

Known by their Fruits (Matt. 7:15–20)

By Jacob D. Gerber

Our culture has, at the same time, a great fascination with leadership and a great skepticism for authority. We gravitate toward strong leaders who communicate a clear and powerful vision for the future; however, we also deeply distrust anyone who holds any power over us. Jesus' words in Matthew 7:15–20 address these issues directly by warning us of a legitimate reason to distrust authority: namely, some leaders are false prophets, who look like sheep outwardly, but inwardly are as ravenous as wolves (Matt. 7:15). Here, Jesus warns us not only of how to evaluate leaders before following them, but also why evaluating leadership is so important. Namely, *your leaders' roots will determine your fruits*.

The Followers of Leaders (Matt. 7:15)

In the previous section, Jesus warned us to enter by the narrow gate and to take the hard road, rather than the wide gate and the easy road (Matt. 7:13–14). Nevertheless, Jesus knows that we do not make such choices entirely independently. Rather, there are many leaders who will work to entice us away from following Jesus.¹ While we may be aware of this kind of danger at some level, Jesus knows that we will likely not be as attentive to such threats as we ought to be, which is why he here equips us to recognize such “false prophets” for what they are (v. 15a). As John Calvin writes, “It is the will of the Lord...that his Church shall be engaged in uninterrupted war in this world. That we may continue to be his disciples to the end, it is not enough that we are merely submissive, and allow ourselves to be governed by his Word. Our faith, which is constantly attacked by Satan, must be prepared to resist.”²

Jesus warns us, then, of “false prophets” (ψευδοπροφήτης; *pseudoprophētēs*; “pseudo-prophets”; Matt. 24:11, 24; Mark 13:22; Luke 6:26; Acts 13:6; 2 Peter 2:1; 1 John 4:1; Rev. 16:13; 19:20; 20:10) similarly to the warnings we have against “false teachers” (ψευδοδιδάσκαλος; *pseudodidaskalos*; “pseudo-teachers”; 2 Pet. 2:1), “false brothers” (ψευδάδελφος; *pseudadelphos*; “pseudo-brother”; 2 Cor. 11:26; Gal. 2:4), “false apostles” (ψευδαπόστολος; *pseudapostolos*; “pseudo-apostle”; 2 Cor. 11:13), “false speakers” (e.g., “liars”; ψευδολόγος; *pseudologos*; “pseudo-speakers”; 1 Tim. 4:2), “false witnesses” (ψευδομαρτυρία; *pseudomarturia*; “pseudo-witness”; Matt. 15:19; 19:18; 26:59; Mark 10:19; 14:56; Luke 18:20; 1 Cor. 15:15), and “false Christs” (ψευδόχριστος; *pseudochristos*; “pseudo-Christ”).³ Since a prophet is charged with faithfully declaring the word of God, a false prophet is either someone who declares that God has said something when he hasn't, or who fails to declare

¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 299.

² Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 1:362.

³ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 372.

something that God has said.⁴ Discerning between true and false prophets was a subject of great concern in the Old Testament (Deut. 18:15–22).

These false prophets are more difficult to recognize than we might expect, since Jesus warns us that they “come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves” (v. 15b). Don Carson writes that, at first, such false prophets come “in sheep’s clothing” in the sense that they may “use orthodox language, show biblical piety, and are indistinguishable from true prophets (cf. 10:41).”⁵ Nevertheless, they are wolves who seek to devour God’s sheep, just as false prophets have done throughout the ages (e.g., Jer. 5:6; Ezek. 22:27).⁶ Spiritually speaking, the right identification of wolves is a matter of life and death.

The Fruits of Leaders (Matt. 7:16–18)

How, then, can the church recognize such wolves among the sheep? Jesus does not intend for us to throw out the baby with the bathwater, by treating all teachers with such skepticism that we never receive the Word of God from those officers whom he has appointed in the church.⁷ The radical distrust of authority in our age is a serious problem. Even if we grant the fact that leaders are not perfect, we must nevertheless recognize that *everyone* is led by *someone*. Those who reject leaders altogether have not avoided being led; they have simply blinded themselves to the fact that they *are* being led. Jesus wants us to follow our leaders, but to do so with eyes wide open.

As a leader (pastor) in the church, I write about this subject with great trepidation for two reasons. First of all, I am entirely aware that defending leadership can sound self-serving, as though my real desire were to protect my own power and privileges. Indeed, I am also deeply conscious of my own failures, shortfalls, and sin. That is, I recognize all too clearly that church leaders fail frequently—because I have painful, firsthand knowledge that *I* fail frequently! So, I do not write this to set up some kind of straw man: “Follow me because I’m not like all those other failed leaders over there.” As a leader, my job is less about defending my own qualifications as impeccable than about pointing to our perfect leader, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Second, I nevertheless do not want to minimize the importance of church leadership because of my failings. The Lord Jesus has appointed officers to establish the rule of his reign in his church, and I would be disobedient to Jesus if I downplayed Christ’s commanded structure for his church. So, I want to acknowledge that there *is* a minimum standard, even if no one ever reaches the maximum standard of perfection. As leaders, we know that we will be judged with greater strictness, both now and in the future (Jas. 3:1). That’s part of the call, and we take it seriously. Part of leading and shepherding well in the church, then, means that we must teach the church to hold us as leaders to the right standard. By this, the church will be equipped to follow us well when we are leading well, and also to confront us boldly when we don’t lead well.

