

Sermon for Pentecost 2, , June 14, 2020
St. Paul's, Green Garden, MI

Matthew 7:15-23

¹⁵“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶By their fruit you will recognize them. You do not gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles, do you? ¹⁷So then, every good tree produces good fruit, but a bad tree produces bad fruit. ¹⁸A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot produce good fruit. ¹⁹Every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰So then, by their fruit you will recognize them. ²¹Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. ²²Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and drive out demons in your name and perform many miracles in your name?’ ²³Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Depart from me, you evildoers.’

Text: Matthew 7:15-23

Theme: “Know Good Fruit From Bad”

- 1. Those who speak God’s Word alone bear good fruit**
- 2. Watch out—those who speak falsehood bear bad fruit**
- 3. In the end they will be destroyed**

Have you ever bitten into an apple that looks ripe and inviting on the outside only to find out that instead of being crisp and juicy it is pasty and mealy on the inside? Or what about that melon you bought at the store? Sure looked good in the produce section didn’t it? But when you brought it home it was seriously under ripe. And there is nothing worse than buying what looks like a ripe tomato only to find out that it has all the flavor of cardboard sprinkled with lemon juice.

Now everybody has their tricks for determining what fruit is ripe and what is not. But can you determine what good spiritual fruit is and what is not? The apostle John wrote that we should test the spirits to see whether they are from God. In other words we really need to test whether or not someone who claims to be teaching God’s Word is really telling God’s truth or not. The only way to do so is to compare what that person teaches with everything the Scripture tells us. Jesus warns us to watch out for false prophets because he wants us to know good fruit from bad. 1. Those who speak God’s Word alone bear good fruit 2. Be on the look out for trees that bear bad fruit 3. For in the end they will be destroyed.

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We should understand from the start that Jesus is concerned for the souls of his children wherever they are in the world. He carefully communicated his Father's truth throughout his ministry. But he has now left his ministry to the Christian Church on earth to go make disciples of all nations. Yet there are those who claim to be the Savior's true spokesmen but speak more of their own ideas than of God's truth. Jesus is really saying, "I want you to know the difference between true teaching and false teaching so that you can tell the good fruit from the bad." Those who speak God's Word alone bear good fruit.

When I was going to school, I would sometimes pick apples for a little extra money during the fall. The orchard had at least 10 varieties of apples that would ripen at different times. Late in the fall a certain variety of apple would ripen that was one of the finest apples I have ever had. It was the crispest, juiciest apple with a flavor that was second to none. When I picked apples in that row I expected to find good fruit and I always did. Jesus says the same thing about those who teach his word: **"Every good tree bears good fruit."** All I had to do was look at the row of apples I was picking, know which variety of apple I was picking and I could tell you what the apple looks like, its flavor and texture. And just by biting into it I could tell you whether the fruit was under or over ripe.

Jesus says when you hear God's word being taught or preached, look at where the teacher or preacher is getting his teaching. Does it really come from the Bible and does everything the person teaches agree with what the Bible says? Does all their teaching really give the glory to God alone? This is what Jesus means when he says, **"By their fruit you will recognize them."** Every good tree bears good fruit. The fruit that Jesus is talking about is the teaching of the pastor, teacher, even a lay person in a position of authority. Just as God has given us good food for our bodies so he has given us wholesome food for our souls. His truth is the only food that we should be feeding our souls. If I am not feeding my soul only the food of his truth I am doing damage to my faith and my soul just as surely as a diet of junk food will do damage to my body.

Look at what the Bible teaches and you will find that it always gives glory to God and to God alone. We human beings are sinful. Without God we can do nothing good. God alone must save us from sin and it is God alone who gives us faith, for Paul says, **"No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit."** That leaves no room to say that a human being with a sinful human nature can make a decision for Christ when he is in his dead, sinful condition. Jesus told his disciples, **"You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you."** Anyone who says you have to make a decision for Christ and that you have to know the precise moment when you made that commitment, whether he knows it or not, that person

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is taking glory away from God and giving credit to man for some part of his salvation. And so the teacher who truly teaches God's Word will emphasize with Paul, "**What a wretched man I am. Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!**" This is why Jesus says, "**By their fruit you will recognize them.**"

The prophet who brings only the teachings of God's Word does bear good fruit. In fact Jesus says, "**A good tree cannot bear bad fruit.**" The whole truth of God's Word is food for our souls. It is always good fruit. Why? When we admit that we have to give God the credit for everything, we see that we also have to put away all pride, all boasting about anything we have done or can do. We then see our sins and our need to repent before God and seek forgiveness for our sins. Only then can we respond in faith and LIVE the way God wants us to live.

You see, God has given you good food for your soul. Just as he gave the people of Israel manna that perfectly nourished their bodies so that they had energy to travel in the wilderness, so our Lord has given us the wholesome food of his word to nourish our faith and strengthen us so that He finally brings us to heaven. This is why Jesus says watch out for false prophets and listen only to the truth of God's Word. You want only good wholesome food for your body. You wouldn't sprinkle arsenic on your pizza would you? Then why would you take to heart any kind of teaching that does not bear the stamp of God's whole truth? Jesus says, "Watch out—those who do not speak the truth bear bad fruit."

