

Matt. 7:15-23

I. Watch out for false prophets (15)

A. Be on guard against the false prophets (15a)

Jesus warned His disciples to actively guard, to be in a consistent state of alert against false prophets. A false prophet is someone who falsely claims to be speaking for God and/or who speaks falsehood claiming it to be the truth about God. Jesus knew that false prophets have always been a possibility, because the devil is always active, and he is always a deceiver. And whenever false prophets speak, they are a serious problem to be resisted. Of course, there is the possibility of an opposite problem, where people become overly zealous “heresy hunters” who are hyper suspicious and accuse people over the smallest mistake or disagreement on peripheral issues. But this can never be an excuse to relax our guard against genuine falsehood and deceptive teachers and their teaching.

There is a difference between a false prophet and a teacher who mistakenly teaches something that is not correct. That does not necessarily mean that false prophets know that they are false prophets and are doing so intentionally, although that will be true in some cases. In the next few verses, Jesus will tell how to determine whether someone is a false prophet. Another helpful test is how they respond to correction when they are shown to be wrong from the Bible. Church leadership ideally will be watchful and discerning to recognize false prophets before they are given any influence or authority in a local church. But they must also make the effort to recognize and remove any influence or authority from a genuine false prophet who has somehow infiltrated the church.

Jesus has clearly commanded us to guard ourselves, and the people under our care from false prophets (this shows the necessary limitations and qualifications for our understanding of 7:1). They are a serious danger, and so we need to take them seriously. Church history is full of the damage caused when people did not recognize or resist false prophets when they subverted the church.

B. Reason: They deceptively pretend to be good, but are really dangerous (15b-c)

1. Pos: who come to you in covering/clothing of sheep (15b)

One of the greatest dangers of false prophets is that it is not always immediately apparent that they are false prophets. They attempt to appear as genuine prophets and teachers and learners. We should not be shocked that they do this – that false prophets are false about who they are. For as Paul wrote in 2 Cor. 11:13-15, “such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness.” Jesus said that they come in the covering of sheep. That is, they are disguised as sheep, attempting to look just like the people they are trying to deceive, capture, and plunder. They take on the appearance of innocence and harmlessness, and affect the attitude of “we’re one of you,” in order to gain acceptance of themselves, in order to gain acceptance of their teaching. In this passage, Jesus says they try to appear as sheep, which is typically the symbol of a disciple, and not a leader. But in John chapter 10, He said that false teachers also try to appear and act as shepherds, which is a figure of Christian leadership. These people typically try to fit in with the Christian congregation in order either to advance to positions of leadership, or to draw people away to their own group over which they assume leadership.

And these false teachers rarely tell outright lies at first. But rather, they start by telling half-truths to induce people to doubt the full truth and to follow their line of thought until it gets to the outright lies. Just like the serpent in the garden, they start by sowing doubt and misunderstanding, and then run with it as if it were the truth (when it is not). And they end up directly countering God’s character and clear revelation. But they do it, not directly, but by attempting to substitute an alternate source of revelation and “truth.” The core strategy of all demonic falsehood is to induce people to trust themselves and their own judgment more than they trust the character of God and His revelation. And a telling sign of a false prophet is that they downplay, ignore, and subtly try to draw people’s attention away from God’s objective truth and Scriptural revelation. But they do it by appearing reasonable and by saying things that are partly true, at least at first. And Jesus clearly said to guard against them. And the next proposition will give even more reason why.

2. Neg: But on the inside, they are vicious wolves (15c)

This proposition is the conclusion of the contrast begun in the last. False prophets try to take on the outward appearance of sheep, but inside that disguise, they are really ravenous wolves. They are destructive, vicious, and extremely dangerous. All falsehood is corrosive and dangerous. And therefore, all who spread falsehood are corrosive and dangerous. And we see the harm done by these kinds of people throughout church history, including in our own time.

When Jesus said, “on the inside,” He may have been referring to what we call the “inner self.” But more likely, He was referring to the contrast with their outer disguise. In other words, their real nature and character as opposed to the deceptive image they try to convey. It is extremely important for Christians to learn the difference (in so many various types of circumstances) between image and reality, between what people think someone is and who they really are.

