

Matthew 7:15-20 *Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits.*

INTRODUCTION

From Chapter 7, verse 13 on, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is contrasting spiritual truth with falsehood. He is warning his kingdom citizens of the danger of false faith, and teaching of how to correctly discern between the right and wrong. He loves His sheep and as the Good Shepherd does not want them to be misled.

Last week in verses 13 and 14 we saw the contrast of the narrow gate and narrow path that leads to heaven compared with the broad gate and broad way that leads to destruction. Jesus wants us to be aware that we must enter the heavenly path correctly – trusting in Himself alone as the only gate to heaven; and that we must walk the heavenly way correctly – avoiding its dangers and temptations and confident of its ultimate destination.

One of the key dangers in preventing one from entering the correct gate and from staying on the correct path are false prophets – those who appear as Christians in belief and behavior, but inwardly follow and teach false doctrine that eventually reveals a life style that is not Christ-like. In this regard they mislead many sheep and thus are likened to ravenous wolves. Jesus speaks of them to warn and to teach discernment to His flock.

FALSE PROPHETS ARE NOT MISLED BELIEVERS

It should be clear that Jesus is NOT speaking of misled Christians, but of those who are themselves on the road to destruction, convinced of the rightness of their example and seeking to draw true Christians to their way of thinking. This is clear by both context and content.

1. **Context** preceding contrasts the road to heaven with the road to hell. Context following contrasts those who proclaim Jesus as Lord and yet God says “I never knew you.” And after that we find the wise man building his house on the rock with the foolish man building his house on the sand. And when the rains came the foolish man's loss was “great” and devastating. So context would indicate that the false prophets are indeed false Christians.
2. **Content** gives a few strong clues: (1) false as opposed to true. (2) Good as opposed to bad and (3) worthless thorns and thistles as opposed to useful grapes and figs and (4) the end result of the bad tree being “cut down and thrown into the fire.”

False prophets are not a recent phenomena. The Old Testament has many revelations of spiritual deceivers. Here are a few of their descriptions from Scripture:

Jeremiah 6:14 *They have healed the brokenness of My people superficially, saying “Peace, peace,” but there is no peace.*

Ezekiel 22:27-28 *Her princes within her are like wolves tearing the prey, by shedding blood and destroying lives in order to get dishonest gain. Her prophets have smeared whitewash for them, seeing false visions and divining lies for them, saying “Thus says the Lord God,” when the Lord has not spoken.*

Zephaniah 3:3 *Her prophets are reckless, treacherous men; her priests have profaned the sanctuary. They have done violence to the law.*

These examples are not speaking of misled believers, but of those who have never known the truth.

THE TWO TREES

It is not difficult to see that the two trees Jesus contrasts are two different kinds of people. He is not warning about literal good and bad trees, but about good and bad prophets. A prophet in its simplest explanation is a teacher and example of God's truth. This could be a church leader or simply someone in the congregation of some influence. Those men and women who proclaim the truth of Jesus in word and deed are the "good trees." Those who appear as good but eventually reveal their true beliefs and behavior are the "bad trees." False belief and false behavior always go together and affect each other. False or shallow belief will always produce false or shallow Christian behavior (bad fruit). And false or shallow Christian behavior can always be attributed to a false or shallow belief system.

BELIEF INFLUENCES BEHAVIOR

CREED INFLUENCES CONDUCT

DOCTRINE INFLUENCES DEED

So what would be the false doctrine of a false prophet? Heresy such as berating the deity of Jesus or claiming salvation by works alone would be easy to spot as false, and would not make the prophet appear as a sheep. Jesus must be speaking of false doctrine that is more subtle than this, deemed acceptable to many sheep of the fold. I find Martyn Lloyd Jones' explanation to be right on:

"[The false prophet] always preaches about the love of God, but those other things he does not mention. He never makes anyone tremble as he thinks of this holy and august Being with whom we all have to do. He does not say that he does not believe these truths ... He just does not mention them at all. ... He does not say things that are obviously wrong, but he refrains from saying things that are obviously right and true. And that is why he is a false prophet."

These would be some critical doctrines that a false prophet would downplay or outright avoid:

- The depravity of mankind
- The final judgment and wrath of God
- Hell and eternal punishment
- The propitiation of the cross
- Jesus made sin for us
- Repentance

And as we all know, a partial truth is a lie. To conceal the whole truth is deception. And therefore, to embrace the partial truth of a lie is to embark upon the wide path to destruction.

THE TWO FRUITS

But false, misleading doctrine alone is not the only trademark of the false prophet. Jesus goes on to speak of the bad fruit, or character it produces.

√ For instance, rejecting the total depravity of mankind will produce a lack of humility and mourning for one's wretched state apart from God.

√ Rejecting final judgment, hell and the wrath of God will produce a dependence on self-effort and good works.

√ Rejecting the importance of repentance will produce a self-sufficient being who sees sin as relative and as something that God will dismiss by His grace.

This simple doctrine of God's love alone will produce a "good pagan" – one who has faults, but not so many for God not to forgive.

Jesus has already taught on the "good fruit" of a kingdom citizen in His "preamble" to the Kingdom Constitution of the Sermon on the Mount. We call them the "Beatitudes." The fruit of a good prophet or a citizen of God's kingdom is to understand his poverty of spirit apart from God and will mourn over his sinful state with an attitude of meek humility. He will hunger and thirst for pleasing God in righteous behavior, such as showing mercy and a pure heart to others and helping them make peace with God through the provision of the one Savior and Mediator between man and God, Jesus.

And Paul in his letter to the Galatians speaks of the "fruit of the Spirit" which is the character manifestation of everyone who is letting the indwelling Spirit of God shine through him. These are the

characteristics of the Holy Spirit that will define and mark the life of a true believer: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

When Jesus says – twice – that you will “know them [false prophets] by their fruits” he is saying that you will be able to discern a wolf in sheep’s clothing by their lack of the character qualities of the Beatitudes and the Fruit of the Spirit. And, in addition, you will find that these lacks in character will betray a doctrinal belief that is shallow or outright wrong. Both creed and character will be found to be flawed and in error, showing beyond a doubt that this “prophet” is false and not a believer.

IN SIMPLE SUMMARY

√ **At the heart of true Christian DOCTRINE is the LORDSHIP OF JESUS.** A sincere, born-again believer will be seeking to follow the teachings and example of Jesus, allowing Him and Him alone to rule his life.

Romans 10:9 *If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.*

√ **At the heart of true Christian BEHAVIOR is HUMILITY.** A sincere, born-again believer will understand his/her helplessness apart from God and the provision of His Son, Jesus, and will seek to always put others before themselves. His confidence is in Jesus, not in self. He is crucified to self and alive to Jesus. As Paul put it so well:

Galatians 2:20 *I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.*

As I give this message, we celebrate the 12th anniversary of Oaks Bible Church. And for the year and years ahead, I pray for each of us, that we might be wise discerners and followers of the full council of God’s blessed doctrinal truth, and bold bearers of God’s Holy character as revealed in the Beatitudes and in the Fruit of the Spirit. May we never be swayed by false, shoddy, God-light teaching - deceived and wandering from the straight and narrow path. But rather may we guide others to the full counsel of God’s truth and exhibit the character of Jesus that will cause them to seek the Jesus that you know and love.

Beware of false prophets. You will know them by their fruits.