

Title: Be Fruitful
Biblical Text: Matthew 7:15-23
Teaching Series: Kingdom Being
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Matthew 7:15-23

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”

We've got two more weeks in Sermon on the Mount, then back to Romans for three months.

Jesus has just finished explaining that there are two roads to take in life. One way is narrow, hard, and lonely. The other way is wide, easy, and filled with people. But

that hard road, the way of Jesus leads to life. The easy road leads to destruction. This is quite the picture, *isn't it?* And today Jesus enhances this vision. You see, these roads are not passive. They aren't just out there and we happen upon them as we walk through life. Rather, Jesus tells us that each road has a set of evangelists, salespeople, and marketing teams which are daily working to convince you and me to take one way over the other. Jesus' sermon is his invitation to "**Enter by the narrow gate**" (v.13). But he warns us in this next passage that there are false prophets or false messengers and false messages which entice us to go the destructive way ... the way that is comfortable, popular, and socially acceptable.

So, Jesus wants us to be wise. He wants us to be discerning. He wants us to understand the difference between the truth and a lie. That's what I'd like to talk about today. I want to talk about the truth. I want to talk about how we know something is or isn't from the Lord; be that a message or a vision or a mighty work. So, *how do we recognize the truth?* I think Jesus gives three ways.

Here's how we'll organize our time together ...

- The truth is *sincere*.
- The truth bears *good fruit*.
- The truth has *integrity*.

[Prayer]

Movement 1: The Truth is Sincere (v.15,.John 7:53-8:6;14:6,.Jeremiah 23:16-17)

The primary way Jesus is going to teach us about truth is by warning us about falsehoods. And because of the progress of modern thought, it's important to state the obvious from the outset: Jesus believes in universal truth. In fact, in John's gospel account Jesus says he is the truth. *Read John 14:6 ... "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."* Jesus not only understood himself to be the gate (the way to the Father) but also the very center of ultimate reality (the truth). Therefore we can say ... truth is anything and everything which rightly reflects the character, virtue, and person of Jesus Christ. Or as scholar D.A. Carson explains, "*Jesus is the truth, because he embodies the supreme revelation of God*" (Carson, 491). Everything that the Father is, the Son incarnates. And so, in Jesus' illustration in the Sermon on the Mount ... about these two roads ... it's right that we see Jesus himself as the truthful messenger inviting the least, the last, and the lost to come to him ... to enter the narrow gate and walk on this road that leads to life.

Conversely, everything and everyone that points to the other gate and way, is false. Namely, Jesus warns us to not listen to who he calls "false prophets." Look at v.15. *Read Matthew 7:15 ... "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves."* This is a warning. Beware means to be watchful and pay attention. *Why? If Jesus is the truth then why is he worried about us going the way of the false prophets?* Well, because they are duplicitous.

While the truth is sincere, these false prophets are pretending. Jesus says outwardly they look like sheep. They are trying to look like sheep. They are cultivating a public persona of gentleness and innocence and mutuality. In reality, or as Jesus puts it, inwardly they are not sheep at all ... they're wolves. In other words, these false teachers and their false messages, as theologian John Stott explains, are "*dangerous and deceptive*" (Stott, 198).

Now, it's unclear who Jesus specifically has in mind. It might have been the Pharisees—the religious teaching class whom Jesus regularly criticized for their insincerity and hypocrisy. They were masters at curating a certain reputation and appeal which was in direct contrast to the truth of their interior life. Remember, these were the folks Jesus said loved to pray to be heard by others, give to be esteemed by others, and fasted to be seen by others (see Matthew 6:2,16). So, contextually it makes sense that Jesus has them in mind. However, it could be anyone. It could be anyone who speaks and even convinces people to take the wide and popular road.

Today, we hear messengers and messages which perfectly fit the bill. And we should beware.

What are the false messages of our day? Messages that seem innocent, even helpful and virtuous, but are actually dangerous and deceptive? Well, there are many. But two stand out. We'll highlight one from the broader culture and the other is from our own spiritual community.

- The first is a secular idea, preached by nonreligious false prophet if you will.

