

Discerning the Difference

(Matthew 7:15-20)

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Note: The text below was prepared for oral delivery rather than for publication in print. As such, be aware that sentence fragments are intentionally used and that this document has not been edited to correct the errors in grammar, sentence structure, etc.

Today we will be continuing our study on the Sermon on the Mount so turn again to Matthew, chapter 7. Our text for today is Matthew 7, verses 15-20. In our passage today, Christ sets forth a warning at the very beginning of verse 15 with the command to "Beware of false prophets" and He proceeds from there to instruct us how to tell the difference between the true and the false. Accordingly, I've titled today's message "Discerning the Difference." As with the subject matter of this entire sermon, Christ is speaking of the gospel of the kingdom, of the way of entrance into the kingdom of heaven itself. And this warning in verse 15 should give us all reason to carefully examine our own understanding of the way of entrance into heaven. That is, when you peel away all the clutter, just what do you believe to be the ultimate determining factor regarding your own eternal destination? Previously, we looked at Proverbs 16:25 which teaches us, ***"There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death."***

That should make us all think. If we have embraced the way that leads to eternal life, that means that we must have discovered, by God's gracious providential intervention, that at some point in the past we were mistaken about the way of salvation itself - heading the wrong way. Because the Bible states it clearly - the way that initially and naturally seems right to every sinner is a way that ends in eternal death. Using myself as an example, for the first 30+ years of my life, I truly thought I was on my way to heaven. I had done my part and believed - I had accepted Jesus Christ as I knew Him to be at that time, but nothing about this experience required a complete reversal of the way that seemed right in my mind.

And as we pick up in Matthew 7:15 today, recall that it was the "way" of salvation, to eternal life itself, that Christ had contrasted with the way that naturally seems right - the way that leads to destruction. In fact, to see this passage in context, let's begin our reading back in verse 13, where Christ commands:

***“Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat:
14 Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.”***

And then, as we begin our text for today, He says, so ***“Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.”*** Here in verse 15 I want you to consider that our Lord is warning us that there are false prophets and as such, He’s telling us:

- 1) Discern (beware)
- 2) That they are Deceptive (wolves in sheep’s clothing, in disguise)
- 3) That they are Dangerous (They’re not as they seem, but rather ravening wolves).

The word *beware* is translated from a Greek word meaning to take heed, to be cautious, pay attention ó watch out! Be discerning! There is something here that is deceptive and we need be able to identify it so that we can distinguish the true from the false. And what are we to beware of? ó false prophets. That is they are imposters. They are prophets in the sense that they claim to speak God’s Word. They are instructing men on the vital issues of salvation and eternal life itself. But their way is a false way. So in the immediate context then, a false prophet is any who claims to speak God’s word but who, either openly or with great subtlety, direct sinners to the broad road that leads to destruction, though they suggest to their hearers (and most likely sincerely believe) that they are speaking of the way to eternal life. And that’s a deadly deception by which the souls of many are devoured.

The Apostle Peter wrote in 2 Peter 2:1, ***“But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, ...”***

Just as Peter likened false prophets to false teachers, it is generally understood that the reference to *“prophets”* here in Matthew 7 is to any who set up themselves to be teachers of others. For a scriptural description of a false prophet, be turning to Jeremiah chapter 23. I particularly want you to see here from scripture that we would be misguided if we assume that the only false prophets we need to beware of are those who would maliciously and intentionally mislead us.

In Jeremiah 23, look down at verse 16 where we read, *Thus saith the LORD of hosts, Harken not unto the words of the prophets that prophesy unto you: they make you vain: (Here vain means to be lead astray) they speak a vision of their own heart, and not out of the mouth of the LORD.* ¹⁷*They say still (peace ó this is the way) unto them that despise me, The LORD hath said, Ye shall have peace; and they say unto every one that walketh after the imagination of his own heart, No evil shall come upon you.*” And then look down further in verse 26: *“How long shall this be in the heart of the prophets that prophesy lies? yea, they are prophets of the deceit of their own heart;*

So, we see that He is speaking here of men who prophesy or teach what they sincerely believe. They speak from their own heart. They tell folks this is what the Lord hath said. If you look down further there in Jeremiah 23 at verse 30, we read, *Therefore, behold, I am against the prophets, saith the LORD, that steal my words every one from his neighbour.* ³¹*Behold, I am against the prophets, saith the LORD, that use their tongues, and say, He saith.*” They use this book, the very words of God, and that adds to the deception.

