

The Tree and the Fruit: Part 1

False prophets are defined as those who, claim for themselves the capacity to define for others the will of God, but represent in their practice and teaching a false understanding of the will of God, specifically an understanding that is not in accord with scripture. Jesus is warning us of wolves that disguise themselves as sheep, so that their falseness is not necessarily immediately apparent.

16 You will know them by their fruits.

Jesus begins and ends this section of teaching with this same phrase “You will know them by their fruits”. The Greek word Karpos **καρπός** means fruit, here meaning result or outcome or product. For a tree, the kind of fruit it produces is a clear indication of it’s nature.

False Teaching, False Doctrines

Paul’s statement in 2 Cor 11:3-4 addresses this: **3 But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his trickery, your minds will be led astray from sincere and pure devotion to Christ. 4 For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, this you tolerate very well!**

False teachers are false concerning core, central doctrines of Christianity, not the areas that are reasonably discussed and result in small differences between what groups of Christians believe. We reason and discuss as brothers and sisters those areas where there are legitimate biblical disagreements, and we reserve our condemnation for those false teachings that are clearly against what the scripture teaches. Because I disagree with a group on a doctrinal issue, that does not mean that I can just write their entire group off as unbelievers, or lost. We reserve the title False Teacher for those who are truly, and on purpose, leading people astray by their doctrine. False teachers and false prophets only appear to care what the Bible says on an issue, they don’t have any real desire to follow God themselves, or lead others to follow God. False Teachers and Prophets are purposefully trying to deceive by their doctrine, leading people astray on purpose.

But for legitimate differences in interpretation of scripture, we’re supposed to approach brothers and sisters in humility and love. The Bible says in Gal 6:1 **Brothers and sisters, even if a person is caught in any wrongdoing, you who are spiritual are to restore such a person in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you are not tempted as well.** So, if we’re talking about a believer here, then we should help them in any way we can to be restored to Christ with gentleness and love, and not pile on condemnation. The best approach is to make sure that WE aren’t the one making the error. Stay in our Bible, and make sure that WE know what it says. We should "ALL" be as the Berean believers described in Acts 17:11 **"These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so."**

Notice that they didn’t immediately jump on some doctrine as the best thing since sliced bread, nor did they immediately condemn what they thought was in error. Instead, they heard with all readiness of mind, and then went back to the scriptures to ensure that what they were being taught was the truth! And so, as Paul said in Romans 14:1-5, we shouldn’t spend our time arguing over those areas that are not absolutely clear from scripture, about which it is reasonable for two bible-believing, theologically sound Christians to disagree. And when it comes to the grey areas, we are to reserve judgement. As Paul goes on to say in Romans 14:10 **10 But as for you, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or you as well, why do you regard your brother or sister with contempt? For we will all appear before the judgment seat of God.** Leave the judgement to God, and don’t presume to look down on the doctrinal understanding of others concerning things that aren’t absolutely clear from scripture. And continuing on in verse 13 **13 Therefore let’s not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this: not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s or sister’s way.** In other words, you’re better off not arguing with them in order to bring them around to your way of thinking, since you may cause them to do something which violates their conscience—and that will leave them worse off and could damage their relationship with God—for which You could be held accountable!

Purposeful Hypocrisy for Dishonest Gain

False prophets are false in the kind of life that they live. Matthew 23 is an indictment of the hypocritical and false religious leaders of Jesus day. **23 Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to His disciples, 2 saying: “The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses. 3 Therefore, whatever they tell you, do and comply with it all, but do not do as they do; for they say things and do not do them. 4 And they tie up heavy burdens and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as their finger. 5 And they do all their deeds to be noticed by other people; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of their garments. 6 And they love the place of honor at banquets, and the seats of honor in the synagogues,** Jesus has been pointing out in the Sermon on the Mount that this attitude is the very opposite of the way that Citizens of God are supposed to live their lives. Jesus mentions the way that the scribes were preying on the people in Luke 20:45 **45 And while all the people were listening, He said to the disciples, 46 “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love personal greetings in the marketplaces, and chief seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets, 47 who devour widows’ houses, and for appearance’s sake offer long prayers. These will receive all the more condemnation.”** False prophets aren’t saved, they are just acting like Christians to gain advantage over sheep. And so, we see that the particular kind of hypocrisy practiced by the false teachers and false prophets is not just the garden variety hypocrisy that comes from falling short of the standard of perfection that we teach. While we mourn our hypocrisy and repent of our sin, turning from our wicked ways to follow Jesus, false prophets do not. They revel in their hypocrisy, laughing as they “pull the wool over the eyes” of the sheep. This is the kind of hypocrisy that Jesus spends so much time condemning in the Gospels, when He confronts the religious leaders. False prophets purposely use religion as a cloak for bad living, and especially using religion to purposefully deceive for personal gain. The hypocrites **sound trumpets before them when they give, so that they are praised by the people** (Matt 6:2), **they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they will be seen by people** (Matt 6:5). **They make a gloomy face when they fast so that they will be noticed by people.** (Matt 6:16). They invalidate God’s Word, preferring their own traditions by preferring that people give to their church instead of take care of their own mother and father, even inventing a tradition to allow them to do so (Matt 15:3-9). They deny justice to the poor and refuse to show them mercy, instead taking bribes (Matt 23:23). These are not believers who fall short, and miss the mark. These are people who purposely set out to use religion to mask their greed and lust for money, power and influence. They lack integrity. They are not only different on the outside than on the inside, but they purposely cultivate this difference, they like it this way because their purpose is to deceive. In Matt 23:25 **“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence.** Notice again the reference to greed and lust. In Matt 23:27 **“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness.** Jesus says in Matt 23:25.