

PROOF IN THE PRODUCT

Matthew 7:15-20

I. INTRODUCTION

II. THE TEXT

KJV—**15** Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. **16** Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? **17** Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. **18** A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. **19** Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. **20** Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.

NASB—**15** Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. 16 By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? 17 Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

NIV—**15** Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. **16** You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? **17** So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. **18** A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. **19** Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. **20** So then, you will know them by their fruits.

ESV—**15** Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. **16** You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? **17** So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. **18** A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. **19** Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. **20** Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

The Message—Be wary of false preachers who smile a lot, dripping with practiced sincerity. Chances are they are out to rip you off some way or other. Don't be impressed with charisma; look for character. Who preachers are is the main thing, not what they say. A genuine leader will never exploit your emotions or your pocketbook. These diseased trees with their bad apples are going to be chopped down and burned.

III. BACKGROUND

A. THREE OFFICES IN OLD TESTAMENT ISRAEL

1. Pre-kingdom Era—Theocracy
 - King = God
 - Prophet and Judge = Moses/Joshua and following Judges
 - Priest = Aaron, his descendants, and Levites
2. Kingdom Era

a. Offices

- King = Saul—David and descendants; divided Kingdoms of Judah and Israel
- Priest = descendants of Aaron and Levites
- Prophet = First prophet—Samuel; non-professional religious

b. King assumed responsibility for jurisprudence, justice, judgment

c. Offices of king and priest became corrupted

d. God raised up prophets to call people back to Him—call officials to accountability

B. OFFICE OF PROPHET

1. Called by God—inspired by God—to tell His word

2. Sometimes in ‘schools’—such as those following Elisha

3. Functions of Prophets

- Foretelling—predicting
- Forth-telling—calling people to obey God
- Miracles—as signs to validate message/messenger

4. Testing Validity of Prophets

a. Doctrinal—see [Deut 13](#)

- o His word/practice had to be consistent with God’s Word
- o Even if he performed miracles—they could be counterfeit!

b. Practical—see [Deut 18:21-22](#)

- o Predictions must be wholly accurate—come to pass fully

c. Moral—see Jeremiah’s indictments—[Jer 23:9-40](#)

- o Life must be morally in line with God’s word

C. FALSE PROPHETS

1. Old Testament examples

a. Amaziah at Bethel

1. Amos proclaimed judgment on Israel
2. Hananiah opposed Amos as enemy of Israel—said everything would be okay

3. Amos was vindicated when Assyria defeated Israel
- b. Hananiah in Judah
 1. Jeremiah proclaimed judgment on Judah
 2. Hananiah opposed Jeremiah as a false prophet
 3. Jeremiah vindicated when Babylonians defeated Judah
2. Intertestamental and New Testament
 - a. Typically charismatic religious-political leaders
 - b. Usually leading revolts against Jewish-Roman authorities
 1. Simon (4BC)—former slave of Herod the Great
 2. Athronges (3 BC)—shepherd rebel vs Archelaus (Judea)
 3. Judas of Galilee (AD 6)—son of Ezekias
 - o Led Zealot revolt against Roman census
 - o Attacked Sepphoris—capital of Herod Antipas—4 miles north of Nazareth
 - o Romans defeated him—crucified 2000 followers!
 4. Theudas (44-46 AD)—[Acts 5](#)—led 400 in rebellion
 5. Un-named ‘Egyptian’ prophet
 - o Led 4000 Jewish assassins into desert
 - o Tried to re-enact Exodus—stopped by Felix (Acts 21:38)
 6. Menahem ben Judah—son of Judas of Galilee (?)—revolted against Herod Agrippa

IV. OTHER NEW TESTAMENT PASSAGES

1. Jesus’ Prediction of Coming Tribulation

Mk 13:19-23—*For those days will be a time of tribulation such as has not occurred since the beginning of the creation which God created until now, and never will. Unless the Lord had shortened those days, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect, whom He chose, He shortened the days. And then if anyone says to you, “Behold, here is the Christ,” or, “Behold, He is there,” do not believe him; for false Christs and false prophets will arise, and will show signs and wonders, in order to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But take heed; behold, I have told you everything in advance.*