It's actually captured perfectly in the book of Jeremiah. ***Read Jeremiah 23:16-17 ... Thus says the Lord of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord. They say continually to those who despise the word of the Lord, 'It shall be well with you'; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, 'No disaster shall come upon you.'*** " In Jeremiah's day there were people who were spreading the message of "all is well" and "nothing bad is going to happen." Even though Israel was in deep sin and rebellion and had rejected the truth of God, these prophets were telling everyone *you're not going to be judged. Doesn't that sound nice? Innocent? Helpful? Even virtuous? There's no judgment. There's no condemnation. Don't worry, be happy.* This is the message we still hear every day in Chicago: *Do as you please (so long as you don't hurt anyone), because no judgment is coming.* Your truth is your truth. But God is warning his people through the true prophet Jeremiah. Because a world free from judgment is a world where truth comes from within us rather than from outside of us. And a world like this is a world without justice. That is precisely the message that leads to very filled and very wide road.
- The second idea is religious one, preached by morally-minded prophets all the time. Rather than telling us we won't be judged at all, the religious

mantra is that we won't be judged so long as we do good. Religious people say: *Do only what pleases God, or he'll judge you like everyone else.* That's the pharisaical prophesy. One of the clearest examples of this message is found in John's gospel. A woman was brought before Jesus who had been "caught in adultery." ***Read John 7:53-8:6 ... They went each to his own house, but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground.*** You see, these accusers believe in judgment, but they think they are immune and others are condemned because of their sinfulness.

Secular people think truth and righteousness is relative.

Religious people think truth and righteousness is achievable.

Jesus is telling us, don't believe them. Beware. Sounds nice. Looks good. But inwardly it's dangerous and deceptive. It's like a wolf dressed up like a sheep. The secular idea is dangerous because though it might feel nice to not anticipate judgment, it won't feel nice on the day of judgment. It's dangerous because it's pretending. The religious idea is dangerous because though it feels good to

compare ourselves to those whom we think we're better than, someone else's sin is not the standard. It's dangerous because it's pretending. In Jeremiah God says, that's the way of destruction. In John Jesus says, that's the the way of destruction. Neither are truth because the truth is always sincere. Truth doesn't pretend. The truth is *sincere*.

Movement 2: The Truth Bears Good Fruit (vv.16-20, 1 John 2:26-27, John 8:7, Galatians 5:22-23)

But that's not the only way we recognize the truth. Jesus shifts and mixes some metaphors and helps us to see that the truth also *bears good fruit*. In other words, we should pay attention not only to the sincerity of a message or messenger but also the effect, implications, or produce of a prophet to determine their virtue. And Jesus tells us a couple things about this good fruit: fruit keeps with it's kind (nature) and good fruit results from health (character). Let's look at nature first. ***Read Matthew 7:16 ... You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?*** The fruit of falsehood, keeps with falsehood. The fruit of truth, keeps with the truth. What you see is what you get. The idea is for Jesus' disciples to pay attention to the message *and* to the life or behavior or character of the messenger. Unlike a wolf in sheep's clothing, plants can not conceal their nature. For instance, if we're willing to suspend the impulse to simply go with the modern message of doing as we please ... or the religious message of judging others ... we'll see that those who point the finger are not perfect ... we'll see those who boast in vain optimism aren't always hopeful. The

fruit almost always tells us more about the nature of something than the words.

With me? Fruit keeps with its kind.

Not only so, but good fruit results from health. Jesus continues, ***Read Matthew 7:17-20 ... So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.*** The metaphor shifts a bit again.

From wolves and sheep ... to bushes ... now, to trees. Or we could say, we not only recognize the truth because it keeps with its kind, but also because the truth is healthy. Ultimately Jesus is saying the same thing: we'll recognize truth by the full picture of someone's life. Again, imagine someone standing by a gate and telling you all about the road ahead and the eventual destination. *How do we know if they're telling the truth?* Well, not simply by listening (to their words) but also by looking (at their lives).

Let's consider again Jeremiah's situation. God's people were being told, don't worry. Prophets of the day, again not unlike our day, were saying ... *No judgment is coming. All shall be well for you. No disaster is coming. Do as you please.*

Instead of simply believing this message and these messengers we're supposed to say, wait a minute. *Is that true? Is that accurate? What else has God said to us about holiness, righteousness, and judgment?* If they would have done so, it would have been abundantly clear that God is a holy God who brings justice and healing through judgment. You see, part of the fruit Jesus is speaking about is the

consistency of a message when it weighed and considered next to other revelations, words, messages, and prophecies. We should test a teachers teaching. *How?* By opening up God's Word ourselves. By sharing concerns and questions with our group. By going to God ourselves through prayer. By surrendering to God's Spirit. A prophet's words bear good fruit when they are aligned with God's word.

The Apostle John summarizes this idea when he was writing churches in the late first century. *Read 1 John 2:26-27 ... I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you. But the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie—just as it has taught you, abide in him.* In Christ, everything you need you already have to discern the truth of someone's words. We must simply take the time to test those words, comparing them to word and will of God.

