

## **The Accuracy of Fruit**

### **Matthew 7:15-23**

Years ago I had a neighbor who did research at K-State on plants. Specifically, he had figured out how to genetically engineer certain types of crops so that the pores in their leaves would be smaller. That way less water would evaporate out of the plant, making it more drought resistant. In other words, he was a genius when it came to plants. The ironic thing is that he couldn't get the grass beside his driveway to grow. And it bothered him. He told me one time, "I can do complex research on plants, but I can't grow grass."

That's a parable for our spiritual lives sometimes, isn't it? Sometimes we know so much about God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit, so much about the Bible, so much about the Christian life, etc. . . .but we bear so little fruit – whether it's the fruit of the Spirit in our own lives or influence in the lives of others. But does it bother us? Are we troubled by the discrepancy between what we know and what we do? Do we take seriously the idea that we should not only be "hearers" but also "doers" of the Word (to use the terminology of James 1)?

I don't preach many sermons with the goal of leaving people bothered and/or troubled. Usually it's just the opposite. But today we come to a passage in which it seems like Jesus is very intentionally introducing a troubling topic for His disciples to consider. At the end of Matthew 7 Jesus speaks about the accuracy of fruit – how you can accurately identify a tree by its fruit *and* a person by the fruit of his/her life. Jesus' teaching forces us to evaluate our lives as to whether or not we are bearing the fruit we should. And it's possible that some of us will be bothered/troubled by what we see. If that's the case, we shouldn't panic. God provides a way for fruitless people to pursue fruitfulness in their lives. We'll talk about that toward the end of the message.

In Matthew 7:15-23 Jesus teaches that there will be some who only masquerade as His disciples. Some people intentionally deceive others; some people are deceived themselves. In either case, you will know them by their fruit; the fruit of their lives will make obvious that they're not truly apprenticed to Jesus.

***The Accuracy of Fruit: False Prophets (Matthew 7:15-20)*** Jesus begins with a warning that is just as relevant in our day as in His:

15 "Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

The NT has a lot to say about false prophets. A prophet is basically a person who delivers a message to people from God. A false prophet is a person who delivers messages that contradict the Scriptures, God's written Word. If someone comes to your door saying that Jesus isn't "the unique Son of God," you can safely say that s/he is a false prophet. False prophets are identified by having a false message. But Jesus here has in mind a person who isn't immediately recognizable as a false prophet. This person appears to have sound doctrine and appears to be a person who knows and speaks for God.

Jesus points out the discrepancy between their appearance and what is true internally. He says that false prophets "come to you in sheep's clothing" – they appear to be rather harmless. But

“inwardly [they] are ravenous wolves.” This is significant, of course, because ***what you are “inwardly” is what you really are.*** The entire SoM has been calling us away from external righteousness to a type of heart righteousness that permeates our very souls. That’s because what you are inwardly is what you really are. “As a man thinks within himself, so he is” (Proverbs 23:5).

Inwardly false prophets are “ravenous/ferocious wolves.” They are predators. Instead of giving life, they take life. In Matthew 23:27 Jesus confronted the Pharisees using similar terms: “For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but ***inside*** they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness.” Outward appearances can be deceiving.

So you can you tell if someone is a wolf in sheep’s clothing? We are told in verses 16 through 20. These verses begin and end with the same statement (*inclusio*), indicating what is being explained in between.

16 "You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? 17 "So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit.

Jesus appeals to a universally-accepted observation from the natural world: a tree is known by its fruit. To the untrained eye, lots of fruit trees look alike *before they bear fruit*. I probably couldn’t tell the difference between an apple tree, a peach tree, or a pear tree. But if I walked up to a tree full of apples I would immediately know that it’s an apple tree. A tree is known by its fruit. Fruit is an accurate indicator of a tree’s identity.

In the same way, Jesus says, you will know false teachers by ***their*** fruits. Their fruit is equally accurate. If a person is inwardly a “ravenous wolf,” it will eventually manifest itself. Maybe not immediately, but eventually the fruit will appear. Eventually a person’s words, relationships, actions, and priorities will accurately betray his/her identity. You will know them by their fruit.

18 "A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit.

Just like a tree will ultimately be known by its fruit, so will a false prophet. A false prophet cannot exhibit the fruit of the Spirit or the life of the Kingdom. A false prophet can fake it for a while, but not forever. By contrast, a true disciple of Jesus ***will*** exhibit such fruit. A true follower of God and Christ can still sin – sometimes in extraordinary ways (think of David with Bathsheba, Peter denying Jesus three times; think of your own life at times). But eventually a true disciple will produce good fruit. Often times that fruit flows from genuine, heartfelt repentance.

