

Sermon 46, Christian Fruit Inspection, Matthew 7:16-20

"For the tree is certainly the soul itself, *i.e.* the man himself, but the fruits are the works of the man." --Augustine

"As long, therefore, as any one is evil, he cannot bring forth good fruits; for if he were to bring forth good fruits, he would no longer be evil. So it might most truly have been said, snow cannot be warm; for when it begins to be warm, we no longer call it snow, but water." — Augustine
Augustine says the good tree's fruits are the fruits of the Spirit, and the bad tree's fruits are the works of the flesh.

Chrys.: Yet He may seem here to have aimed under the title of "false prophets," not so much at the heretic, as at those who, while their life is corrupt, yet wear an outward face of virtuousness; whence it is said, "By their fruits ye shall know them." For among heretics it is possible many times to find a good life, but among those I have named never.

"The pain of hell is indeed intolerable, yet are ten thousand hells nothing to falling from that blessed glory, and being held in hate by Christ." — Chrysostom

"Christ did not wish His teaching to undergo such an unfair, and also uncertain, judgment, as to be reckoned by the life that men lead. So by fruits, it is the very *way of teaching* which we must understand, which in fact holds first priority." — Calvin *in loc.*

"The false prophet is identified by his priorities. . . . They placed success before obedience . . . they put their own position before their service . . . Most obviously, they substituted *gifts* for *grace*." — Sinclair Ferguson *in loc.*

"Test the doctrine by its fruit, and test the teacher by his or her fruit." — Oswald Chambers

"We saw about doctrine, for instance, that if you only watch to see whether a man is going to say things that are outrageously wrong you will probably never detect the false prophets because they do not say such things. But if you realize that there are certain things a true Christian must always emphasize, and if you watch for them, then you will discover that they are omitted, and you will see that the man you thought was a Christian is really a false prophet, and therefore a grievous danger." — D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 2:253.

You can teach what you know, but you reproduce what you are!

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- III. Always Evaluate on the basis of Fruit!, v. 20

Proposition: Jesus tells us that fruit inevitably reveals the tree — and in the same way, fruit reveals the human being.

Most of you know that I worked Walmart produce for 14 months to help pay for my seminary education. Many of you have also heard about the shipment of limes that turned yellow that we received. While I still don't know what happened to these poor little citrus fruits, it turned them all a beautiful pastel yellow color. I argued with customer after customer about what kind of fruit these yellow limes were. "They're lemons," everyone insisted. "They're yellow!"

"Yes," I countered, "they're yellow but they're not lemons. Lemons are pointy on the ends, like a football. Limes are round, like a grapefruit. These are round but yellow. They are definitely limes!"

Well, I recount that story because Jesus tells us to examine fruit. Last week, we looked at Jesus' warning to us to be on guard against false prophets. This week, we'll look at His test: do they produce good fruit or bad fruit? We don't have to tell what species of fruit we find. Walmart produce employees have to know the difference between limes and lemons. But Christians only need to know one difference — the difference between good and bad. So this morning, we will talk about how fruit reveals the nature of a tree, and the nature of a human being.

I. An Agricultural Observation: Every Plant Produces According to its Kind, v. 16b-18

Jesus starts by expounding the key principle of creation biology: every plant, in fact every living organism, reproduces after its kind. You will never get an octopus from a horse, or an apple from a pear tree. Men beget men, bacteria bacteria.

A. The Fruit Reveals the Plant's Species, v. 16b

So the fruit reveals the plant's species, because every plant reproduces after its kind. If it's growing an orange on it, then I can be 100% certain that it is an orange tree. If it's growing a grape, I can be certain that it is a grape vine. This is so deeply ingrained in us that we never think to question it. If in fact a plant is producing a particular kind of fruit, then we know for a certainty that it is that particular kind of plant. Figs won't grow on thistles — and if a particular plant is producing figs, then you can be totally sure that it's a fig tree.

B. The Fruit Reveals the Plant's Health, v. 17

But Jesus says that we can take this a step farther. Not only does fruit show the plant's species; it also shows the plant's health. Bad plants make bad fruit. Good plants make good fruit.

