

Matthew 7:15-20 “False Prophets and Fruit Inspecting”**

Series: The Sermon on the Mount: Kingdom Living 101

Main Idea: In Matthew 7:15-20, Jesus exhorts us to beware of false prophets by becoming fruit inspectors.

- I. Jesus exhorts us to beware of false prophets (15).
 - A. They are deceptive.
 - B. They are deadly.
- II. Jesus exhorts us to be fruit inspectors (16-20).
 - A. Fruit reveals (16a).
 - B. Fruit makes things obvious (16b).
 - C. Fruit exposes hidden realities (17).
 1. It reveals the nature of something.
 2. It reveals the health of something.
 - D. Fruit demonstrates fundamental conditions (18).
 - E. Fruit is not optional (19).
 - F. Fruit is what we are looking for (20).

Take Inventory: Two key questions to ponder...

1. Who has my ear?
2. What kind of fruit are people seeing in my life?

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It’s amazing to watch Jesus at work, in everything He does. It’s amazing to watch how He finishes a sermon. We’re nearing the end of His most famous sermon, His sermon on the mount. And He finished it by talking about, of all things, false prophets and fruit inspecting.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 7:15-20

It's wonderful to take a walk in the woods, especially at this time of the year. But before a good parent turns a child loose in the outdoors, he or she warns the little one of something which is potentially very dangerous. There are subtle hazards in the woods. They are silent dangers. I'm not talking about ferocious animals, nor careless hunters. I'm referring to the danger of poisonous fruit and vegetation.

It's a reality that some types of fruit are nutritious while other types of fruit are potentially deadly. And good parents take the time both to warn their children of the potential danger, and teach them how to handle it.

And so it is in Jesus' teaching for us today. As He comes to the end of His sermon on the mount, He talks to His listeners in plain, straightforward fashion about **false prophets and fruit inspecting**.

I’ve entitled this series, “Kingdom Living 101,” for essence, that’s what it is. Jesus has been teaching about the kingdom of God. He began by identifying who belongs to the kingdom. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (5:3).” And, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (5:10).”

So there are participants in the kingdom, and there are persecutors of the participants in the kingdom. There’s a kingdom battle going on.

So who’s in the kingdom? We might be surprised. Jesus said in 5:20, “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

So some who think they're in the kingdom, in fact, are *not*. Unless your righteousness exceeds the most religious people in Israel, you're not in.

Jesus spends the next part of His sermon showing what that means. He shows that the heart of the problem is indeed the problem of the heart. So you've never killed anyone. That's good. But have you been angry with someone and called them a fool? You are liable to the hell of fire, says Jesus in 5:22. The same goes for morality. So you've never committed adultery. That's commendable. Maybe. Have you ever desired it? It's the heart that God sees.

Jesus tells us to pray, "Our Father in heaven...Your kingdom come...on earth as it is in heaven (6:9-10)." This must be our number one desire in life. Not to see our kingdom come, but His kingdom come. In 6:33 Jesus says, "Seek first the kingdom of heaven."

You say, "This is convicting. I fall short." Yes, we all do. That's what Jesus is showing us. We fall short. And it's often the good folks, the religious folks who have the biggest trouble admitting it.

So what's the solution? What effect does Jesus intend this sermon to have on us? He tells us when He gives the invitation in chapter seven.

Ask. "Ask and it will be given to you (7:7)." "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him (7:11)!"

So there's the invitation. We are to be people who ask, and ask continually. We enter God's kingdom, not by doing, but by asking, specifically asking Him to do what He promised He would do on the merit of His Son's life, death, and resurrection. We are saved by simply asking Him to save us. And we're to live this way, too, by asking Him to do what He has promised to do, to provide for us, protect us, and make Himself known to the world through us.

But Jesus isn't done, not quite yet. The effect of this sermon, as with any good sermon, is meant to show up in real life in real and concrete ways. How so?

You can't get any more practical than this. As we learned from the text Pastor Matt preached last week, the essence of kingdom living is the golden rule (7:12). "Do to others as you would have them do to you. This sums up the Law and the Prophets."

This is what asking produces, a people who ask God to save them, and then ask God to help them do to live out the golden rule.