In a similar way, Jesus’s words here may or may not refer primarily to the false prophets’ intentions. Some likely are fully aware that they are deceptive, and are purposely trying to take advantage of people, even destroy them, for their own selfish gain. But it is also a possibility that some of these people don’t yet realize the full picture of what they are doing. They may not intentionally be deceivers, but are completely blinded by sin to the true nature of what they are doing. Jesus warned of those who thought they were doing God a favor by persecuting the church, and fighting against the truth (see John 16:1-4). In the same way, false prophets may be fully convinced in their own mind that they are in the right and are deceiving people because they themselves have already been deceived.

And the main point is not about the intention of the wolves, but rather about their harmful result. Whatever they were trying to do, they are destructive and vicious, and have the possibility to do great harm in the church. And that is why Jesus strongly warned His people to watch out for them. In Acts 20:29, Paul warned the Ephesians that wolves would infiltrate and false teachers would arise from their own congregation. And his letters to Timothy and John’s three epistles all show evidence that these letters were trying to clean up the mess in the Ephesian church that these wolves had caused.

II. Here is how you will recognize a false prophet (16-23)

A. You will know false prophets by their fruit (16-20)

1. They will inevitably produce fruit according to their nature (16-19)

a You will know them from their fruit (16a)

In this proposition, Jesus begins to describe how we can discern who is a false prophet. He will illustrate this concept in the following propositions, but here it is simply stated using a common metaphor of fruit. “Fruit” metaphorically stands for the result and produce from something. Jesus suggested we examine the long-term results of someone’s life and teaching in order to see if it produced good or bad results. It is very easy to promise that an idea or action will bring a good result, but the real test comes when that idea or action is put into practice and its actual, real-life results are examined.

Our society is filled with examples of bad consequences from things that may have sounded good at first, when they only existed in the realm of ideology and propaganda, and before they were implemented in the real world. Many politicians make great sounding promises, but the results of their policies don’t actually deliver, or they have unintended bad consequences. For example, the proponents of the sexual revolution promised liberation, but brought about broken families through divorce, the explosion of STDs, the bondage of sexual addiction, the murder of millions of innocents, and a variety of perversions and confusions to the point that many cannot even tell if they are a boy or a girl. Those who demanded that God be removed from the public square promised a more rational and peaceful common discourse built on secular principles and scientific truth. But this has resulted in exploding tribalism and fanaticism, the kind of political correctness that fanatically tries to silence and punish all dissenters, and the censoring of all viewpoints that do not align with the politically and/or ideologically determined “science” and the canceling/de-personing of those who hold those viewpoints.

Heresies of all kinds may seem enlightened and freeing at first. But all deviations from God's truth are ultimately cruel and bring untold misery, because they are rejecting and fighting against reality itself and the Lord of all reality Himself. And those who are caught up in those kinds of lies will share in its failure and consequences.

And history has shown that faithfulness to God's truth has always brought the greatest blessing and prosperity in the long run. The Gospel has lifted the quality of life and the justness of all societies in which it has taken hold.

b Illustration from creation – things produce according to their nature (16b-19)

1) Things produce according to their nature (16b-18)

In this section, Jesus used the illustration of literal fruit in nature to make His point that the product of something is a trustworthy indication of its true nature. Things cannot produce different from their essential nature, and things inevitably produce the results that are consistent with their nature.

a) The fruit never goes against its nature (16b-c)

Here, Jesus used two specific examples of the impossibility of something producing a result different from its nature. A fruit cannot be harvested from a source that differs in nature from the desired fruit. The different kinds of plants are incapable, because of their inherent nature, from producing the other kinds of fruit. These propositions are similar in meaning to the modern saying "you can't get blood from a stone." His point is that we cannot expect a false prophet to be able to produce genuinely good, long-term results, either in their own life, or in the lives of those who believe their falsehood. And this is evidence, in turn, that they are indeed false prophets.