2. Peter’s Warning

II Pe: 2:1-3—*But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; and in their greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.*

3. John's Advice: Test Spirits by these Standards

I Jn 4:1-4—*Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world. You are from God little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.*

4. False Miracles

Rev 13:11-15—*Then I saw another beast coming up out of the earth; and he had two horns like a lamb and he spoke as a dragon. He exercises all the authority of the first beast in his presence. And he makes the earth and those who dwell in it to worship the first beast, whose fatal wound was healed. He performs great signs, so that he even makes fire come down out of heaven to the earth in the presence of men. And he deceives those who dwell on the earth because of the signs which it was given him to perform in the presence of the beast, telling those who dwell on the earth to make an image to the beast who had the wound of the sword and has come to life.*

V. PARALLEL PASSAGES

A. JOHN THE BAPTIST

1. Words of judgment against Pharisees and Sadducees
2. Precedes prophecy of coming Christ—who will bring judgment and separation

Mt 3:7-10—*But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them. "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, "We have Abraham for our father;" for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*

B. JESUS' SERMON MATERIAL IN LUKE

1. Following Two Parables
 - Blind leading Blind—**Lk 6:39**
 - Servant not above Master—**Lk 6:40**

2. Following passage on Being Judgmental—Speck in Your Brother’s Eye—[Lk 6:42](#)
3. Precedes closing passage of Sermon on Mount—[Lk 6:46-49](#)
 - Why call me “Lord, Lord”—and do not what I say?
 - Illustration of two houses—built on rock or sand
4. Luke gives abbreviated account—without ‘False Prophet’ introduction

Lk 6:43-45—**43** *For there is no good tree which produces bad fruit, nor, on the other hand, a bad tree which produces good fruit. 44 For each tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they pick grapes from a briar bush. 45 The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart.*

VI. EXPLANATION

A. TARGET OF JESUS’ CRITICISM

1. Previously—aimed at those who abused the religious system
 - a. Scribes and Pharisees—[5:20](#)
 - b. Hypocrites—probably mostly Pharisees—who abused righteous acts—[6:1-18](#)
 1. Showy givers
 2. Showy prayers
 3. Showy fasters
 - c. Judgmental legalists—[7:1-5](#)
2. **Now**—technically—‘prophets’ who pretend to hold everyone else accountable
3. ‘False Prophets’—more generally—anyone distorting the—“Law and the **Prophets**”
 - See [5:17](#)—I have come to fulfill Law and **Prophets**
 - See [7:12](#)—Golden Rule sums up Law and **Prophets**

B. SHEEP AND WOLVES

1. **Sheep’s clothing**
 - a. Could refer to a false mask of **innocence** (?)—like innocent sheep
 - b. More likely purpose—to **disguise**
 1. To infiltrate flock
 2. To take advantage of sheep—and/or to mislead them

2. **Ravenous wolves**

a. Real purposes

1. To mislead sheep for selfish purposes
2. To devour sheep—similar to Satan—as a ‘roaring lion’—see **I Pe 5:8**

Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.

b. Old Testament example

1. Religious leaders in Ezekiel’s day
2. Took advantage of poor people for financial benefit

Ez 22:23-27—*And the word of the Lord came to me, saying, “Son of man, say to her, ‘You are a land that is not cleansed or rained on in the day of indignation.’ There is a conspiracy of her prophets in her midst like a roaring lion tearing the prey. They have devoured lives; they have taken treasure and precious things; they have made many widows in the midst of her. Her priests have done violence to My law and have profaned My holy things; they have made no distinction between the holy and the profane, and they have not taught the difference between the unclean and the clean; and they hide their eyes from My Sabbaths, and I am profaned among them. Her princes within her are like wolves tearing the prey, by shedding blood and destroying lives in order to get dishonest gain.*

c. Similar warning later by Jesus

Mk 12:38-40—*Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted in the market place, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows’ houses and, for a show, make lengthy prayers. Such men will be severely punished!*

