FALSE / GENUINE

Beware of the false prophets, those who come to you looking like sheep while within they are predatory wolves. <u>You can recognize them by their deeds</u>. One does not pick grapes from thorn bushes, does one? Or figs from thistles? Thus every good tree produces good fruit, but a decayed tree produces bad fruit. A good tree is not able to produce bad fruit, nor can a decayed tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Clearly, then, <u>you can recognize the false prophets by their deeds</u>.
Matthew – 7:15-20

The first thing to notice in this pericope is that it begins with *"false prophets"* in v.15 and ends with *"false prophets"* in v.20. The *"false prophets"* themselves are not necessarily the focus of this section but rather what makes them false.

In other words, the emphasis is more on the importance of good deeds than on the false prophets. Another thing to note is that Jesus has spent two chapters teaching on the character of the disciple following him in the Kingdom of God. By establishing that character, he now can teach on what the counter to that character is.

This is the first of the Sermon on the Mount's final three concluding warnings.

1) A tree and its fruit; false and genuine – 11.15-20;
2) I never knew you; judgment of pretenders – vv.21-23;
3) Hear and build your house on the Rock – vv.24-27.

These warnings focus our attention on the seriousness of the sermon's call *to the righteousness of the Kingdom and the righteousness of the disciple in that Kingdom.*

For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.
Matthew 5:20

So keep seeking above all else the kingdom of God and the righteousness he demands, and all of these things will also be yours.
Matthew 6:33

Matthew 12:33 speaks this same language under the very same context without using the verbiage of *"false prophet."*

Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, <u>for the tree is known by its fruit</u>.
Matthew 12:33

The passage of today's message can be outlined as follows:

1) the warning concerning false prophets.
2) how they are to be recognized.
3) the basic principle that good comes from good and bad comes from bad.
4) the reality of judgment.
5) repetition from the first verse of how false prophets are recognized.

This section is framed with both positive and negative language to reiterate the same teaching.

Symmetry and parallelism are also found within this section.

The difficult problem in this section is trying to identify the false prophets.

Are these the same people referred to in vv.13-14 regarding the gate and the straight path and in Matthew 21-23 regarding the people Jesus claims to have never known?

This question may seem unimportant but depending on how it is answered and how *this group* is identified, it can lead one to connect other passages in Matthew to this one.

1) Are the false prophets Gnostics, Essenes, Zealots or some charismatic activity such as *Post-Easter Palestinian enthusiasts?*
2) Were they Jewish Christians who were over-zealous for the law and opposed to the Gentile mission?
3) Were they Hellenistic antinomians (anti-law) within the earliest church communities who held to the views of Paul and were thus ultra-Paulinists?
4) Were they the people referred to whom the Lord does not know and thus, are the *lawless* ones as evidenced by the phrase of Jesus – *"you workers of lawlessness."*

And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because <u>lawlessness</u> will be increased, the love of many will grow cold.
Matthew 24:11-12

Note that Matthew portrays Jesus as connecting the *"false prophets"* and *"lawlessness"* in the passage above as he does in the passage we are studying today. Same author, same connecting data point language. On this ground such a view at least needs to be considered.

5) Others argue against this view with the contention that out passage today refers to two different groups: the former being the Pharisees and the latter being the charismatic Christians whose righteousness is insufficient.

Arguments against these views is that the passage we are studying today does not refer to strict antinomianism (anti-law).

6) The *"false prophets"* were simply Christian prophets.

What we can do, however, is acknowledge that the designation of the term *"false prophet"* need not be taken to apply to a particular group at all. The term can be applied in a generic way to any and all *professors of faith in Yahweh* who fulfill the description given in the passage.