(1) Surely, people don't gather grapes from thorn-bushes (16b)

Obviously, His point is that only grapevines can produce grapes. And thorn-bushes can only produce thorns, and whatever else is naturally produced from its particular nature as a thorn-bush. But they cannot produce grapes.

(2) Nor figs from thistles (16c)

Fig trees can only come from fig trees, and thistles can only produce those things characteristic of the nature of thistles, which do not include figs among the natural possibilities.

b) The fruit is a certain demonstration of its nature (17-18)

This section is similar to, but the mirror image of, the section above. It begins with the connection "in the same way." Just as plants are not able to produce fruit that is not its natural product, these plants are able to produce the kind of fruit that is its natural product. And not only that, plants naturally do produce their appropriate, naturally occurring kinds of fruit. And therefore, one can confidently assess the nature of the plant by the nature of the fruit which it naturally produces. If a tree produces apples, I can confidently assert that it is an apple tree. If it produces oranges, it is an orange tree. If a tree produces strawberries, it is a fake, because strawberries come from small bushes, not trees.

Jesus used this illustration from nature to show that the good prophets and the false prophets will both eventually show their true nature by the long-term results that their lives and teachings produce. And that is the most reliable way that we can judge their nature.

(1) Trees automatically produce according to their nature (17)

This is one side of the reality of the relationship with the nature of plants and the fruit they produce. They naturally produce those results which are in line with their nature. And therefore, their nature can be clearly discerned from the kind of results they produce.

(a) Pos: In the same way, every good tree produces good fruit (17a)
On the positive side, good trees naturally produce good fruit. “Good” in this context means a tree that functions as it was created to function. It is healthy and naturally produces a good result. Good fruit is a clear indication that the tree is healthy and of the species that naturally produces the desired kind of fruit.

(b) Neg: But poor-quality trees produce worthless fruit (17b)
Negatively, poor quality plants (and people, to apply the illustration) produce poor quality fruit. Bad fruit is a clear indication either that the tree is unhealthy or that it is of the species that only produces undesirable fruit. That is applied to false prophets in that their bad fruit demonstrates that they are false prophets.

(2) Trees are unable to produce outside of their nature (18)

This is the other side of the relationship between plants and their fruit which Jesus used as an illustration. They are unable to produce fruit different from their nature and health. And therefore, their nature and/or health can clearly be discerned from the kind of results which they do not produce.

(a) Pos: A good tree is not able to produce worthless fruit (18a)
It is impossible for a good tree to produce bad fruit. So, the presence of bad or worthless fruit rules out the possibility that the tree is healthy and of a species that naturally produces good fruit.

(b) Neg: Neither [is] a poor-quality tree [able] to produce good fruit (18b)

And, in the mirror truth to the last proposition, it is impossible for a bad plant to produce good fruit. So, the presence of good fruit rules out the possibility that the tree is bad and/or diseased or of a species that does not naturally produce the desired kind of fruit.

2) Every unproductive tree is destroyed (19)

In this verse, Jesus extended the illustration of trees and fruit to show the destiny of the false prophets and the people who follow them. Just like a worthless, unproductive tree is rejected and destroyed, so also, the false prophets will be rejected and destroyed. That is the appropriate destiny for fruitless trees.

a) Every tree not producing good fruit is cut down (19a)

This proposition refers to only one of the two categories of trees which Jesus mentioned in the previous verses. This does not apply to good trees which produce good fruit. But the other kind of tree, that which does not produce good fruit, is cut down. It is cut down because it is a bad, worthless, tree. It is known to be a bad tree because it did not produce good fruit. And (the point of this section) the true nature of a tree is known by the fruit it produces, or the lack thereof. The common experience of a tree being cut down is symbolic for the unfruitful people somehow being destroyed and removed from their previous status.

b) And it is thrown into fire (19b)

This is a continuation, from the previous proposition, of the illustration of what will happen to an unfruitful tree. Not only is it cut down and removed from the ground that used to give it nutrition. But it is also completely destroyed in the fire. Jesus often used fire as a picture of the eternal torment of hell in speaking of the punishment of the ungodly. Here, he also applied it to the unfruitful, because the unfruitful tree is ultimately an illustration of false prophets and deceivers.