What, then, is the right standard that we must teach? Jesus instructs us to test prophets by their fruits: “You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from

⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 300–01.

⁵ Carson, “Matthew,” 227.

⁶ Osborne, *Matthew*, 271.

⁷ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:363–64.

thistles?” (v. 16). When the Bible speaks of someone’s “fruit,” both the doctrines taught by that person (Isa. 8:20; 1 John 4:1; Heb. 13:9; 2 John 9, 11; Matt. 15:9; Tit. 1:9–12) as well as their behavior (Matt. 3:8, 10; 21:43; Luke 3:8–14; John 15:8–10; Gal. 5:22–24; Eph. 5:9–12; Phil. 1:11; Col. 1:10; Jas. 3:17–18).⁸ While some wish to limit Jesus’ warning to one part or the other, the Bible speaks of the “fruits” of a person as a comprehensive representation of “everything they are... including what they say as well as how they act.”⁹ While it is possible to deceive people for a certain amount of time, the deception cannot last forever: “One’s fruit...will ultimately reveal what one is.”¹⁰

Jesus gives two reasons why the fruit of a prophet/pastor/teacher is the most reliable test to evaluate a man and his ministry. First, the fruit is organically connected to—and indeed, arises from—the health of the person in their soul: “So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit” (v. 17). To see an apple hanging from a tree identifies the tree as an apple tree; oranges identify the tree as an orange tree, and so on. Second, to press the point further, Jesus observes that a “healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit” (v. 18). By this, Jesus “underlines the absolute essentiality of righteousness for those who follow Jesus, as well as its impossibility for those who do not.”¹¹ By a person’s fruits, you know what that person is.

The Fruits of Leaders (Matt. 7:16–18)

If we can discern the *nature* of a person by their fruits, then we can also know their ultimate *fate* by those same fruits.¹² Jesus says, “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (v. 19). This warning of impending judgment fits precisely with what Jesus said in the previous section: the wide gate and the easy way ultimately lead to destruction. Therefore, anyone who leads others through the wide gate and along the easy way will be the first of those who go into judgment. If the previous section imagined this judgment in terms of people walking off a cliff to their destruction, Jesus now clarifies that at the bottom of the cliff sits a lake of fire.

Elsewhere, Jesus tells us that this warning is not limited to leaders alone. Rather, God actively judges *all* his people, cutting down *any* trees that do not bear good fruit in order to throw them into the fire (John 15:2, 6). This is how a leaders’ roots come to determine *your* fruits—and, ultimately, your *fate*. Everyone who genuinely follows a leader will bear the same fruits as those leaders: “A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher” (Luke 6:40). So, if our leaders lead us through the wide gate and down the easy road, we will bear the bad fruit of evil, diseased roots. On the other hand, if our leaders lead us through the narrow gate and down the hard road, then we all will rejoice together (John 4:36).

To conclude this section, Jesus repeats the warning that he issued back in v. 16: “Thus you will recognize them by their fruits” (v. 20). However much someone may appear as a fellow sheep, we must carefully judge their words and their conduct to see whether they might be false prophets,

⁸ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 374; Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 183; France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 291.

⁹ Osborne, *Matthew*, 271.

¹⁰ Carson, “Matthew,” 228.

¹¹ Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 184.

¹² “Jesus moves from the fruit of the rotten tree to its fate” (Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 178.).

leading us down the way that leads to destruction. Again, this is an issue that concerns life and death for us.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the logical connection between Jesus' warning against the wide gate and easy road in the previous section (Matt. 7:13–14), and his warning against false prophets in v. 15? What does this tell us about the dangers of false prophets? Why are false prophets so difficult to recognize? What is the danger to following false prophets? How does that danger connect to the danger of destruction at the end of the wide gate and easy way (Matt. 7:13)?
2. What does Jesus mean when he tells us that we will “recognize them by their fruits” (vv. 16, 20)? What are the “fruits” of these leaders? What is the connection between the “fruits” of the leaders and the “roots” of their deeper character? What does Jesus mean when he says that it is impossible for a healthy tree to bear bad fruit, and for a diseased tree to bear good fruit? In what situations are you tempted to overlook or even rationalize the bad fruits of leaders?
3. In what way are the fruits of leaders connected to their fate (v. 19)? How does this warning help us to understand and evaluate the future of leaders who twist God's Word, yet seem to gain significant success in this world? How does this warning about the fate of leaders connect to our own fates (John 15:2, 6)? Why do you think that Jesus repeats his warning that “you will recognize them by their fruits” in v. 20?
4. What does the Bible teach about obeying leadership in the church (e.g., Eph. 4:11–16; 1 Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:7–19)? How do these positive commands concerning leadership fit with Jesus' warnings about false prophets here? When, how, and to what degree can we follow a leader who is also a fellow sinner with us? What role does the congregation have in the church both to support and to hold leadership accountable?