C. The Fruit Always Reveals the Plant's Condition, v. 18

But this isn't just a general observation, because the opposite is true as well. Bad plants make bad fruit, and good plants make good fruit. If and only if a plant is good, it will give good fruit. If and only if a plant is bad, it will give bad fruit. It's totally impossible to get good fruit from a bad plant, or vice versa.

II. Agricultural Facts Spiritually Applied, vv. 16-20

Well, why does Jesus present these truths of botany to us? Does He want us to be better biologists? No. He says these things because they have a spiritual meaning.

A. Actions Are the Fruits of Human Beings

He's thinking about actions as the "fruit" of human beings. Just as a tree grows apples all over itself, so you grow actions all over yourself. The tree produces apples from within itself; you produce actions from within yourself. And indeed, the parallels go further. This is what Jesus is implying when He talks about the tree and its fruit.

1. Actions Reveal a Person's Identity

Just as fruits reveal a plant's species, so actions reveal a person's identity. That's what Jesus is saying here. What you do shows who you are. How you treat people. How you respond to setbacks. How you act when you think you're being treated unfairly. How you respond when you think you're being treated generously. And on and on and on. Jesus encourages us to think of those actions as "fruits," revealing the inner nature of the person producing them.

2. Actions Reveal a Person's Moral Condition

But further, actions reveal a person's moral condition, because they will always be either good or bad. Rocks just are; they aren't good rocks or bad rocks. But human actions are of necessity either good or bad. If your actions are bad, they reveal that you are a bad person. They are rotten

fruit, and Jesus tells us that the rottenness came from the tree. The badness in the action comes from the person doing it.

3. Actions Always Reveal these things

Furthermore, just like with the fruit, there is always a one-to-one correlation between who you are and what you produce. If you produce bad fruit, it's because you're a bad tree. Jesus is utterly insistent on this point.

Now, that really hits home, because all of us like to take our worst moments and think, "That wasn't really me. I don't know where that came from. But honestly, I'm not the kind of person who screams at my kids. I'm not!" But of course, if you actually did scream at your kids, then you must be the kind of person who would do such a thing, no matter how inaccurate your chosen self-image.

So how do we understand the fact that we are saved sinners who do both good and bad things? By the fact that we all started as bad trees and yet are in the process of being made over into good trees by God Himself. We have elements of both good and bad in us. But Jesus' point is that you don't change the nature of the tree by taping fruit on outside. You can't hang a cherry from a lime tree with duct tape and hope that you will thereby convince the tree to become a cherry tree. It doesn't work that way. And in the same way, your actions cannot be changed from the outside in. You cannot do the things a good person does to make yourself good. You have to be a good tree before you can bear any good fruit.

B. Actions Are the Fruits of Human Beliefs

But not only do actions reveal what you are; they also reveal what you think. Actions are the fruit of our beliefs as well as ourselves.

1. Actions Reveal what a Person Thinks

And thus, you can see a particular action as a fruit not only of yourself, but of what you believe to be the case. If you think a pan is hot, you will protect yourself from it with hot pads. If you believe that someone doesn't like you, you will behave differently to that person than you will to someone whom you believe likes you very much.

2. Good Actions Reveal Good Beliefs

Well, good actions reveal good beliefs. Again, the tree and the fruit. Good beliefs, true beliefs, lead to good actions. If you believe the truth about God and His word, then you will live your life in a way that honors God.

3. Bad Actions Reveal Bad Beliefs

Bad actions, though, show bad beliefs. Thus, you might believe that it is right and proper to verbally abuse black people. Every time you see a black person, you might consider your sacred calling to yell three or four nasty things at him. This would be a bad action produced by a bad belief. Or you might believe that sick children need sugar to help them get better, and that the best thing you can give a sick child is a big bowl of Reese's peanut butter cups. Again, this would be a bad belief that produced a bad action.

C. Diagnostic Questions

So Jesus is telling us here that we know “them” — false prophets, in context, but really any Christian — “by their fruits.” This can be the fruit of their lives or the fruit of their thinking, or both. Jesus doesn’t limit it to a particular kind of fruit. He says that any fruit is fair game for inspection.