So what are we going to do with this message? Jesus knows we need one more thing. An exam. He gives us an exam of sorts which runs from verses 13-27. Throughout His sermon, Jesus has talked about two kinds of righteousness, two kinds of treasures, two potential masters, and two potential ambitions. Now it's exam time. The Master-Teacher gives us an examination to test our loyalty to kingdom living, our commitment to discipleship. It's a four-part test:

- Two Ways (13-14)
- Two Trees (15-20)
- Two Claims (21-23)
- Two Builders (24-27)

So this is the final exam in Jesus' class of Kingdom Living 101. It's a comprehensive exam. Part one, which was last week (verses 13-14) covered geography, "two ways". In part two, as we'll see today, the exam deals with biology, "wolves, trees, fruit," verses

15-20. Part three will take us into the courtroom, verses 21-23. And part four will take us to the construction site, verses 24-27.

Today it's biology. In Matthew 7:15-20, Jesus exhorts us to beware of false prophets (He likens them to wolves) by becoming fruit inspectors. Technically, it's pomology (from Latin, "fruit," + -logy), a branch of botany that studies fruit and its cultivation.

I. Jesus exhorts us to beware of false prophets (15).

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

Notice the strong verb. Jesus says we are to "*beware*". We are to be on our guard. We are to be on the look out. We are to keep a keen spiritual eye. Why? Because there is trouble around us, not lurking in the shadows, not downtown, but trouble where we might least expect it, perhaps right here in this room. What is the trouble?

False prophets, "pseudo-prophets." It's the Greek word for "lie". Jesus warns us of imitation prophets, counterfeit teachers, those who say they are speaking for God but are deceptive.

Of course, false prophets were around a long time before Jesus' day. Listeners in the audience would have been very familiar with warnings in the Old Testament regarding false prophets.

In fact, they knew the problem began with a rival voice in the garden. God said, "Don't eat." The rival said, "What does He know? I offer a better way."

And so it went through the pages of the Old Testament. God says, "This is the good way. Walk in it." The rival says, "What does He know? Here's a better way."

Jeremiah had a confrontation with false prophet who said, "'Peace, peace', when there is no peace (Jer 6:14; 8:11)."

Ezekiel warned, "Her princes in the midst of her are like wolves tearing the prey...to get dishonest gain (22:27)."

Zephaniah described Israel's false prophets in his day, "Her prophets are wanton, faithless men (3:3)."

Why are false prophets so dangerous? Here's one of the primary reasons. Notice the approach they take, according to Jesus.

"Who come to you." It would be bad enough if you ran into them *out there in the world*, but this is worse. They come and infiltrate the ranks of the followers of Jesus.

Jesus said that false prophets would come right into the midst of His people. And who are Jesus' people? After Jesus died and rose again, He returned to heaven, and then the Holy Spirit came and took up residence in those who believe in Jesus. He brought into existence the Body of Christ, the church.

This is where the false prophets come. To you. To the church. And they have been following this strategy ever since, for twenty centuries now. In the past two thousand years, false prophets have caused unthinkable damage to the Christ's Church.

Jesus knew it would be so. Hence, this warning to beware.

Think about the timing of this exhortation. Jesus has just delivered words of life to His hearers. But there's an enemy who hates this message. Jesus just faced this enemy out in the wilderness in chapter four, who came to Jesus and tempted Him three times. He's coming after you, too, says Jesus to His followers. How?

By doing what I have just done with you. Preaching. He will send you messengers, prophets, who say they are speaking for God. That's what a prophet is, a preacher, someone who speaks for God, and speaks messages that he claims have come from God.

So why do we need to be on guard against false prophets? For two reasons.

A. They are deceptive. They come to you, how? In "sheep's clothing." What is sheep's clothing? In Jesus' day the shepherd's garment was a sheepskin turned inside out. The fleece would be against the shepherd's body. The hide would be visible on the outside. But, of course, a man might wear a sheepskin and NOT be a shepherd. That's the way it is with false prophets.

False prophets are very deceptive. They look innocent. What could be more innocent looking than a sheep? Mild. Sort of skiddish. You might even feel sorry for them. But don't.

They mislead their listeners. They deceive those who are close to them. They may even deceive themselves. They are "slippery". They are hard to pin down. Martin Lloyd-Jones pointed out that the problem often is not so much with what they say, as what they don't say.

They talk about the Bible. They talk about Jesus. They talk about the cross and the empty tomb, and may even shed tears as they do so. But they put a different slant on these precious, biblical realities. They are *false* prophets.

Friends, the greatest threat we face to the gospel does not come from agnostics and atheists. That threat is obvious. A far greater hazard comes from those who conceal their hostilities and try to pass themselves off as genuine believers who belong to us.

