

A Tree and Its Fruit

Matthew 7:15-20

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Our text is Matthew 7, the gospel text. Last week, Jesus set out the stark choice between two roads, with two destinies, for two groups of people. Here turns to two kinds of prophets or teachers, symbolized by two kinds of trees, with two kinds of fruit. We shall make, appropriately, two points. The warning in v. 15 and the testing in verses 16-20.

I. The Warning

First, then, the warning. Matthew 7, verse 15: Watch out for, or beware of, false prophets. Just like last week where “enter by the narrow gate” was the only... imperative, this is the only imperative, the only command here. Watch out for false prophets. And again this is a present imperative – it is a perpetual need of the church. Be on your guard – beware of false prophets.

The connection – with last week -- is likely the idea that false prophets often will blur the distinction between the broad way and the narrow way. They are not advocates for the way of the cross, for the hard road of discipleship. The promise something easier – something incompatible with the whole ethos of the SOM, and thus people love them. These people make finding the narrow way hard, they obscure it. A prophet here could include those charismatics, who, just after this next, on the last day say:

“Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, are we not prophets?” Who, nonetheless, were workers of lawlessness destined for destruction. A sober passage which, Lord willing, we will look at next week.

Of course, if there are false prophets, it assumes there is a standard, and that there exist true prophets. True prophets are distinguished by the fact that they are admitted to the heavenly council of God and his court, his hosts. They stand in the presence of God and declare his word to the people. False prophets declare their own mind, or some muddled, distorted Word to the people. By extension, of course, the text would apply to anyone who claims inspiration or authority to speak for God. Any leader or teacher.

The first thing to see is that Jesus feels this is, and shall be, in his own day, and in the future, a real problem. The OT history is full of false prophets, who spoke their own minds instead of the Word of the Lord. Who, in their corrupt optimism, Jeremiah tells us, always say peace, peace, when there is no peace. They refuse to believe, much less pronounce, oracles of judgment, preferring to assure the people that all will be well. They heal the wound of the people of God lightly.

Jesus treats much of the Jewish leadership, the Pharisees and Sadducees, as belonging to this class. Blind leaders of the blind, he calls them, among other not-so-nice things. He sees these pseudo-prophets as growing more numerous in the days ahead. And John tells us, in his first epistle, that many anti-Christ's have gone out into the world in these last days.

The whole NT is full of warnings against this sort of false, or pseudo, prophet or teacher in these last days. Peter warns of the rise false teachers in 2 Peter 1, the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus), Colossians, Galatians, all warn repeatedly against false teaching. In 2 Corinthians, Paul deals at length with false or pseudo- apostles, who are subverting his authority. And if we move forward in time, we find that the church has had a long and tangled history of dealing with false teachers. They have, in God's providence, had their value, in that they have forced the church to clarify its teaching, to probe the deposit of faith, in response to their heresies. What we call Orthodoxy, right teaching, (the Great Tradition) has often been forged in controversy with false teachers.

Nevertheless, false teaching is not a good thing. It has done, and it is doing, immeasurable damage. For, its followers have been, and are, legion. The warning, thus, is not one we can ignore. We have no reason to believe FP's are going to diminish or go away. In fact, Scripture indicates the opposite. They increase toward the end. The man of lawlessness, himself an/the anti-Christ who deceives, will be, Paul says in 2 Thess. Slain by the breath of the Lord's mouth at his appearing.

It turns out that the ground we tread, the ground of the revelation of the holy God, has proven to be very fruitful ground for countless errors which exploit, weaken, and damage the sheep. To this very hour the church is full of deluded crackpots (Crockett), as well as apparently sincere and gifted people, and every kind of person in between, who twist, distort, and mangle the Word of God, with various and sundry corrupt motives. They come to you, Jesus says, in sheep's clothing. Notice: they come to you: They arise in, or they insinuate themselves into, the church. They desire the hearing of the Christian community. We Christians can be very trusting – even naïve – people when it comes to public authority in the church. And we have made many false prophets quite wealthy.

We're taught to be submissive, not to judge, to be patient, to believe the best. It appears almost as if false teachers know this, so they come to you. But they are deceptive. They come in sheep's clothing, but they are not sheep. They are good

at disguising themselves as sheep. They can put the wardrobe of sheep on. They know the culture they are in, they know the trappings of piety, they know just what to do to impress you with their spirituality. They have the form of godliness, but not its living power. They can learn Christianese, that whole unreal language of pious truisms, which many popular teachers (and many in the church) seem to traffic in. High Christian theology, reverent engagement with the deep structures of Holy Scripture, they neither care to, nor can they, engage in. Or, when they do attempt to do it, they distort it, often without the slightest knowledge that they are in over their heads – or that they are, in fact, teaching falsehood.

But they can shoehorn Bible citations into ordinary conversations, they can feign earnestness, they can preach winsomely, they can win friends and influence people, they can accumulate a following, and that's usually enough of a disguise, enough external adornment, to pass as a sheep in the eyes of many faithful. So, they are deceptive, sometimes quite skillfully so. No false prophet announces himself as such. For, even if Christians are too prone to trust, we are, nonetheless, unlikely to succumb to open invitations to sin, or do evil, or renounce some basic doctrine.

So, it's rare that false teachers make flat out heretical statements, that are too obvious to miss. If that were the case, Jesus' warning here would hardly be necessary. Some subtlety and sophistication are needed to seduce most people. So, like Satan, who can disguise himself as an angel of light, they dress up, they clothe themselves as sheep, but Jesus says: Inwardly they are ferocious wolves. Greedy, ravenous wolves. The point is that they destroy the sheep. Sheep are defenseless against wolves, without good shepherds guarding them. These are not shepherds who guard the lives of the sheep, they are not even hirelings who run when the wolf approaches, they ARE wolves.