2. Therefore, indeed, you will know them from their fruit (20)

This proposition is a summary of the preceding section. It wraps up and restates the point of the entire illustration of trees and fruit. False (and good) prophets will be known by the results they produce in their own lives and in the lives of the people that follow them. We are commanded to watch out for false prophets, and their fruit is the primary evidence by which we will recognize them. This point is qualified and clarified in the rest of the passage.

B. Fruit is better evidence than just talk (21-23)

This section must be understood in the context of the previous section. Jesus was still talking about fruit, and how one will know who will enter the Kingdom, and who is false. Here He clarified that the fruit He spoke about in the previous section is more than just outward works. It is not less than outward works, but it is more than that. And He also clarifies that some people are self-deceived. They may have at least some evident success in outward works without being a genuine disciple. And many will be surprised to find out that they are not vindicated and accepted in God's judgment, even though they could point to at least some outward fruit. Therefore, in this section, Jesus emphasized that the fruit that is really the most important is the reality of personal relationship with Christ, which, of course will be demonstrated by outward works and other good fruit.

And the *claim* to have fruit is not the same as actually having the genuine kind of fruit that is true evidence of genuine discipleship. Just like the saying "talk is cheap," Jesus showed that someone's claims are not enough if they are not backed up by the kind of genuine evidence that Christ desires. And obedience to the will of the Father is the evidence that Jesus mentioned in this context. We are not saved by our works. But good works, done in obedience to God, and for the glory of Christ, are good evidence that we are genuinely saved. And a lack of these kinds of good works are grounds to question ourselves, even if we have other outward fruit that we could claim. This also shows that it is possible to accomplish seemingly good things in a way that is not obedient or honoring to God.

1. Actions and truth, not just talk, will determine the Kingdom (21)

a Neg: Not everyone saying to me "Lord, Lord" will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven (21a)

This verse is another strong warning. It is a continuation of the warning against false prophets, elaborating on the kind of "fruit" that is genuine evidence, and the kind that is not. But this also shifts into a warning for all to not presume on their own status. It is relatively easy to call Jesus "Lord" and not mean it. And it is also possible to think that we are living in obedience under the Lordship of Christ, while not actually submitting to Him in heartfelt obedience. Many people are attracted to the benefits of Christ, or go to Christ for a "fire-insurance" ticket to avoid hell. But they don't actually know and love Christ Himself. They are only interested in His benefits. They claim to be serving Christ, but in their inward attitude, they are still just serving their own desires, and trying to use Christ in that service. And they may not realize that this is what they are doing. Therefore, this serves as a strong warning to every Christian to examine our hearts and guard against this type of self-deception and hypocrisy. Is Jesus truly our Lord, or are we still enamored with worldly idols and only paying lip service to Christ?

And notice that in the historical context of the Sermon on the Mount, before Christ was crucified and risen, He was working from the standpoint that it is appropriate for people to call Him "Lord." He was already clearly claiming to be an authority of the highest magnitude, worthy of service and obedience, even though He had not yet revealed the full extent of His identity and mission. And He claimed to be instrumental for a person's entrance into the Kingdom.

Jesus warned that not everyone will come to experience and share in the fullness of His eternal Kingdom. Not even everyone who expects that they will enter the Kingdom actually will. This is a sobering passage, but an important passage to motivate us to pursue the narrow way that leads to life, and not to complacently slip into the broad way that leads to destruction (see vv. 13-14).

b Pos: But the one doing the will of my Father in Heaven [will enter] (21b)

This is the continuation of the contrast begun in the previous proposition. The contrast He made was not between going to Him and obeying God, as if obedience to God would earn entrance into the Kingdom. The contrast He was making was between mere lip service and genuine conversion to Him, which results in heartfelt obedience.