Now back to Matthew 7, if we consider the context, immediately following this warning given in verse 15, we find down in verse 22, Christ setting forth how some of these very false prophets of whom we are to beware, sadly approach the judgment fully expecting to be admitted into heaven themselves as they say, *“...Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?”* ²³*And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.*” Now these were prophesying in the name of Christ and yet He says He knew them not. You see, anyone possessing a little worldly-wise òstreet smartsö might well see through those who would intentionally try to òpull the wool over their eyesö so to speak. And certainly such con artists would fall into the category of an imposter ó a false prophet or false teacher. But in our context, I believe He is speaking of men who are sincere in their religion ó they’re just sincerely wrong. So, we can’t determine the true from the false simply by assessing their sincerity or their integrity, or based upon what may be well-deserved reputations as judged in the eyes of others.

Now with regards to their deceptiveness, they are described here as those who come to you in sheep's clothing. In Hebrews 11:37, we read of the persecuted true saints of old how ***They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented;*** From this passage we know that these Old Testament saints literally wore sheep's clothing. And in addition to this reference to literal clothing, He may well be alluding to the sheep spoken of by Christ in the book of John as the very elect of God, those sheep who Christ says hear His voice in the Gospel message and come to the Father by Christ. Whether taken literally or figuratively, either way it's clear that this is referring to those who likewise claim (perhaps even sincerely believe) that they've heard His voice in the gospel but whom, like the preachers mentioned in verses 21-23, are sadly mistaken.

And so as we consider verse 15, recognize that simply because one speaks and teaches others in accordance with their own heart-felt, sincere conviction (like these preachers), it doesn't change the reality of what they are on the inside. They may mean well, but they are what they are. He says that inwardly they are ravening wolves. That word *ravening* is derived from a word that means to take for one's self or to seize or take away. They lead astray.

So it's clear from Matthew 7:15 that there are those who would deceive us, and would lead us down the broad way that leads to destruction under the presumption that we're actually on the road to eternal life. This speaks of a danger of eternal significance ó the danger that we might remain fooled and devoured by such ravenous wolves that outwardly appear to us as harmless, well-intending sheep. So how are we to discern the difference? How are we to distinguish the true from the false?

Well, He tells us beginning in verse 16 where we read, ***“Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? ¹⁷Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. ¹⁸A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. ¹⁹Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. (And I believe that is referring to their ultimate and eternal destruction) ²⁰Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.”***

Ye shall know them by their fruits. What fruits? Some suggest that this would refer to their converts; however if this were the proper understanding we would have to judge Noah as a false preacher. He had no converts but the Bible tells us He was a preacher of righteousness.

Now some think that öfruitsö here refers to the outward character and conduct of a person. But in this context, it must be referring to something more specific. Paul spoke to Timothy about corrupt men who “...**had a form of godliness...**” In Matthew 23, Christ said of the Scribes and Pharisees, considered by many to be the most religious folks who ever lived, that they öí **outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within...** (they were)í **full of hypocrisy and iniquity.**”

Hold your place there in Matthew 7 and be turning over to Luke Chapter 6. While you’re turning there, recognize that we are all trees according to this analogy. But we know that the fruit that is produced cannot be distinguished by its outward manifestation. Many, such as these preachers mentioned in verses 21-23 of Matthew 7, do many wonderful works yet Christ said He knew them not. These works that appear outwardly commendable before men, He calls works of iniquity (sin).

So this proves to us that He is not suggesting here that we can distinguish the true from the false by simply looking at outward character and conduct. Here in the context of Matthew 7, the fruit spoken of is that which is produced by a prophet or teacher in that specific role. What does such a prophet, preacher, or teacher produce? A prophet prophesies ó he tells forth. Likewise, a teacher or preacher provides instruction to others to point them to a way of salvation ó a way that supposedly leads to eternal life? And in so doing, they set forth doctrine. And here in Matthew 7, that is the fruit by which we are to distinguish the true from the false ó by their doctrine ó their body of faith ó what they purport to be the way to eternal life itself ó that which they believe and teach to others is the real determining factor as to one’s eternal destination, heaven or hell.

In support of this, I want you to look with me now at a parallel passage as recorded in Luke 6, beginning in verse 43 where Christ says, “**For a good tree bringeth not forth corrupt fruit; neither doth a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.**”⁴⁴ **For every tree is known by his own fruit. For of thorns men**

do not gather figs, nor of a bramble bush gather they grapes... (Now here in vs. 45, take particular note of Luke's record as he explains what this fruit is,) ⁴⁵*A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is evil: for of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh.*

So from this account, we know that what this good man or evil man brings forth is the fruit that identifies the true or the false. And what is brought forth is that which is spoken, told forth, or prophesied / taught. He says this fruit that is brought forth comes from the treasure of the heart of which the mouth speaks. Ultimately, men with any degree of integrity can do no other. We eventually will major on that which we believe in our hearts makes the vital difference.