Verse 19 indicates that ultimately God will judge false prophets:

19 "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 "So then, you will know them by their fruits.

Whereas God prunes a genuine believer so that s/he might be more fruitful (John 15), a false prophet is like bad tree that needs to be cut down and burned. God will ultimate judge those who falsely speak in His name. But for our part, we will known them by their fruit.

Identifying someone as a “false prophet” may sound like an outdated thing to do. But I have encountered a few modern day “false prophets” over the years. Years ago a guy showed up at the church wanting to be involved in leadership. He said all the right things; he claimed to have all sorts of theological education and experience. But a few things just weren’t right. Whenever the Scriptures were being taught (on Sunday mornings or in another setting), he disappeared – a phone call or an emergency appointment. When his wife came with concerns, he became even more illusive. To make a long story short, he had a history of entering into churches and ministries, using them for his own purposes. He had a secret life in another state. When confronted with these things, he threatened legal action if we spoke publicly about him or his situation. Jesus was right: a tree is known by its fruit.

Jesus says, “Beware of false prophets.” Paul told the elders in Ephesus, “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock . . . savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock” (Acts 20:28-29). Several other passages in the NT warn against false teachers (see 2 Peter 2). Sometimes you will know false teachers by teachings that fail to reflect the truth of Scripture. But you will always know them by their fruit.

As a side note, let me state the obvious: Jesus’ teaching doesn’t give us permission to be judgmental and hyper-critical about every area of doctrine and practice that we think is unbiblical. As in all things, humility should rule the way we evaluate others’ lives and ministries. And the goal – until it becomes obvious that it is unattainable – is always to help people come back to a place of sound doctrine and obedience.

As a teacher, I find it incredibly hurtful when people question my motives or take something I’ve said out of context and draw the wrong conclusions about what I think or believe. I certainly get things wrong sometimes, and my motives aren’t always pure. But when that’s the case, I want people to come to me with gentleness and humility so that I can learn and grow and do better in the future.

Since that’s how I want people to treat me, that’s how I should treat others. Even in this area of being on guard for false prophets, the “golden rule” of Matthew 7:12 applies: we should treat others the way we want others to treat us. I got some great advice a long time ago concerning critiquing another person’s doctrinal position. The advice was to represent the other person’s view in such a way that they wouldn’t object if they were sitting on the front row. We should be that fair and that gracious.

In the next paragraph (verses 21 through 23) Jesus recounts a future conversation between Himself and someone who claims to be His disciple. This conversation confirms that what a person actually *does* is the best indicator of who a person really is.

***The Accuracy of Fruit: False Disciples. (Matthew 7:21-23)*** When we hear this conversation we can’t help but evaluate our own lives.

21 "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter.

A person’s words can be deceiving, but a person’s actions are always an accurate representation of his/her life. Simply addressing Jesus as Lord isn’t enough to indicate the condition of a

person's heart. The person who "does the will of [the] Father who is in heaven" actually enters into heaven. The entire SoM is focused on doing the will of God from the heart.

We need to think carefully here about what Jesus says. Jesus doesn't say that doing the will of God is the thing that *qualifies* a person for the kingdom heaven. Many Scriptures tell us that the basis of our entrance into the kingdom of heaven is Jesus' death on the cross. We are saved "by grace through faith"; it is simply a gift that we need to receive.

Nevertheless, Jesus says that doing the will of God is the necessary *evidence* that a person has been saved by grace. This is what James spoke about when he wrote that "faith without works is dead" (James 1). This is what Paul was talking about when he wrote that we are "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10).

There is nothing incompatible between being saved by grace through faith and the necessity of bearing good fruit. The imagery Jesus used earlier suggests that good fruit is the *natural* byproduct of our life with God; just like an apple tree naturally produces apples, the person who abides in Christ naturally bears fruit of Christlikeness. Our will and our effort is certainly involved (i.e., we're not passive in the process), but our obedience is a natural expression of who we really are. A believer should never have to fake obedience; to the contrary, we are never more fully true to ourselves when we're obedient.

Notice the conversation that will take place on "that day" (the Day of Judgment):

22 "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' 23 "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.'

Jesus says that a person can speak convincing words and even do miraculous things . . . and still not be a true disciple of His. In Jesus' worldview (really a biblical worldview), God isn't the only one who empowers people to say and do impressive things. In the book of Exodus, for example, the magicians of Egypt duplicated the miracles that Moses did (by the power of God). Since the miraculous is so rare in our experience, it's common for people to be "wowed" by demonstrations of the miraculous (or even by claims of the miraculous). (See also Jeremiah 14:13-14). It's very common for people to assume that everything miraculous or impressive spiritually is good and is from God. But that's simply not the case.