“Doing the will of my Father in Heaven” is a broad statement which includes at least all of the previous material from the Sermon on the Mount. In that sense, this statement is parallel to the next major section (7:24-27), where Jesus compared those who put His words into practice to a man who built his house on a rock, and those who didn’t to a man who built his house on sand. And, as taught through the Sermon on the Mount, acts of obedience are inseparable from the proper inward motivations and intentions for those deeds. But also, in light of the entire New Testament, the “will of the Father” includes trusting in Christ as Savior and submitting to Him as Lord (see e.g. Jn. 6:29). The rest of the New Testament lays out the details of a Christian ethic of a life that is pleasing to the Father. But it also clearly asserts that we cannot live this ethic on our own strength, and we need the presence of God’s Spirit and New Birth in our lives, which only comes through faith in Christ. Doing the will of the Father is the result of genuine discipleship and saving faith. It can never be the cause of it.

And, in light of the following verses, it is also possible to do many apparently impressive outward things, without them being evidence of genuine conversion. Many good works (like the works of the Pharisees) can be done for motives of personal pride and gaining a reputation for godliness (see 6:1-18). But those works are not the same as doing the will of the Father. The key factor is that our works are done in obedience to the Father, and presumably for His pleasure and reward, and not a reward before people.

2. Many will claim to be in the Kingdom, but will not be (22-23)

a Many will claim to be a part of my work (22)

1) Many will say to me in that day (22a)

“In that day” is the day of judgment, when people are either welcomed or denied entrance to the fullness of God’s eternal Kingdom. This proposition introduces the objections that some will make at that time to an unfavorable verdict. And the fact that they will object to God’s righteous verdict is evidence that they are self-deceived or self-righteous (or probably both).

2) We took part in your work (22b-d)

This section is the content of the objections that some people will make to the condemnation they will receive at the time of final judgment. These objections may indicate a level of surprise at the verdict, showing that these people were deceived (or self-deceived). Or they may indicate self-righteous argument and boasting, trying to show that their own works should be accepted as earning their entrance to the Kingdom. In either case, as will be shown in verse 23, these objections are not valid, and they will do nothing to overturn the righteous verdict against these kinds of people. They may think their accomplishments are impressive and deserving of reward, but Jesus said that God is not impressed at all.

a) Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your Name? (22b)

These people will claim to have prophesied in Christ’s Name. To prophesy means to speak a divinely inspired revelation. And “in your Name” means that they were claiming to have spoken from and for Christ. They claimed to have spoken His message.

This could indicate a few different possibilities. First, they could be lying about what they did. Second, they could have been false prophets, who falsely prophesied, falsely claiming to do so in Christ’s Name. And third, they may have genuinely prophesied in Christ’s Name. The third possibility brings up some potential questions like “How could God give genuine prophesy through someone who was

not a genuine disciple?” But even if this is the case, it is not a problem. God, in the Old Testament spoke through scoundrels and questionable people like Saul, Balaam, and even Balaam’s donkey. He can speak truly and perfectly through imperfect people. But in this context, where Jesus was warning against false prophets, the second possibility is most likely the case.

b) And we cast out demons in your Name? (22c)

To cast out demons is somehow to drive out a demon – to force an evil spirit to leave a person they had previously taken possession of. This necessarily involves some sort of supernatural power great enough to command and overpower those hostile spiritual entities. And the claim to do it in Christ’s Name is a claim that this supernatural power for successful exorcism came from Christ Himself. This claim, likewise, has a number of possible interpretations. It could refer to genuine exorcisms, or it could refer to some form of deception, falsely claiming to be a genuine exorcism. In Acts, there were exorcists who tried (unsuccessfully) to cast out demons in Jesus’s Name, even though they did not believe in Him (see Acts 19:11-17). Later in Matthew (see 12:22-32) people accused Jesus of casting out demons by the power of the devil. Jesus responded that the devil’s kingdom was not divided, and did not work against itself, and so (in His case at least), genuine exorcism was proof of God’s power. Therefore, it is most likely that these were not genuine effective exorcisms that these people had done. However, it is still possible that God had worked genuine exorcisms through them, not because of their faithfulness, but for the sake of those being freed from the demonic. But the point, in this context, is that even these exorcisms were not proof of citizenship in God’s Kingdom if they were not accompanied with a genuine conversion to Christ and New Life in Him.

