

## Matthew 7:15-20 – “A Call to Discernment”

(Pew Bible Page: 812)

**Intro:** If you “Google” the phrase, “Discerning what is true from what is false,” you will get at least five pages of websites offering help of various kinds, some religious and others not. From this I deduce that there is a hunger in our society to “learn to discern.” Or is there? Whether this is true in America or not I’ll leave to your discretion, but one thing is certain from tonight’s text: Jesus calls His saints to discernment when it comes to those who are teachers in His Church.

**Proposition:** Christ warns His disciples to beware of false prophets. He calls us to inspect the fruit of our teacher’s lives to discern who is real and who is not.

Our study tonight will speak three times about False Prophets: (v.15) Beware of False Prophets; (vv.16-18) Discern False Prophets; (vv.19-20) The Destiny of False Prophets.

(v.15) Beware of False Prophets – Jesus warned that false prophets would come and they have indeed appeared in every generation including our own. **Matthew 7:15 - 15** “*Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.*” What does this verse tell us about such men? They appear to be genuine believers, “*Who come to you in sheep’s clothing.*” They are not just members of the flock; they will be “false prophets,” – teachers and ministers of the gospel, too. Their outfits often include ordination, seminary education, denominational affiliations and other seemingly reliable Christian “pedigrees” of various sorts. Always they will carry the name “Christian” and present themselves as such. But in spite of their outward appearance, inwardly they are “*ravenous wolves*” seeking whom they may devour. The apostle Paul spoke of these men in **Galatians 2:4** calling them - **4** *False brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery.*” Their danger to the unwary is clear and present: they come among the brethren pretending to be brethren but set a dangerous trap for anyone who falls into their circle of influence. What is wrong with their teaching? They do not present “*the narrow gate and hard path that leads to life*” in their teaching (cf. 7:14). “It is a teaching, the falseness of which is to be detected by what it does *not* say rather than by what it *does* say,” notes Martyn Lloyd-Jones. Their teaching leaves out vital things:

Marks of false teachers:<sup>1</sup>

1. They never get to doctrinal particulars – they focus on one doctrine only, usually the love of God. God’s holiness, God’s wrath, the despicability of sin, etc., are not taught or quickly passed over in their teaching.
2. They never emphasize the final judgment and eternal destiny of the lost.
3. Their teaching does not emphasize the utter sinfulness of sin and the total inability of man to do anything about his own salvation. When sin is mentioned at all, it is only about particular sins. The fallen nature of man is never talked about.
4. They do not preach the expiatory nature of atonement, and the substitutionary death of the Lord Jesus Christ.
5. They do not emphasize repentance in any real sense.

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<sup>1</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, pages 245-250.

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“We do not seem to understand that the most dangerous person of all is the one who does not emphasize the right things,”<sup>2</sup>notes Lloyd-Jones.

[DOCTRINAL POINT] We must be on our guard against false teachers who are always seeking to steal away God’s sheep from the narrow gate and the hard path that leads to life.

(ILLUSTRATION) Let’s let J. C. Ryle make our illustration and application of this point: “This is a warning that is much needed. There are thousands who seem ready to believe anything in religion, if they hear it from an ordained minister.... The teaching [of everyone] must be weighed in the balance of the Holy Scripture: they are to be followed and believed, so long as their doctrine agrees with the Bible, but not a minute longer. We are to try them ‘by their fruits.’ Sound doctrine and holy living are the marks of true prophets.”<sup>3</sup>

(APPLICATION) “What is the best safeguard against false teaching? Beyond all doubt the regular study of the Word of God, with prayer for the teaching of the Holy Spirit. The Bible was given to be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Psalm 119:105). The man who reads it aright will never be allowed greatly to err. It is neglect of the Bible which makes so many a prey to the first false teacher whom they hear. [Christians who are undiscerning] would fain have us believe that ‘they are not learned, and do not pretend to have decided opinions:’ the plain truth is that they are lazy and idle about reading the Bible, and do not like the trouble of thinking for themselves. Nothing supplies false prophets with followers so much as spiritual sloth under a cloak of humility.”<sup>4</sup> Forewarned is fore armed!

(vv.16-19) Discern False Prophets – Jesus said that these men would be recognized “*by their fruit.*”

**Matthew 7:16–18 - 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.”*

What did He mean? D. A. Carson helps us understand:

One’s “fruit”—not just what one does, but all one says and does—will ultimately reveal what one is (cf. James 3:12). The Semitic way of expression (i.e., both positive and negative—viz., every good tree bears good fruit, no good tree bears bad fruit, etc.) makes the test certain, but not necessarily easy or quick. Living according to kingdom norms can be feigned for a time; but what one is will eventually reveal itself in what one does. However guarded one’s words, they will finally betray him (cf. 12:33–37; Luke 6:45).<sup>5</sup>

James M. Boice adds:

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<sup>2</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, pages 243-244.

<sup>3</sup> J. C. Ryle, page 55.