Notice carefully how Jesus responds to the "many" who claim to have prophesied, cast out demons and performed many miracles in His name:

23 "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.'

First, Jesus says, "I never knew you." When Jesus "knows" you, you belong to Him (see John 10:14). Second, Jesus says that they "practice lawlessness." As opposed to having lives that conform to the truth of Scripture, they lived lives that were contrary to the law/truth. Jesus leveled this same charge against the Pharisees in Matthew 23:28 "Even so you too outwardly

appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.” Their lawlessness involved a blatant disregard for the weightier matters of the Law such as “justice, mercy, and faithfulness” (23:23). Appearance and words can be deceiving, but the fruit of our lives is always accurate.

Jesus quotes David in Psalm 6:8 when He says, “Depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.” Just as David wanted to distance himself from those who do evil, on the final day Jesus will distance Himself from those who “practice lawlessness.” This is only right because the kingdom of heaven is ultimately only for those who love God and His ways. People who practice lawlessness won’t be at home there (see C.S. Lewis’ *The Great Divorce* for a fictional account of how unbelievers might experience heaven).

***What is our response?*** If you’re like me, you hear Jesus’ words in verse 23 and you wonder, “What will Jesus say to me on “that day”? Will He say, “Well done, good and faithful servant . . . you’ve allowed Me to bear fruit in your life”? or “I never knew you. Depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness”? This passage forces us to evaluate our fruitfulness – whether or not our lives show the fruit of the Spirit’s work, the fruit of obedience, and the fruit of influence in the lives of others. There are many different types of fruitfulness.

***If you look at your life and you really don’t see any fruit*** it would be wise to ask the question, “Have I genuinely repented and trusted in Jesus for eternal life?” Where there’s life there’s growth, there’s fruit, there’s some evidence. Jesus was very clear about the accuracy of fruit.

It is possible to sit through church services for years and never really come to the place where your heart is broken over your sin to the point where you cry out to God for forgiveness and for life. It’s possible to be half-hearted and apathetic about the condition of your soul. I was that way for the first 20 years of my life. I was very involved in my church growing up, but for whatever reason I didn’t really come to the place of repentance and faith until I was 20 years old.

I don’t want to provoke a crisis of faith unnecessarily, but neither do I want to give false assurance to the person whose life doesn’t bear the fruit of knowing Jesus. In other words, if you don’t see some fruit of salvation, I don’t want to tell you, “Don’t worry about it. . . you prayed a prayer ten years ago. . .” No, I want to say to you, repent and trust in Jesus alone for salvation. If you do, you will become a new creation in Christ and will then begin to bear the fruit of salvation.

***If you have already trusted in Christ and you see a degree of fruitfulness***, Jesus’ teaching here in Matthew 7 still holds a powerful challenge for you. We all have pockets of disobedience (or possibly even lawlessness) in our lives. None of us would say that we bear as much fruit as we could or should.

I don’t so much want to issue a challenge to get busy and try to start bearing fruit as much as a challenge to seek God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. I want to challenge us to abide in Christ so that we will bear the fruit that Jesus wants us to bear. Ultimately God is the One who produces fruit in our lives. The fruit we exhibit is purely a manifestation of God’s grace in our lives. But we put ourselves in a position to experience that grace. Here are a couple suggestions of how to do that:

First, pursue God in specific, tangible ways. Decide on some specific ways of seeking God that fit your life. In that way you put yourself in a position to grow and bear fruit. You'll seek God differently than I will because we've got different gifting, temperament, opportunity, and aptitudes. There is no one-size-fits-all ways to seek God. But I'd encourage you to pursue God in very specific, tangible ways. Beginning next Sunday morning we're offering a five-week "Habits of Maturing" course that's designed to help you come up with a plan for seeking God. There are some time-tested ways of seeking God that believers have found helpful in every generation. You should come out of that course with a simple plan for seeking God that fits your life. Check the box on the connections card if you want to take that course. The same course is offered two different hours – 9:30 and 11:00.

Second – and this really gives heart to our habits of maturing – cry out to God to give you spiritual fruit. Implore/plead with God to transform your life so that you'll bear the fruit you were created to bear. If you're luke-warm, that's the place to begin, "God I'm luke-warm and I don't really want what You want. . ." If you're disobedient in some area of your life and it's stunting your growth, start there, "God I beg you to make me an obedient person. . ." If you look around you and sense that these are days of opportunity like none other, ask God for an extra measure of grace to be fruitful. Wherever you are and whatever God is doing in your life, cry out to Him to give you the spiritual fruit that He wants you to bear.