the animal world, false prophets are described as “*coming to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves*” (7:15). This describes those who falsely represent God’s revelation as identifying themselves with God’s people. They will gain a degree of credibility based upon this association.

This also contrasts their meek and harmless appearance as sheep with the dangerous reality of their true character. They are ravenous, from the word HARPAX, meaning rapacious, to seize and carry off by force. It is the root word that is translated “robbery” in Matthew 23:25 and Luke 11:39. These people come to seize and carry off people by their teaching, akin to robbery. They come to the unsuspecting to create destruction. The essence of their false words is not provided but the threat they pose is clear.

How to guard against this threat is expanded upon by the illustration from the plant world. The basic premise for identification is found in the statement “*you will know them by their fruits*” (Matthew 7:16, 20). Fruit is what is produced from a tree and therefore we identify the tree by their fruit. Indeed, it is what is produced by the tree that leads us to assign names to different trees.

The development of this point about trees and fruit begins with where grapes and figs are found. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes and figs are not found from thistles. The metaphor of the fruits moves away from grapes, which are grown from vines, and toward figs, which are grown from trees. From the focus upon the figs comes the contrast of the two trees.

The first contrast in Matthew 7:17 is the positive assertion regarding trees and fruits. Good trees bear good fruit and bad trees bear bad fruit. Conversely, the second contrast in Matthew 7:18 is the negative assertion regarding trees and fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. The point that you will know them by their fruit is clear and compelling.

The discernment of false prophets (7:20)

In the false teachers, their fruit provides evidence of their nature. The best indicator of whether someone is a harmless sheep or a dangerous wolf is their fruit. Fruit is a common metaphor (Matthew 3:8, 10; 12:33; 13:23; 21:43; 26:29). But what is the fruit that Jesus meant? A look at how Jesus used this figure of speech is helpful.

In Matthew's Gospel, fruit is used to refer to the evil words of the Pharisees. *"Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart."* (Matthew 12:33-34).

Also in Matthew's Gospel, fruit refers to our deeds. "And the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty" (Matthew 13:23).

The term "fruits" in Matthew 7:16 and 7:20 is noteworthy since it indicates that it is more than one thing. Since the fruit is visible evidence of the nature of the false prophets we can list this evidence.

1. The words of the false prophets

It is fair to conclude that the fruit of the false prophets includes their doctrine. This is the primary means that they are so dangerous. Peter describes them as introducing destructive heresies. *"But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them"* (2 Peter 2:1). Note the manner in which heresy is introduced is "secretly." There is a sense of people being led astray subtly and without warning. This makes the task of discernment even more challenging.

Certainly, any form of corruption of the gospel in either the person or work of Christ is intended by the phrase *"even denying the master who bought them."* While denying the master is the greatest extent of the heretical destruction and while no one teacher can totally understand the entire revelation of God perfectly, he must uphold the basic orthodox tenets of the Christian faith.

Those who present themselves as speaking on behalf of God are inherently claiming authority that they do not have. Those false prophets are destructive even if what they say is not specifically opposed to the Bible. This is because by their alleged prophecy, they are necessarily moving people away from God's true revelation and toward what God is not saying. This is a big step in a dangerous direction and a great many have suffered under this sort of spiritual guidance.

2. The works of the false prophets

A common reference for fruit in the Bible is in regard to what a person does. The types of fruit that are described as good works are varied in the New Testament.

- Fruit used to describe good works done for others: *"that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work"* (Colossians 1:10).
- Fruit used to describe to positive result of ministry: *"I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that often I have planned to come to you (and have been prevented so far) so that I may obtain some fruit among you also, even as among the rest of the Gentiles"* (Romans 1:13). *"You know the household of Stephanas, that they were the first fruits of Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves for ministry to the saints"* (1 Corinthians 16:15).
- Fruit is used to describe the praise that we give to God: *"Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name"* (Hebrews 13:15).
- Fruit is used to describe monetary assistance: *"For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual things, they are indebted to minister to them also in material things. Therefore, when I have finished this, and have put my seal on this fruit of theirs, I will go on by way of you to Spain"* (Romans 15:27-28). *"Not that I seek the gift itself, but I seek for the profit [literally, fruit] which increases to your account"* (Philippians 4:17).

In each area we can evaluate the works of those teaching and hold them to a stricter judgment (cf. James 3:1). Those who do not walk to please the Lord, to please Him and bear the fruit of good works, show themselves as those we should beware of and avoid. *"Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven"* (Matthew 5:16).

Similarly, those who have no appetite for the ministry of the gospel to outsiders or who do not devote themselves to the ministry of believers give evidence of those to whom we should beware. *"For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?"* (Matthew 5:46).

Likewise, those who exalt themselves rather than give praise to the Lord in humility show themselves as unworthy of our attention. *"Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven"* (Matthew 6:1).

Finally, those who seek to gain for themselves monetarily have no place in representing God to anyone. *"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth"* (Matthew 6:24).

3. The character of the false prophets

Fruit is also described in the New Testament as the testimony of one's character. Those who are led by the Holy Spirit will exhibit a godly attitude. *"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law"* (Galatians 5:22-23).

While all will at times struggle to express these godly demeanors, those who are false teachers misrepresenting the Lord and His word are the opposite of the fruit of the Spirit. They are characterized by the deeds of the flesh. *"Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God"* (Galatians 5:19-21).

The character qualities of teachers are crucial data that identifies those who we should not listen to. Those who destroy peace and unity of the Spirit must be avoided. This corresponds to the qualifications of an elder in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. The righteous teacher is one who is characterized by wisdom. *"But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace"* (James 3:17-18).

Conclusion

Not everyone who is involved with a Christian ministry should be received, regardless of how well they speak or even what they say. Many false teachers speak truth in many ways but they still introduce destructive heresies. They come to us in sheep's clothing but are destructive. *"For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness, whose end will be according to their deeds"* (2 Corinthians 11:15).

We must always beware of those who by either their teaching or their behavior demonstrate themselves to be teachers to be marked out and avoided so God's people can be protected. They appear as servants of righteousness by human measure but secretly introduce destructive heresies. Their abuse of God's word is dangerous to any believer and corrosive to any church.

"Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them" (Romans 16:17).