Look back now in Matthew 7 at verses 17 and 18. There Christ says that a good tree brings forth good fruit and a corrupt tree brings forth evil fruit. And then He says a good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, nor can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. You see, the fruit comes from the essence of the tree ó from its heart as we apply the analogy. I have a peach tree on my property. What is the clearest evidence that it truly is a peach tree? Its fruit ó it produces peaches. If it could reason, òI want to produce apples this year,ö it would do no good. It couldn't. Why? Because of what it is ó it's a peach tree.

Likewise, it is not the good fruit that makes the tree good. The fruit only manifests the type of tree, whether good or corrupt. So we see that the fruit is only good if it is being produced by one whom God has made a good tree. And it is not called good fruit because it now meets God's standard of perfection. It's not because God has somehow now enabled the sinner to improve his or her performance. The believer's best efforts at obedience and the best efforts of true Gospel preachers and teachers at directing others to God's way of salvation conditioned on Christ alone (the doctrine of Christ) both fall miserably short of meeting the standard of perfection required before a holy God.

No, it is good fruit because it is that which is produced by a good tree ó one who has been judicially accounted perfect (righteous) so that he and his efforts are made acceptable before a holy God ó not based on the efforts themselves ó not based upon anything proceeding from them, but based upon the perfection, the righteousness, of a suitable Substitute being reckoned to their account ó that which the Lord Jesus Christ alone accomplished in His life and death on the cross. They are accepted in Christ ó ðaccepted in the belovedö to use the scriptural language.

In 2 Corinthians, chapter 11, beginning in verse 13, Paul wrote, *õFor such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. ¹⁴And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. ¹⁵Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works.*” So how are we to beware of them if they appear to be ministers of the very righteousness that the scriptures indicate is set forth in the true Gospel message ó the doctrine of Christ? That word ðtransformedö has the connotation of a temporary change. The key is that they canø hang there. A corrupt tree eventually must speak from the evil treasure of its own heart. And so weøre taught in 2 John, verse 9: *“Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son.*” Ultimately they are true to their own heart ó they canø abide in the doctrine of Christ.

So what is the doctrine of Christ? Itø that which Christ has delivered here in His sermon. Notice at the end of chapter 7, down in verse 28, it reads, *õAnd it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine:...ö* Thatø what this entire sermon delivered by Christ Himself has been all about. Itø the doctrine of Christ. If Iøve counted correctly, this is the 18th message that Iøve brought in this series from the Sermon on the Mount. And for those of you who have heard most of these you know that with all that weøve studied, Christ has stayed on the same subject throughout. Itø one simple message.

In the Beatitudes, at the beginning of the sermon, He spoke of the evidences of those who are the eternally blessed of God ó of the poor in spirit who find themselves spiritually destitute with nothing to plead before a holy God but mercy ó the unmerited favor of God by way of the perfect satisfaction to law and justice required and produced by Christ, and by Him alone. He said these eternally blessed (õgood treesö) are those who are brought to hunger and thirst after righteousness. That rings true to the theme of the entire sermon ó the Gospel of the kingdom ó this dominion, reign or rule of grace (as Romans 5:21 asserts) grace reigning through righteousness unto eternal by Jesus Christ our Lord.

And Christ made it clear that all of the salvation of any who enter heaven is conditioned on Him. He said in chapter 5, verses 17 & 18, õí that is why I cameí ö ó to fulfill the law perfectly, every jot and tittle. He goes on to say except your efforts (your righteousness) exceeds that of the best of the best put together, the scribes and the Pharisees, that youøll in no case enter into heaven. And then in verse 48 of chapter 5, He tells us just how much our efforts must exceed the presumed righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees when He tells us ó õ*Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.*”

Now where does this doctrine of Christ leave a sinner? If you believe this, you know that neither you nor any other sinner can do anything that will make the difference. Youøre convinced that you must look to Jesus for it all ó the author and finisher of our faith. You need mercy ó you need this perfect righteousness and you, being a sinner in thought and deed, cannot produce it. And yet Christ commands us in this very chapter to ask, seek, and knock and asserts that if we ask, according to His way, we shall receive, we shall find and that the door to eternal salvation shall be opened. But we also read how many desire to go to heaven, theyøre seeking something / heaven itself but it is not the specific, narrow way of salvation conditioned on Christ alone, that He commands us to seek. Well, he told us specifically what to seek for didnø He? He said in 6:33, õSeek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness,ö referring to the very satisfaction that Christ alone made by His perfect obedience, even unto death. You see, only His Person and work merits any favor before a holy God and only His vicarious death removes the guilt of sin. There is no merit before a holy God to be found anywhere other than in the impeccable, perfect obedience and infinitely valuable payment for sin made by Christ, the God-man.