They come to you, says Jesus. They come in sheep's clothing, which means, they do everything they can to look like us, those who truly follow Jesus. They may use orthodox language. They may show biblical piety in their lifestyle. But it's all a coverup, a sham, a deception, for when the rubber meets the road, they're on the broad road!

They reject the narrow road of genuine discipleship Jesus has taught in the sermon on the mount. They deny that the gate is narrow, and the way hard. They proclaim a way to God that's more palatable to a world that crucified Jesus.

A false teacher does not advertise himself as a false teacher. He doesn't say that he is spreading lies, that he's contradicting what Jesus said. Forbid the thought! He claims to be a teacher of the truth. He quotes Jesus. He says he loves Jesus, and wants you to love Him too.

Dietrick Bonhoeffer describes the methods of the false prophet, "Knowing that Christians are credulous people, he conceals his dark purpose beneath the cloak of Christian piety, hoping that his innocuous disguise will avert detection."

So why must we be on guard against false prophets? Because they're deceptive.

B. They are deadly. "Who come to you in sheep's clothing *but inwardly are ravenous wolves.*" Ravening wolves, says the KJV. Ferocious wolves, says the NIV.

The wolf, of course, is the natural enemy of sheep. Sheep are defenseless against a wolf. Wolves can cause great damage and destruction to a flock of sheep. And so can false prophets in a local church. They are not only dangerous, but deadly.

It ought not surprise us that the apostles also confronted this danger. Read the rest of the New Testament, and you'll hear it again and again.

You'll hear it from Paul in Acts 20:29, "After I depart. . . grievous wolves shall enter in among you [notice this danger from within], not sparing the flock."

Paul also said this in 2 Corinthians 11:13-15, "For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. . ."

Peter confronted the problem in 2 Peter 2:1, "But there were false prophets among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you. . ."

John gave this warning in 1 John 4:1, "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but test the spirits whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world."

Jude devotes his entire letter to exposing this danger of false teachers, as he says in Jude 3-4, "Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. ⁴ For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ."

Why are false prophets so dangerous to us? It's because they tell people what their carnal hearts want to hear. They fill people with vain hopes. They give listeners a false sense of security. They say that the broad road doesn't lead to destruction. They declare that all roads lead to God.

Suppose I came to you and said, "Don't worry about paying your taxes this year. Oh, you may have received a tax statement from the IRS, but that's just a suggestion. You need the money worse than they do. And they won't care if you keep your tax money as long as you put it to good use."

Would you believe me? Not if you're wise. Why? Because the law of the land holds true whether I say it's true, or not, whether you want it to be true, or not.

So it is with God's Law. God says that there's a broad road that leads to destruction, and a narrow road that leads to eternal life. That's the Law. Period. It holds true whether we believe it or not. And we'd better beware of those who deny it, who say it isn't true.¹

So as Jesus comes to the end of His sermon, He exhorts us to beware of false prophets. But if we're to do this, He knows we need help. We need something else, a second exhortation.

II. Jesus exhorts us to be fruit inspectors (16-20).

Listen again to verse 16-20, "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 knows we need a way to identify false prophets, so He gives us a test for in verses 16-20. We might be surprised at the test He gives. He could have provided us with a one hundred question examination to give to every potential teacher. But He didn't give us a doctrinal test to identify false prophets. Instead, He gave an ethical test.

¹G. Campbell Morgan said, "It's possible for a wolf to wear a sheep's clothing, but it cannot grow a sheep's clothing."

"Ye shall know them by their fruits," says the AV in verse 16. There's a saying that goes, "Like root, like fruit." What a person *is* will inevitably show itself by the way the person *lives*. A person's profession must be tested by his practice.

Here's an important principle that I learned shortly after I became a Christian. If our walk doesn't match our talk, it's better not to talk! If our life is out of order, and is inconsistent with God's Word, then we are not in a position to be teaching others, no matter how great a speaker we may be, by the way.

According to Jesus, fruit matters. In fact, Jesus uses one verse to give the warning, and then four verses to the matter of fruit. Fruit is a big deal. Indeed, Jesus gives us four insights into fruit.

A. Fruit reveals (16a). Verse 16, "You will recognize them," says Jesus. He says the same thing in verse 20, "Thus you will recognize them." How do we recognize them? Those two statements bracket the answer. This whole section is about fruit. You recognize false prophets by their fruit. Fruit reveals the truth about a person.

B. Fruit makes things obvious (16b). This takes it a step further. Fruit not only reveals, but it makes things obvious. Notice the phrase, "by their fruits." The word is plural. Fruits. You can't hide fruit. It keeps coming. There's fruit, then more fruit, and then more fruit. What's inside keeps coming out. You will recognize them *by their fruits*.

