

Focus Text

“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.” **(Matthew 7:15–20, ESV)**

1. Beware of False Prophets

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.” **(Matthew 7:15, ESV)**

Coming out of the discussion of the broad and narrow gate, Jesus launches into another parable about false prophets. It’s essential to recognize that prophets throughout Scripture have the authority to speak on the Lord’s behalf. Jesus pushes against those who speak falsely and use their standing with the people to benefit themselves, harm the hearers, and blaspheme against God. Prophets in Jesus’ day functioned similarly to modern local pastors; they spoke with authority, and their primary task was to call the people back into a faithful covenant relationship with God. However, Jesus warns that some people are acting as prophets, but they are really wolves. This imagery was well-known in prominent Greek writing, and Ezekiel uses a similar image to describe princes who were like wolves tearing apart those whom they were sworn to protect. It is a high honor to speak for God and defend His Word. The prophet's role is needed and a gift from the Holy Spirit to the Church. Sadly, some have chosen to stand in places of spiritual leadership and abuse that position for personal gain and affluence. Jesus warns all of His people to beware of those who seek to exploit their positions of spiritual authority solely for personal gain.

“‘False prophets’ are to be defined negatively as those who, while claiming for themselves the capacity to define for others the will of God, represent in their practice (and probably also in their teaching, but not necessarily so obviously) a false understanding of the will of God, specifically an understanding that is not in accord with the OT (Law and the) Prophets as now illuminated by Jesus. What primarily defines them is the falseness of their relationship to the prophetic stand of Jesus.”¹

“Her princes in her midst are like wolves tearing the prey, shedding blood, destroying lives to get dishonest gain.” **(Ezekiel 22:27, ESV)**

¹ Nolland, John. 2005. The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

“The phrase “wolf in sheep's clothing” has its origins in both biblical and ancient Greek sources. In the Bible, it appears in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, where he warns, “Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves” (Matthew 7:15)[1][2]. This metaphor describes individuals who appear harmless or friendly but are actually dangerous or malicious[1]. The expression also has roots in one of Aesop's fables, dating back to the sixth century BC, which tells the story of a wolf disguising itself in a sheep's fleece to infiltrate a flock and attack the sheep[1][2]. Some scholars suggest that Jesus' use of this imagery in Matthew 7:15 may be an intentional allusion to Ezekiel 22:27, which uses similar wolf imagery to depict corrupt officials[3]. The phrase has since become a common expression in contemporary English to describe deceptive individuals[1][2].”²

2. Fruit Reveals Authenticity

“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.”

(Matthew 7:16–17, ESV)

Jesus then explains how to identify a wolf in sheep's clothing by the way they live their lives. “Actions speak louder than words” is on full display here. Jesus then moves into the natural order of creation, where plants only produce their specific kinds of fruits. Secondarily, Jesus uses this mental image to balance good versus evil. Grapes are beneficial; they can feed people and make wine a staple in Israel. Thornbushes are weeds from Hades that ensnare people and animals alike and are considered evil. Figs are delicious and provide nourishment, and thistles are a nuisance weed that sticks to everything but cannot be used for anything. The false prophet proclaims God's will but lives as if they don't care about God in the slightest. Returning to the sermon, Jesus reminds us that we should give and serve without seeking public recognition. That we should love our families. We should spend time in prayer with God alone, without needing to share it with the whole world. For Christian leaders, false prophets look like preaching in a pulpit on Sunday morning but not spending time with the Lord throughout the week. For all Christ followers, this is the church mask syndrome. The hypocrisy of dressing up and sitting in the pew, saying “amen”, leading a Bible study, and then once Sunday morning is over, the person who walked into church disappears and a carnal, sinful person gets in their car and lives in opposition to all principles taught and embraced on Sunday morning. A question to ponder: “Would people outside the church be shocked if they visited and found you here?”

² [1] Manser, Martin H., Natasha B. Fleming, Kate Hughes, and Ronald F. Bridges. 2000. *I Never Knew That Was in the Bible!*. Electronic ed. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

[2] Toler, Stan. 2018. *The Ultimate Bible Knowledge Challenge: A Collection of Bible History, Trivia, and Fun Facts*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers.

[3] Quarles, Charles L. 2011. *Sermon on the Mount: Restoring Christ's Message to the Modern Church*. Nashville, TN: B&H Academic.

“What is the outworking in the lives of these people of what they stand for? This advice corresponds with a widespread human recognition that close observation of a person’s actions is the most accurate guide to what a person really is. In the Matthean context instinctive recognition of what constitutes appropriate fruit has now been sharpened and extended by the teaching of the Sermon itself.”³

3. Discernment for True Discipleship

“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.” **(Matthew 7:18–20, ESV)**

As Jesus concludes the thought on false prophets, he reminds us that nature will not allow trees to bear fruit that is different from their kind. A healthy tree (a righteous person) cannot bear bad fruit, and a diseased tree (false prophets) cannot bear good fruit. Jesus then repeats the words of John the Baptist. This is important! John was speaking to the unrepentant Pharisees and Saducees who refused to be baptized by John and to repent of their sins against God. Jesus is pointing us toward the religious leaders who refuse to bow their knees before God and to follow Him humbly. Instead, they declare a form of religion God never asked for and do not abide by the very traditions they force upon others. Jesus reminds the people that if someone comes to speak in the name of God and doesn’t repent and act humbly toward God, and doesn’t try to love their neighbor, ignore them, they are bad fruit. The challenge for every Christ follower is acknowledging that at some point, others will be following us. Children, grandkids, and other Christians will lean on our guidance in some way throughout our lives. The gift Jesus offers is for all of us to be humble before God and allow Him to empower our lives. We can be humble and repentant. No, we will never be perfect, but we can admit our need for God, His grace, and His power through the Holy Spirit. If you are willing to do those things, then we can bear good fruit for Christ!

“This verse repeats exactly the words of John the Baptist from 3:10 (see discussion there). It identifies the Matthean Jesus with the judgment emphasis of John. It also functions to make the ‘false prophets’ less attractive to identify with: Do you want to share their fate? It expands the good and bad fruit imagery into a miniature parable.”⁴

“Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Matthew 3:10, ESV)

³ Nolland, John. 2005. *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

⁴ Nolland, John. 2005. *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

Application

Where do you need to take off your Mask?

Jesus calls out the hypocrisy of the religious leaders in his day and time because their actions and words don't line up. As the pastor of Good Shepherd, if my actions begin to falter so far away from Christ, I am no longer able to lead. However, Jesus isn't just looking at the leaders; He desires that all His followers have a genuine life of love and faith, because He has given us the Holy Spirit to empower a Christ-like life.

Masks are the fake faces we wear when we are ashamed of the sins hiding in our lives. Jesus wishes to heal those places, but He requires honesty from us.

This week, with your cornerman, have a conversation about the places you might be hiding and pray for each other to surrender those things to the Lord.