Now, let's consider again the situation with the woman caught in adultery. A group of religious leaders devised a plan to deceive Jesus. And they used a vulnerable woman to execute that plan. Not only so, but in order to do so they had to pretend like they were innocent. They had to pretend as if they were above the law. They had to pretend as if they were righteous and purveyors of the truth. You see, no one in the bunch said ... wait a minute. What about the man this woman was sleeping with? What about our own addictions to pornography? What about the lust of our flesh and eyes and temptations toward self-indulgence? What about our own sin? That was precisely Jesus response. *Read John 8:7 ... And as they continued to*

ask him, he stood up and said to them, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.” What’s Jesus showing us here? Well, he was showing us that these were bad trees. How does he know? Because they were bearing bad fruit. The habits of their hearts were incongruent with the words of their mouths—they were hypocrites. This too is what we should be looking for as we determine whether or not a message or messenger is truly from the Lord.

To put a finer point on things, no matter what a person says we should consider how they live. Good fruit is all about character. The Apostle Paul helps us draw out the particulars. *Read Galatians 5:22-23 ... But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.* Again, there are people standing at the gate telling you and me to go this way or that. Stories and books and professors and preachers are all telling us where to do, what to do, and how to live. *How do we know if their message and they themselves are being true?* Well ...

- If they’re talking about love, we should ask two questions ... *is their definition of love consistent with God’s? And, are they living with love themselves?* That’s the fruit.
- If they preach about joy and peace ... *is their message consistent with the gospel? Are they joyful and peaceful?*

- If they tell you to be faithful ... do they describe faithfulness in a way that reflects God's faithfulness? Are they being faithful? That's the fruit.

Jesus is telling us, beware of anyone whose words and character are not in line with the words and character of God. Beware of those whose lives are not bearing good fruit. He furthers this point in his final statement in the passage. We can recognize the truth because it has *integrity*.

Movement 3: The Truth has Integrity (vv.21-23)

Be prepared, this is one of the most ominous passages in the entire Bible. *Read Matthew 7:21-23 ... Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'*" Okay, so good news ... even if you can't discern the truth in this life ... God will set everything to rights in the age to come. In other words, God sees every wolf hiding underneath sheep's clothing. God sees the true state of every bush and tree. God knows good fruit from bad fruit. Therefore despite the confusion and uncertainty of messages and messengers in the life, we can take comfort knowing that eventually God will make everything plain.

This is counterintuitive to the modern prophets. You see, we think that peace will be found if we believe no judgment is coming. When in actuality, peace only comes when justice is served. God's judgment should be a deeply settling reality.

But the other side of Jesus' final warning is what it exposes in all our hearts. Notice, these prophets are saying **Lord, Lord** and have done all their works and words "*in his name.*" They sound legit. They should spiritual and Haven't you been feeling it the entire sermon? It has for me. After all, the truth is sincere ... and I'm often duplicitous. The truth bears good fruit ... and all too regularly, bad fruit sprouts from the branches of my life. With me?

This is convicting to the religious prophets. You see, we think peace will be found if we cast judgment upon someone who has sinned worse or at least differently than us. When in actuality, peace only comes when love is perfectly embodied.

Where does this happen? How else can we recognize truth? Well, when justice and love meet. You see, truth is not only sincere and bears good fruit, but also has integrity. And the place where truth's integrity is put on display for all to see is the cross of Christ. It's at the cross where judgment does indeed come (contra the modern message). But on the cross judgment comes upon Christ (contra the religious message).

Jesus Christ is the sincere one.

Jesus Christ is the good fruit.

Jesus Christ is full of integrity.

Because Jesus Christ is the truth.

Now, *what's all this mean?* Well, it means we can and should believe and trust his message. While false prophets stand in front of the wide gate and tell us their way will lead to the good life, Jesus stands as the narrow gate and tells us his way will cost us our lives, at least our lives as we know them. Falsehood begins with the promise of life and ends with death. While the truth of the gospel begins with the invitation to death and leads to life. Jesus stands as the narrow gate and says, ***Read Matthew 16:24–25 ... Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.***

Now, *how could this be? How or why does the narrow and hard way lead to life?*

Well, it's not because of our effort. It's not because those who travel this way do so with greater strength, ability, fruitfulness, or blessing than others. Notice what

Jesus says. ***Read Matthew 7:23 ... “And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”***

The fundamental difference between those on the narrow road and those on the wide road of destruction is relationship. Jesus knows you. It's grace. It's love. That's the truth.

This is perhaps the most fundamental reality of recognizing the truth. It comes with integrity. Or we might say, it comes in relationship. We recognize truth because truth is a person. Jesus Christ is the truth, and though he is our Judge, he's also our

friend and our brother. He's also a humble messenger inviting us to join him on the way of everlasting life.