So in order to know someone by his fruits, ask these two questions:

1. “What fruit does this teacher produce, in his own life and the lives of his closest followers?”

This question will help you see what things followers of this particular teacher do that other people don’t. Think about the pastors you know. How do they personally live? What fruit is to be found in their lives? Let’s say they talk about reading the Bible and praying. Do they read the Bible and pray? Do those close to them read the Bible and pray? Do they obey the moral law of God? What about their followers? How obedient are they to God’s commands?

You can and should evaluate yourself this way, too. Look at me, your pastor, and ask these questions. If the answers are not good, you should pray for me and also ask me about it. If you say, “Wow, I see myself/my pastor/my favorite author producing a lot of bad fruit,” then remember Jesus’ insistence that bad fruit doesn’t come out of nowhere, but exclusively from a bad tree. That’s the only place to get bad fruit. On the other hand, if you see good fruit coming from yourself/your pastor/your favorite theology books, then that’s a good sign that the person producing that fruit is right where God wants him to be.

2. “What fruit does this teaching produce in the lives of those most zealous for it?”

But don’t stop with the fruit of the person. Look at the fruit of the ideas too. Find someone who’s really dedicated to believing a particular idea, and look at the fruit.

One obvious idea to test in this way is communism. Look at what happened to the nations which embraced communism. What kind of fruit did it bring forth? Bad fruit. Well then, look at a preacher who is constantly pushing the idea that Jesus came to save sinners, that Jesus died for those who had done nothing good, nothing to impress Him, nothing to earn His favor, and that everyone who trusts in Him can have eternal life. What sort of consequence does that idea have in the lives of those who really believe it? Does it make them bad people? Hard to live with? Hard to talk to? No. Just the opposite, in fact.

So look for the fruit — the fruit of the person and the fruit of the idea.

D. Actions Have Eternal Consequences, v. 19

Well, Jesus reminds us that actions not only come from the heart, but that they have eternal consequences.

1. Unrepentant Sinners Will Be Thrown into Hell

This reference to the tree being cut down and thrown into the fire is a clear reference to Hell. Everyone who brings forth bad fruit, and who brings forth nothing but bad fruit, will be sent to Hell.

In short, Jesus reminds us that this question of fruit is not purely academic. It's not like a tree in the backyard at one's new house. You wonder whether it's a Red Delicious or a Braeburn apple, but you moved in during the winter and won't know until midsummer at the soonest. But the question can afford to wait. You'll find out when you find out. No! Jesus says that this question of fruit is vital because the wrong kind of fruit is evidence of a bad heart, and people are sent to Hell for being bad people.

2. People Who Bear Good Fruit Will go to Heaven

But this threat also implies a promise: everyone who bears good fruit is a good tree and will go to Heaven. So how does one begin to bear good fruit? Well, Jesus doesn't address that here. Elsewhere, He says you have to make the tree good first. You have to go to Him and ask Him to cleanse you, ask Him to make you a good tree. But when He does, He fits you for Heaven. The point is not that He makes you good enough to deserve Heaven, but rather that He chooses to bring you to Heaven and then sets about renovating your nature, turning you into that good tree that bears good fruit. You bear good fruit by abiding in Christ the vine.

III. Always Evaluate on the basis of Fruit!, v. 20

Finally, then, you will know them by their fruits. Evaluate people and ideas on the basis of what practical action they produce. Believing that people are basically good produces a radically unjust society. Believing that God gave His Son for the life of the world produces a bunch of kind-hearted people who are very generous. And so on. Evaluate on the basis of fruit!

And what about when you find that your own fruits don't measure up? Then go back to Jesus. Ask again. Seek again. Knock again. Seek to bear good fruits.

What do you do when you find that someone else's fruits don't measure up? Beware. Pray for that person. If he's a Christian teacher, don't listen to his teaching. The fruits it produces are not ones you want to cultivate! But at the same time, remember that this whole section is governed by Jesus' command to "judge not." Don't write anyone off, but be careful not to listen to anything harmful either. Above all, stay close to Jesus! He's the ultimate good tree, and His fruit is always good. Stay close to Him, and yours will be too. Amen.