That is, these are the ones who *look like sheep* yet bring forth *"bad fruit."*

> *Now, as regarding the apostles and prophets, act strictly according to the precept of the Gospel. Upon his arrival every apostle must be welcomed as the Lord; but he must not stay except one day. In case of necessity, however, he may stay the next day also; but if he stays three days, he is a false prophet. At his departure the apostle must receive nothing except food to last till the next night's lodging, but if he asks for money, he is a false prophet.*
> *Didache 11:3-6*

Indeed, we could say that Jesus or Matthew had no specific group in mind at all. What is far more grievous to Jesus and Matthew than the reality of the false prophets is the more pressing issue of their behavior.

> *However, not everyone speaking in ecstasy [in the Spirit] is a prophet, except he has the ways of the Lord about him. So by their ways must the true and false prophet be distinguished.*
> *Didache 11:8*

> *If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, "'Let us go after other gods, which you have not known, and let us serve them. you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.*
> *Deuteronomy 13:1-3*

Note that the emphasis of Deuteronomy and the Didache is not so much the reality of the false prophet, but their behavior.

There is one specific manifestation of these false prophets that comes into view: *charismatic enthusiasts.* By Matthew's standards, these individuals evidenced no righteousness within the faith community.

Some confirmation that the *false prophets* being spoken of in our text today are *charismatic enthusiasts* comes from the following verse later in Matthew's Gospel account which speaks of future deception from the time of its being spoken in that account.

> *For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.*
> *Matthew 24:24*

Beware of the false prophets, those who come to you looking like sheep while within they are predatory wolves.
Matthew 7:15

The *false prophets,* however, can also be understood in a general way and not specifically.

In the immediate context of this passage, the *false prophets who come to you looking like sheep* are people who appear to be something they are not.

It is the essence of false prophets that they pretend to have and proclaim the truth while their lives evidence that they themselves do not follow the truth.
Hagner – Matthew, page 183

And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray,
For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.
Matthew 24:11, 24

"in sheep's clothing" – tells us that they will appear to be proper members of the community of faith, the people of God. *Sheep* is a common Old Testament metaphor for the people of faith.

Then he led out his people like sheep and guided them in the wilderness like a flock.
Psalm 78:52

Know that the LORD, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his, we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.
Psalm 100:3

Matthew commonly applies this metaphor to the new believers.

Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.
Matthew 10:16

And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left.
Matthew 25:33

Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered."
Matthew 26:31

Since *sheep* in these verses falls into a proverbial metaphor, it would indicate that the *false prophets* are those who present themselves as holding to the truth.

"but inwardly are ravenous wolves" – despite their outward appearance and profession, these people are in fact, the mortal enemies of those who belong to the *flock of God.*

This biblical metaphor is drawn from the Old Testament and early writings.

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together.
Isaiah 11:6

A sinner has no more in common with a devout person than a wolf has with a lamb.
Sirach 13:17

He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.
John 10:12

The metaphor of wolves and sheep points to the fact that the wolves are the natural enemies of the truth. They are the deceivers of the true people of God.

The fact that the language of deception is characterized by such fierce imagery as *ravenous wolves* reveals the depth of contempt to which God holds it.

I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.
Acts 20:29

For in the last days false prophets and corrupters will be multiplied, and <u>the sheep will be turned into wolves</u>, and love be turned into hate.
Didache 16:3

There is critical importance being made in this warning against being taken in by those who appear, act and speak as if they are in the Kingdom. By necessity the disciple must be aware of false prophets since following them will lead only to the *death and dismemberment* of the flock.

You can recognize them by their deeds. One does not pick grapes from thorn bushes, does one? Or figs from thistles?
Matthew 7:16

"by their deeds" – points to the object of the ones performing the deeds who in this case are the false prophets.

In this verse and those that follow, Jesus offers a definition and critique of the false prophets. What is in question here is the fundamental concern with the false prophet's conduct.

"Fruits" is a natural and common metaphor for righteous deeds.

Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.
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 3:8, 10

Therefore, I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.
Matthew 21:43

But the fruit of the Spirit is . . .
Galatians 5:22

I am the vine and you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.
John 15:5

By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.
John 15:8

Thus, the deception of the false prophets has the potential of being uncovered by the discerning disciple even as these agents of unrighteousness work *throughout history* to lead the flock astray.