c) And we did many miracles in your Name? (22d)

A miracle is a deed that is beyond normal human ability, and therefore demonstrated supernatural power of some sort. And doing miracles in the Name of Christ is a claim that the deed was done by His supernatural power. This is an implicit claim to have access to Christ and His supernatural power. This claim, also, has a number of possibilities. There are fake miracles, that are made to seem like miracles, but are not. The later New Testament warns also that real miracles can be performed by demonic forces for the purpose of deceiving people. And it is possible that God did a genuine miracle through unbelieving people for His own purposes and glory. Again, the purpose of these claims in this context is to show that even the greatest of outward demonstrations is not enough without genuine inward discipleship and a changed life through relationship with Christ.

All of these claims, even if we interpret them all as being genuine and put them in the best light, were not enough to guarantee entrance into the Kingdom. This should cause us all to examine ourselves and make sure we are not putting our hope in our outward accomplishments (even good ministry accomplishments). Our good works never have, and never will be grounds for our participation in God’s Kingdom. Jesus is our only hope. So, we should always trust in Him, and His righteousness, and never in our own, even if we have produced good and impressive fruit. And we should live out this trust and delight in Christ in a way that does produce fruit, not for our vindication, but for His glory. Because, as the next verse shows, we will not be vindicated by our outward works, even if they are impressive.

b I will refuse to acknowledge them and throw them out (23)

1) And then, I will confess to them (23a)

“Then” is still referring to the time of final judgment. It is the same time as “in that day” in 22a. Jesus will respond directly after those people made their claims to have done great things in His Name.

In this context, the word “confess” has the connotation of publicly acknowledging. They made their claims, and then Jesus will make His claim in a public declaration discounting and refuting their claims. And His word has the final authority in these competing claims.

2) I don’t know you and am sending you away (23b-c)

This is the content of what Jesus will publicly declare at that time.

a) That I never knew you (23b)

Jesus will deny that He ever knew them. Of course, in one sense, He knew them, because as God, He knows everything (and everyone). He knew who they are, and all about them. But He did not know them in a significantly important personal connection. And more importantly, as a result, He did not acknowledge them. In John 1:10, John wrote that the light (Jesus) had come into the world, but the world did not know/acknowledge Him. In the same way, at the final judgment, Jesus will respond in kind to all those who did not truly know and acknowledge Him – that He does not know or acknowledge them.

Notice that the knowing is described in the direction from Jesus to people. Jesus knows (or doesn’t know) people and they are the ones who are known (or not). He did not mention whether they knew Him or not, even though that is important in a sense. This may be a reference back to Psalm 1:6, which says “for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” The contrast in that verse is between being known by God and perishing.

The point of this phrase is that even though those people claimed to be partnering with Jesus in His work, He did not acknowledge that to be true. In fact, He directly contradicted their claim to be connected with Him. And inherent in His public refusal to acknowledge them as His own is a pronouncement of judgment, which will be clearly stated in the next proposition.

b) Depart from me, workers of lawlessness (23c)

After Jesus’s public declaration in response to the claims of those who will object to their judgment, Jesus will pronounce the sentence of their judgment, which is part of His rejection of their appeal. He will command them to go away, to depart from Him. And that means that they will depart from His presence, and from the blessing of His eternal Kingdom. They will be denied entrance to His Kingdom and sent somewhere else. This verse does not specifically say to where they will go. But Jesus later spelled it out in 25:41, where He said, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels!” Jesus will reject their objection and sentence them to eternal punishment.

And He will also clarify the basis for their sentence by addressing them as “workers of lawlessness.” They claimed to have worked prophecy, miracles, and exorcisms. But Jesus declared that they had worked the deeds that were a product of a lawless disposition, rejecting, not only the standards of society, but especially rejecting the standards of God. And the attitude that always underlies the rejection of God’s standards is a rejection of God Himself as the standard giver. In other words, they had claimed Jesus as “Lord, Lord” in 21a. But He said that their deeds demonstrated that they were not in submission to Him as Lord. Rather, they had rejected any lordship and lived in a lawless way. And therefore, their punishment is just and right.