At this point, Jesus used two rhetorical questions. He asks, "Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?" Interesting questions, with an obvious answer to both. Certainly not! The key to production on the outside is life on the inside.

But there's another point to Jesus' illustration. In Palestine there is a thornbush called the "buckthorn" bush. Little black berries grow on the buckthorn bush. At first glance, these little black berries look like, you guessed it, grapes! What's more, in the Palestinian countryside, you can find thistles. On certain thistles grow a special flower. Upon first seeing these flowers you might think that you were seeing, again, you guessed it, a fig! But not for long.

Jesus' point is clear. At first, there may be a superficial resemblance between two plants, and two preachers too. But just take a closer look. You'll see the difference. The fruit will make things obvious.

A false prophet can look legitimate, at first. He may wear the right clothes. He might use the right language. He can use the buzzwords of the day, like, concern for justice, even gospel-centered and Christ-focused. But in the end, they're just words, as the fruit makes clear.

There's a big difference between appearance and reality. And a false prophet can't hide his true identity forever. Sooner or later, you'll find out where he stands.

Someone has said², "No man can at one and the same time prove that he is clever and that Christ is wonderful." The ambition of genuine teachers is always to draw attention to Christ, but not so with false teachers. Their ambition always results in the attention being drawn away from Christ.

A word of caution is in order. Jesus is not telling us this to spread distrust in the church. As D. A. Carson puts it, He is "not encouraging a heresy-hunting mentality

² I believe it was Denney.

here.”³ Jesus doesn't want us to always be leery and skeptical of each other. That would ruin the church. He says *fruits*. It's plural. We can all have a bad day, even a bad message. And when that happens, show grace, and an arm on the shoulder with a kind question, “Is that what you really meant to say?” And then, keep listening, and watching. By their *fruits* you will know them, because fruit makes things obvious.

C. Fruit exposes hidden realities (17). “So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit.”

So now Jesus delves into the realm of horticulture to apply the test given in verse 16. He mentions two basic conditions. One, that of a healthy tree (NIV says, “good tree”). And two, that of a diseased tree (NIV says, “bad tree”; KJV says, “corrupt tree”). Those are the two basic conditions of trees.

And here are the inevitable outcomes. Good trees produce good fruit. Bad trees produce bad fruit.

So the fruit is critical. The fruit exposes hidden realities.

1. *It reveals the nature of something.*
2. *It reveals the health of something.*

You don't find apples growing on a peach tree. There are no grapes growing on a pear tree. The fruit reveals the nature of the tree or bush that produces it. As well as it's health. A sick tree doesn't produce quality fruit.

D. Fruit demonstrates fundamental conditions (18). “A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit.”

Good trees can't produce bad fruit. Bad trees can't produce good fruit. Perhaps the word “quality” might be a better word. Martyn Lloyd-Jones makes an important point regarding this word “corrupt”:

‘Corrupt’, of course, does not mean rotten, because a decayed or rotten tree does not bring forth fruit at all...He is calling attention to the fact that trees which resemble each other in that they look perfectly all right, do not of necessity produce the same kind of fruit. One tree may produce good fruit, the other tree may produce poor fruit. What is called ‘evil fruit’ does not mean entirely ‘rotten’ either; it means it is poor in quality, it is not good fruit.⁴

The point is, fruit demonstrates fundamental conditions. Of trees, and of people who speak about God and for God. Jesus is talking about false teachers, about imitation disciples. They produce bad fruit. They are not Christlike in character. They are not in line with God's Word. They do not have a godly influence on those around them. Jude 12 says that false teachers are trees without fruit.

E. Fruit is not optional (19). “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” Those are drastic steps to take. Cut down. Throw into the fire. Trees that don't produce good fruit are good only for firewood. Which is another way of saying, fruit is not optional. No fruit? You're heading for the fire!

Dear friend, mere profession of discipleship will be no protection against the coming judgment. The tragic reality is that the world is full of nominal disciples of Christ, who have said the right words, but lack fruit to substantiate their words.

F. Fruit is what we are looking for (20). “Thus you will recognize them by

³ Carson, D. A. (1999). *Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World: An Exposition of Matthew 5-10* (p. 136). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

⁴ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, pp. 251-2.

their fruits.” In the AV, “Wherefore, by their fruits ye shall know them.”

Jesus explains the significance of His illustration of the two trees and two types of fruit. He says that the key to unmasking false prophets is their “fruit”. By their fruits we will know them. Fruit is extremely important.