"Hear then, sir." I said, "shall I know their workings (fruits), seeing that both angels dwell with me?" "Hear," he said, "and understand their workings (fruits). Now see the works of the angel of wickedness also. First of all, he is quick tempered and bitter and senseless, and his works (fruits) are evil, overthrowing the servants of God. Whenever the he enters into your heart, know him by his works (fruits).
Shepherd of Hermas Mandate 6.2.4

The idea here is that a Spirit-filled person will produce Spirit-filled fruit or works because that is who and *whose* he is. He can do no other. And he will do this for his life just as the life of a grape vine only produces grapes and not thistles.

He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines: he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it, and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.
Isaiah 5:2

The fruit of a tree shows the care it has had: so too does a man's speech disclose the bent of his mind.
Siach 27:6

R*ighteous deeds or righteous fruit come only from those who follow the teaching of Jesus.*

Thus every good tree produces good fruit, but a decayed tree produces bad fruit. A good tree is not able to produce bad fruit, nor can a decayed tree produce good fruit.
Matthew 7:17-18

Again, we see the parallel of good trees against bad trees where the obvious lesson from nature is employed for clarity: *the situation of trees is destined by their Creator to be what it is and this cannot be otherwise.*

"Good tree" – in the context of the Sermon on the Mount and in Matthew's Gospel, represents the disciples of Jesus, the people of the Kingdom, and the *"good fruit"* the righteousness expounded in the teaching of Jesus.

"decayed tree" – refers on the other hand, to those *(false prophets)* who only give the appearance of belonging to the truth and whose true character is revealed in the unrighteous deeds.

"bad" (fruit) ponerous -literally means spoiled.

"But thus says the LORD: like the <u>bad</u> figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten, so will I tread Zedekiah the king of Judah, his officials, and the remnant of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who dwell in the land of Egypt.
Jeremiah 24:8

It can also mean *"badness"* in an ethical sense.

so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the <u>evil</u> (ponerous) and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.
Matthew 5:45

If you then, who are <u>evil</u> (ponerous) know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him?
Matthew 7:11

The stress here is that it is contrary to nature for a good tree to produce bad fruit and a bad tree to produce good fruit.

When Jesus applies this metaphor to the righteous and unrighteous deeds, it underlines the absolute essential nature of righteousness for those who follow Jesus, as well as the impossibility for those who do not.

Every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Clearly, then, you can recognize the false prophets by their deeds.
Matthew – 7:19-20

The wording of the tree being *"cut down and thrown into the fire"* is the common metaphorical language of eschatological judgment.

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

Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age.
Matthew 13:40

And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.
Matthew 18:8-9

If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers, and the branches are gathered, thrown away into the fire, and burned.
John 15:6

This lack of righteousness will mean condemnation at the end.

What must be understood in this language is that *it is God who is the acting agent of condemnation and judgment* thus, intensifying the conclusion to this passage.

Thus you will recognize them by their fruits

This last verse brings us back to and draws inclusion with the first verse of the passage.

Beware of the false prophets, those who come to you looking like sheep while within they are predatory wolves.

As the sermon draws closer to its conclusion, we are presented with a stern warning against hypocrites and hypocrisy (although neither of these words is used). Some people pretend to be and appear to be something they really are not. These false prophets, as they are here called, can undermine the true flock if they are followed. The ultimate test of truth is in what these people do, not what they say. For what they do inescapably betrays their character and points to the judgment that awaits them. this passage thus points very vividly to the absolute importance of true righteousness – indeed its inevitability for the followers of Jesus and its impossibility for those who propose another way. The ultimate test of truth is in deeds, not claims, or pretentions. The Church must be very vigilant against appearances and empty words and press the criterion of good works in discerning the true from the false.
Hagner – Matthew, page 184