C. **SHIFT IN METAPHORS**

1. Expectation might be to use ‘shepherd’ and ‘false shepherd’ example

- Jesus did this *later* in **John 10**
- Where Jesus describes Himself as—the Good Shepherd
- Contrasted with—False Shepherds—who come to steal, kill, destroy

2. But here the emphasis is not on *leadership*—giving guidance to eternal life

3. It is a warning about *how to discern* who is false/misleading

4. The proof—evidence is in their **works**

a. Not to determine their role—or disguised role

- b. But to discern their **character**
- c. And the proof of character is in the **product**—how they behave/act
- 5. Jesus will end His sermon with this emphasis on **practical works** and **obedience**
 - 7:24—*Whoever hears these words of mine and puts them into practice . . .*

D. PROOF IN THE PRODUCT

1. You will know them by their fruits—What kind of ‘fruit’ is this?

- a. Later—this theme is developed more deeply:
 - 1. Bearing ‘fruit’ by being part of the True Vine—being in Christ—**Jn 15**
 - 2. Producing evidence of ‘fruit of the Spirit’—**Gal 5:22**
 - 3. The ‘fruit of righteousness’

Ph 1:11—*Having been filled with the fruit of righteousness, which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.*

Jas 3:18—*And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.*

- b. But here—it is simply bearing ‘kingdom fruit’
 - 1. Following the Kingdom Ethic—of **Mt 5-7**
 - 2. Following Jesus’ fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets

2. Grapes from Thorn Bushes—Figs from Thistles

- a. Used as an exaggerated example (hyperbole)
- b. Illustration frames the rest of the examples
- c. It is impossible—and silly—to expect to grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles
- d. Likewise—it is *impossible* to get good fruit from bad trees
- e. **Main idea:** the character/nature of the plant determines the product
 - 1. Thistles produce flowers and berries—but not figs!
 - 2. Thorn bushes produce thorns,, maybe flowers, even berries—but not grapes!

3. Good Trees and Bad Trees

- a. **Main idea:** the *nature* of the tree determines the *product*

- b. **Vice versa:** the *product* tells the *character/nature* of the tree
- c. A Good Tree—is productive—produces fruit
- d. A Bad Tree—is unproductive—produces no fruit—or unusable fruit
- **Example: Jesus cursed the fig tree—because it produced only leaves—Mk 11**
- e. The impossibility of defying nature
 - 1. It is impossible of pretending forever
 - o Evidence may be hidden for the short term—by producing nothing
 - o But eventually there will be a product—that proves the character
 - o Or if there is never any fruit at all—then the tree is bad
 - 2. The nature of the kingdom = “Either—Or”
 - o **Everyone** produces either good or bad fruit—**nobody** is exempt
 - 3. It is impossible for false prophets/disciples to produce genuine kingdom fruit

E. DESTINY OF USELESS/BAD TREES = DESTRUCTION

- 1. As prophesied by John the Baptist—**Mk 3**—cut down and thrown into the fire
- 2. Further explained later by Jesus

Jn 15:1-2—*I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit.*
- 3. Woe to pretenders—Jesus’ harshest criticism for false religious leaders who misled people
- 4. Explained more fully below

7:23—*And then I will declare to them, I never knew you; “Depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.”*

F. BY THEIR FRUIT YOU WILL RECOGNIZE THEM

- This fruit—is behavior that produces results
- These results—are consistent with the Kingdom Ethic
- This Ethic applies—all the Law and the ‘true’ Prophets—as fulfilled/explained by Jesus
- Summarized by the Golden Rule