This raises the question. What does Jesus mean by fruit? Jesus Himself had this to say about fruit in John 15:4-8, “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.”

Notice that last phrase, “And so prove to be my disciples.” That’s what fruit is. It’s the proof that we’re following Jesus, that He is reproducing His life in and through us.⁵

Think of it this way. Fruit is the product of a plant. Fruit is the reproduction of a plant. A tomato plant produces tomatoes. A peach tree produces peaches. An apple tree produces apples. And Christians who abide in Christ produce the fruit of Christ in their lives, or Christlikeness. So fruit refers to evidence, and here we see three evidences:

- a. A person's character is to be Christlike—John 15:8 (“disciples”)
- b. A person's message is to be Christlike—John 15:7 (“my words”)
- c. A person's influence is to be Christlike—John 15:12 (“love one another”).

So fruit is comprehensive. It’s not just what a person says. Nor is it just what a person does. Fruit involves all that a person is, says, and does in life.

We hear the guy at work swear and use God's name in vain. We say it's a terrible sin, blasphemy. And it is. But what about the preacher who prays, “Our Father in heaven, Thy kingdom come,” but his lavish lifestyle indicates he’s more interested in someone else’s kingdom? For that matter, what about us when we pray, “Thy kingdom come,” but in our hearts we too are refusing to allow Him to rule our lives, which is why we’re not willing to do that ministry He wants us to do, so that His kingdom will come into the lives of others?

Fruit reveals. Fruit makes things obvious. Fruit exposes hidden realities. Fruit demonstrates fundamental conditions. Fruit is not optional. Fruit is what we are looking for, in our own lives first, and when we’re trying to discern whether someone is a false prophet.

Take Inventory: Two key questions to ponder...

⁵ Carson, D. A. (1999). *Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World: An Exposition of Matthew 5–10* (pp. 135–136). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic. D. A. Carson, “There is nothing in their preaching which fosters poverty of spirit, nothing which searches the conscience and makes men cry to God for mercy, nothing which excoriates all forms of religious hypocrisy, nothing which prompts such righteousness of conduct and attitude that some persecution is inevitable. It is even possible in some instances that everything these false prophets say is true; but because they leave out the difficult bits, they do not tell the whole truth, and their total message is false.”

1. *Who has my ear?* Who am I listening to? Start with, what preachers online? But in our day we need to talk about other outlets as well. Whose podcast? Whose Youtube channel? Who am I following in life?

I googled the question, “What are the most popular youtube channels?” Cocomelon-nursery rhymns was number two, with 118 million subscribers. Lots of influence going on there.

And the number one Youtube personality in 2021? PewDiePie, aka Felix Kjellberg, who “got his start doing gaming walkthroughs and reviews, but has since expanded to more satirical commentary and meme roundups,” so says his review. He’s 31 years old and has over 100 million subscribers.⁶

I’d never heard of him, so I did a little reading. According to *Business Insider*:

“In the early days, PewDiePie's channel consisted mostly of play-by-plays of video games — dubbed the "Let's Play" genre — along with color commentary. He found that his videos with horror games were more popular, and people were drawn to his overdone reactions.”⁷

“In 2015, Kjellberg released a satirical self-help book called "This Book Loves You." The book parodying motivational texts rose to No. 1 on The New York Times bestseller list when it was released that November.”

“In 2017, Kjellberg's antics cost him. A Wall Street Journal report found that nine of his videos, between August 2016 and February 2017, included "anti-Semitic jokes or Nazi imagery." One of those videos showed two men, paid by PewDiePie, holding up a sign reading "Death to All Jews.”

Honestly, I couldn’t even finish reading the article. The *fruit* was so revealing, so inconsistent with Christ and His kingdom.

Who has your ear? Friends, we're bombarded with voices calling for our attention. Are you making sure that those you listen to have fruit consistent with the teaching and example of Jesus Christ?

2. *What kind of fruit are people seeing in my life?* Is their good fruit in my life? Do the people around me who know me well have reason to believe that Jesus Christ has really transformed my heart?

Fruit comes from the vine, from Christ. Do you truly know Christ? Has He saved you? Are you allowing Him to live through you? In a moment, we’ll come to the Lord’s Table and remember again what He has done for us, to save us, to bear His fruit in and through us.

Closing Song: #186 “The Old Rugged Cross” (all four verses)

Communion

⁶ <https://www.businessinsider.com/pewdiepie-youtube-felix-kjellberg-life-career-controversy-2019-9>

⁷ Ibid.