But these false prophets, (preachers or teachers), of which we are to beware suggest just something contrary, in opposition to this doctrine of Christ. While invoking His name and twisting God's own words, they suggest that salvation is ultimately attained based upon some condition or requirement that the sinner is able to meet. They tell their hearers that something other than (or in addition to) the one righteousness produced by Christ alone possesses merit before God. They tell them that the determining factor in their eternal destiny is ultimately in their hands ó at least in some small way or to some degree. And that's a false way.

It's to promote that if you'll do your part, be it ever so small (i.e. - believe, accept Jesus, invite Him into your heart or life, say the sinner's prayer, be a good person, go to church, really get serious about spiritual things, clean up your act, try to obey God or keep the law, pray daily, confess Christ by walking an aisle or in baptism, ó you name it, any one or any combination of these things or any other conditions) ó they suggest if you meet the requirement prescribed by their particular religion or denomination, then you shall be saved. And being deceived themselves, they tell people that this is what God says and that they shall not surely die eternally. That describes the broad way that leads to destruction.

But those who enter the strait gate and the narrow way that leads to eternal life, as they are convinced of the impossibility of either their guilt before God being removed and/or of being found acceptable before God based upon anything other than the one righteousness established by Christ in His life and death being reckoned to their account ó then they have no where else to turn. They need that righteousness (the righteousness of God) to be made theirs by God's judicial imputation of it to their account. They need mercy and know that their salvation is not in their hands, but rather in the hands of a sovereign God who says in Exodus 33 and is repeated for us again in Romans 9, that He will have mercy on whom He will.

In closing, be turning to Isaiah 61. Some respond to this message of sovereign grace by thinking, "I'm glad I don't believe what you're saying for I'd hate to think that I could do nothing to procure my eternal destiny ó how frightful such thinking must be." But what they fail to realize is that none will adopt this, God's way of salvation, apart from God doing a miraculous work of grace in their heart that would cause them to bow at His feet. And that gift of faith and repentance is the certain fruit and effect of

what Christ merited for them in His life and death. And so this revelation of faith is only given to those for whom He lived and died ó those whose sins He bore ó for whom righteousness was established and imputed. So no one who truly pleads for mercy ever fails to find it. They realize that theyøve been blessed to have this revealed to them by Godø's Spirit, knowing that otherwise they couldnøt shuck off their own natural, sinful determination to go the way that naturally seemed right to them and humbly and bow at the feet of a sovereign God ó not One who is sovereign in all things, including salvation.

You see, they were made good trees when they were justified by the blood of Christ at the cross of Calvary. And then in time, in each successive generation, God reveals this blessing to them so that their fruit, their doctrine, is the doctrine of Christ ó the truth which God has graciously brought their way in the preaching of His Gospel. And He gives them spiritual life and all of its faculties ó eyes to see, ears to hear and hearts and minds to understand and value His way at the exclusion of all others. He puts it into their hearts.

It may seem a disturbing thing to have concluded that youøre totally at Godø's mercy when it comes to your eternal destiny. But once so convinced ó the objects of Godø's mercy ó they bow to that truth and rejoice for they know nothing else will do for them, a sinner. They need a suitable substitute. And they know that only those for whom Christ died, to whom righteousness has been imputed, are made able to see and embrace this radical change of heart and mind. So they find themselves in that number and their distress turns into comfort and assurance. Christ said that all that the Father gave Him shall come to Him. And they (and only they) will!

In Isaiah 61, beginning in verse 1 we read, ***"The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, ...***(and this list of things that Christ is sent to do continues as we pickup in verse 3 where we see He was sent) ***...To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he might be glorified."***

God will not share His glory. Salvation is of the Lord. And every tree of righteousness He planted, will bow to that truth in God-given faith, submitting to God's way of salvation in Christ alone and repenting for ever having imagined anything else would do.

Did you notice in our text today that our Lord only presents 2 alternatives? We're all either corrupt trees or good trees ó trees of righteousness, planted by the Lord.

I pray that all who hear this message will be blessed by God to discern the difference!

Footnote from the author: While this sermon was prepared and delivered by me, I often utilize the commentaries, study helps, and teachings of others to supplement my own prayerful study of the scriptures. Since this document was not originally prepared for publication in print, please excuse and recognize that it was unfeasible to properly identify and credit all of the various original sources used to develop the content herein. Ultimately, it is my sincere and foremost objective to accurately present the gospel of God's grace found in the only infallible source, God's word itself ó the Bible.

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