<sup>4</sup> J. C. Ryle, pages 55-56.

<sup>5</sup> Carson, D. A. (1984). [Matthew](#). In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 191). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

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This can be applied in two ways. First, a genuine Christian life will show evidence of good works. Salvation is not by works. Anyone who trusts in his or her works for salvation is not saved, because that person is not trusting in the work of Jesus Christ alone (Eph. 2:8–9). But, on the other hand, it is also an error to suppose that a person can be a genuine Christian without doing good works since a Christian has the life of Christ within, and Christ’s life will always express itself in doing good. This is especially true of teachers. Progress in the Christian life is often slow, and new believers may be far from producing much that is unmistakably good fruit. But teachers must! If teachers are not living a high level of Christianity and are not producing good fruit, they are false teachers and wolves.<sup>6</sup>

So the way a man lives his life, the way he walks with Jesus is one evidence. But there is a second evidence as well: the effect the man’s teaching has on others:

(Voice on the second evidence that a man is “a good tree or a bad tree”). Let me put it this way. Does the teaching you are receiving satisfy your soul? Does it bring you closer to God? Does it equip you to live for Jesus Christ at home and in your place of work? Does it make you less selfish? Does it prompt you to help and serve other people when you have an opportunity to do so? If it does not, find teaching that does. Find a place where the teaching takes root and flourishes in growth and spiritual satisfaction. The only instruction that will ever satisfy you in this way is accurate Bible teaching.<sup>7</sup>

Jesus illustrated His point by using the example of two kinds of trees: one good, and the other bad. His point was that life produces after its own kind. An unregenerate preacher, one who doesn’t know Christ himself, will yield a life of bad fruit: deficient teaching and unfaithful living. He was very insistent on this: healthy trees only bear healthy fruit; diseased trees inevitably bear bad fruit. To drive His point home in verse 18 He pointed out the impossibility of anything else being the case: **Matthew 7:18 - 18** *“A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit.”*

[DOCTRINAL POINT] The ESV Study Bible puts this point succinctly: “The life of the prophet and the results of his influence on others are the fruits that will indicate whether or not his message is consistent with the kingdom life of righteousness.”<sup>8</sup>

[ILLUSTRATION] When I worked for Kroger, my boss who was an old produce department guy before he was promoted, came in on a regular basis to look over the store. He went through the Produce department with discerning eyes, to say the least. One day he found an apple on the shelf that didn’t measure up. He picked it up and handed it to me, saying, “Take a bite of this apple.” I bit the apple and found it to be mealy and rather tasteless. His discerning eye spotted what the rest of us had overlooked: that apple should have been rejected rather than offered for sale.

[APPLICATION] In this same way, Jesus calls believers to develop discerning eyes when it comes to those who are teaching God’s Word. But surely someone will say, “But what about Jesus’

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<sup>6</sup> Boice, J. M. (2001). [The Gospel of Matthew](#) (p. 114). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

<sup>7</sup> Boice, J. M. (2001). [The Gospel of Matthew](#) (p. 114). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

<sup>8</sup> ESV Study Bible, pg. 1834.

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command, ‘*Judge not, that you be not judged*’? Aren’t we disobeying His teaching when we say others are ‘false prophets’?” Not at all! The same Jesus that said, “*Judge not,*” in these verses calls us to make discerning judgments on those who present themselves as our teachers.

Censoriousness is never right; but a proper discernment is always called for. Are you able to judge what is good fruit and what is bad fruit among those who want to teach us God’s Word? If not, how will you keep from falling into a trap?

(vv.19-20) The Destiny of False Prophets – Jesus warned that false prophets will not escape the most severe justice: **Matthew 7:19–20 - 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.*” We need not spend much time expositing these verses, for their meaning is clear: The dead wood of a false teacher is good for nothing more than burning in the fire when all is said and done. Paul is more explicit yet in **2 Thessalonians 1:6–11 - 6** “*Indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, 7 and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels 8 in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 9 They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, 10 when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.*” Since God takes this matter so seriously, we should as well. “*Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.*”

[DOCTRINAL POINT] God will judge those who harm His Church. We must be on our guard not to fall into their trap.

**Conclusion:** Let’s let D. A. Carson give us our concluding thoughts: “Warnings against false prophets are necessarily based on the conviction that not all prophets are true, that truth can be violated, and that the gospel’s enemies usually conceal their hostility and try to pass themselves off as fellow believers. At first glance they use orthodox language, show biblical piety, and are indistinguishable from true prophets (cf. 10:41). Thus it is vital to know how to distinguish sheep from wolves in sheep’s clothing. Jesus does not explicitly say who will have the discernment to protect the community but implies that the community itself, by whatever agency, must somehow protect itself from the wolves.”<sup>9</sup> We do well to heed Jesus’ command to “Beware”!

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<sup>9</sup> Carson, D. A. (1984). [Matthew](#). In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 191). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.