Paul, in what could be an early fulfillment of Jesus' warning, told the Ephesian elders in Acts 20: After my departure, from among yourselves, fierce wolves will arise, not sparing the flock, and they will speak twisted things to draw the disciples away after them.

Doctrinal error is not harmless. It is IN ITSELF sin, and it leads to sin. It harms and seduces the sheep. Often, especially long-term, it likely does more damage to the church than open rebellion and disobedience. Wolves destroy the flock. Therefore, Jesus takes the threat seriously. Guard yourself, be vigilant, be discerning, beware, watch out for false prophets. And the warning assumes a people, a community of disciples, who know the contours of the apostolic faith well, and who can discern the difference between the Good Shepherd's voice and the voice of a false shepherd.

Thus, the warning calls us to become students of scripture, armed, discerning, sober and alert. For you can't watch for false teaching if you have not matured in

the faith, if your own Scriptural spectacles are out of adjustment. As Hebrews 5 puts it -rather pointedly, to a church that was being seduced:

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, ¹³ for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. ¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

Heed the Word of God – train your powers of discernment. That’s the warning.

II. The Testing

Our second point is the testing. Verse 17: By their fruits you will recognize them. Jesus is emphasizing this discernment by way of fruit, for he repeats these very words at the end, in v.20. A dressed-up wolf can perhaps be mistaken for a sheep (for a while anyway), but trees cannot hide their identity for long. Eventually, and inevitably, the nature of tree (or the wolf-like nature) reveals itself. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? Of course not. The nature of the fruit will tell us about the nature of the tree. Likewise, Jesus continues, every good/healthy tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. Or, put negatively, a good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit.

The point is simple enough. If you are discerning, people will eventually show you who and what they are. Nature prevails over the various artifices we construct to hide it. Let’s say three things about discerning this fruit. I’ll call them character, doctrine, and results.

Character

First, character. Fruit, in this case, is Christlikeness. If the fruit of the Spirit is present, that is a good indication that you are not dealing with a wolf. The fruit of the Spirit is to be esteemed over the gifts, as Paul demonstrates in 1 Cor. 13, and wolves and false prophets can, mysteriously, be gifted. They can prophesy, work miracles, and cast out demons in Jesus’ name.

In the larger context of the Sermon of the Mount, Jesus would see fruit as poverty of spirit, meekness, showing mercy, purity of heart, thirsting for righteousness, and peacemaking. He uses similar language, later in Matthew’s gospel, when he says, in the context of giving and account for every careless word... that the good man, out of his good treasure, brings forth what is good. Speech will eventually disclose character. And wolves will be unable, over time, to tame their tongues. James, using language much like we have here, says the

same about our tongues, which can bless God, and curse men made in his image.

These things ought not to be so, he says: Does a spring pour forth both fresh salt water? Can a fig tree bear olives or a grapevine produce figs? Again, natures will reveal themselves. In teachers, pay special attention to their speech as a whole. So we look for the fruit of the Spirit (gentle, loving, kind, patient?), we look for the life of the beatitudes, this is the first type of fruit.

Doctrine

The second thing is doctrine, the teaching itself. The faith has been once and for all delivered to the saints. There is an apostolic deposit of truth in the Holy Scriptures, and the saints, all of them, not just elders or pastors, must know it, guard it, and contend for it. For false prophets will say a lot of good and true things. But they will usually distort a piece of the truth all out of proportion. The emphasis will definitely be in the wrong place. And disordered truth is the most powerful form of falsehood.

In addition, false prophets love novelty and innovation (new insights allegedly never seen by anybody before). They despise holy tradition and teaching which unfolds the mind of Scripture. They love what the Holy Spirit is allegedly showing them. What the Holy Spirit has taught the church for 20 centuries, not so much. This is why Paul, in Gal 1, can say that if even he OR an angel from heaven, preaches another gospel, other than the apostolic gospel: Let him be accursed. We are called, by John, to TEST the spirits, meaning test the teaching of people who claim to be inspired. Doctrine must be tested, and it can't be tested unless we have some grasp of its contours and boundaries.

Results

Finally, the third thing here, the results. And this one takes some time, but we should watch the effects of what is being taught closely. False prophets will, Moses said, often seduce the people to follow other gods. False teaching, and we see throughout the Pastoral Epistles, results in ungodliness and division, and endless disputes. It upsets the faith of people and spreads like gangrene. But the goal of faithful, apostolic doctrine is love, from a pure heart, with good conscience, and a sincere faith. That's the goal of all true teaching – love. Out of a purified heart.

Let me conclude with a warning. A text like this can create a wrong spirit in us. We are not called here to a kind of hyper-suspicion or heresy hunting, which can be the favorite pastime of some. Such people can rip up the wheat in their zeal to rid the church of tares. We are certainly not called to become wranglers who quarrel about words, and minor details, or subordinate doctrines. The test of discerning fruit, that we are given here, is a reliable test, but it is not always easy,

and it is certainly not always able to be done quickly. Doctrinal teaching and its fruits take time to develop, and they take time to evaluate well. That's why verse 19 is important, it says:

Every tree that does not bear fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. The broad road DOES lead to destruction, but ultimately, it is God's eschatological judgment which infallibly and finally deals with this problem.

Our judgments are provisional and partial. And we must not forget this. Nevertheless, this text calls us to due diligence – sober, humble, charitable diligence -- to engaging our critical faculties, informed by all the virtues Jesus has taught us through the whole Sermon on the Mount. In this spirit then, watch out for false prophets, for by their fruit (lives, doctrine, and its effects) you will, in time, recognize them. For true sheep heed only the voice of the Good Shepherd, and they will not follow a stranger. Amen.

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