Jesus makes it clear that false prophets come looking as if they are part of the flock. "**They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are reavenous wolves.**" Some might be asking themselves, "**Pastor, isn't this just talking about those who are obviously trying to deceive others? People who are sincere Christians really aren't bad people are they, even if they don't teach all the truth of God's Word?**" There may be many who are sincere but if they are sincere in their false belief it is no less damaging to themselves and others. Once a steel bottle left a certain factory labeled "oxygen" but it was mistakenly filled with carbon dioxide. When it was delivered to the hospital the nurses attached the tubing to the bottle and gave it to a person who needed oxygen. The person died because there was carbon dioxide in the bottle instead of oxygen. Now the people who filled the bottle at the factory and those who delivered it to the hospital, and the nurses who gave it to the patient, and even the patient himself were all sincere in their belief that the bottle contained oxygen. Unfortunately, their sincerity did not stop the deadly effects when the patient suffocated for lack of oxygen. Whether they are sincere or not, false teachers bear bad fruit Jesus says.

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He emphasizes this when he says, **You do not gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles, do you?** When we go looking for good fruit, we don't start in the briar patch do we. I remember picking wild blackberries when I was a boy. Most of you you know about blackberry bushes, they grow thorns and stickers. It wasn't too hard to pick the berries around the outside of the bush but you had to be very cautious about picking the berries deep within the bush because the thorns and stickers would get you every time. Jesus' picture here reminds us that just as we don't look for edible fruit on thorn bushes and thistles because we will get hurt so we don't go looking for the truth of God's Word from one who does not teach His whole truth. If we do we endanger our soul's salvation.

Jesus reminds us that a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. The thorn bush doesn't bear strawberries or huckleberries. The thistle doesn't produce peaches or cherries. If the tree is harmful it can produce only inedible fruit. Someone who claims to teach God's Word but adds to the truth or takes away from the truth is cheating his hearers. **False teaching is harmful because it has a domino effect.**

Our own sinful nature may like to think that only one false teaching or even a few false teachings don't matter much. But consider the domino effect that one false teaching has on other teachings. The Bible tells us, and we believe, that God the Son took a human nature into the Godhead. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary, forever both true God and true man. But even among those who call themselves Christian many say that this teaching only came about in order to emphasize what a special person Jesus was. "But," they say, "he really wasn't God." They believe Mary probably had an affair with a traveling Roman soldier and that's how Jesus was born. Now if that were true, then Jesus really isn't God and we really need to sift through his teachings to see what applies to us in the 21st century. Then Christianity becomes little more than a religion of morality—do good and be good—and since God loves all people, certain false teachers say everyone will go to heaven. Friends, do you see how this destroys people's souls? It causes people to believe that we don't need to call disobedience to God a **sin** and therefore, there is no need to repent of our sinfulness before God and receive his forgiveness by faith. If we eat this rotten fruit we become little more than a 21st century version of the Pharisees—full of pride and self-righteousness. And you know what Jesus said to the Pharisees —“**Woe to you Pharisees and teachers of the Law, you hypocrites.**” He said that to them because they were false teachers who would be justly punished.

Jesus told his disciples that sham religious activity does not fool God. “**Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven.**” It is almost as if Jesus is saying to

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us, “Do you want to know what will happen to those who teach lies and lead others astray? Just because they claim to be religious does not mean that they will enter my kingdom.” Jesus points us to the future, to Judgment Day. Just as he said “Woe” to the Pharisees and teachers of the law two days before he died, so he says “woe” to all false teachers. They will plead their case before him and say, “But look, we spoke in your name, we did many wonderful signs and miracles in your name. We deserve a place in your kingdom don’t we?” And Jesus says, “Then I will pronounce my verdict.” **“I never knew you. Depart from me, you evildoers!”** And it was during Holy Week that Jesus specifically warned against listening to false teachers for he said they will deceive many: **“False Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible.”**

Jesus’ warning is given for a good reason. False teachers do not love Christ, and do not do his works. For Jesus said the one who does the will of my Father will enter heaven. We should understand what Jesus means and what he does not mean here. The will of his Father is to know and believe that I am a sinner and that I need to repent daily before God and then receive forgiveness from Jesus. Yet many suppose that doing the will of the Father is to do all kinds of acts that the world calls good without a heart that looks to God alone as Lord and Savior. Unless that kind of heart, born of the power of the Holy Spirit lives inside a person, he or she will not enter heaven. This is why Jesus gives us the warning about listening to false prophets.

Those who have taught falsely without a heart that repents of sin will hear those horrifying words from the mouth of Jesus himself, **“I never knew you. Depart from me, you evildoers.”** Notice that Jesus calls them evildoers despite the fact that they may do many charitable acts, they may do many wonderful looking things and all in the name of Christ. But if a repentant faith does not live in them they will find that Jesus will cast them out. For his verdict will show that the fruit of their actions was not the fruit of faith but the fruit of self-righteousness, the continuous attempt to make themselves worthy before God instead of receiving Jesus’ blood and righteousness.

No matter at what stage of growth we are in our spiritual life Jesus wants us to know good fruit from bad. He wants us to know how to find the good and avoid the bad for the bad fruit brings only great harm. The good fruit comes from those who speak his words without adding, subtracting or twisting their meaning. This is the fruit that we need to constantly look for, listen to and put into practice in our lives. Only by eating the good fruit from our Lord Jesus will we truly live. Amen.