

Testing Fruit

MATTHEW 7:15-20

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TODAY WE ARE GOING TO TALK ABOUT THE SECOND OF THREE tests that are exclusively designed for people who profess to be Christians. They are meant to help professing Christians determine how genuine their Christianity really is. We need these tests, because it is all too easy for us to become self-deceived into thinking we are someone other than whom we really are.

Before I talk about the second test in particular, I want to say something about the relationship all these tests have with the doctrine of assurance of salvation. What I said last week might have caused some of you to doubt whether or not you are saved. That doubt may be a good thing and it may not be a good thing, depending on the status of your love relationship with God.

When properly applied, these tests will help a professing Christian understand whether or not he truly loves God. And our love for God is far more important than what we profess to be. A person who has a deep love for God may fail at a number of points on these three tests recorded at the end of MATTHEW 7. But even though he has failed, he should not doubt his salvation. However, if the person in question does not have a deep love for God, then that person, after discovering that he has failed at certain points on these tests, should doubt the fact that the salvation he thinks he has is genuine.

Perhaps the best way to understand this is to ask yourself the following question, "Is it possible for me to hurt the one I love?" The obvious answer is yes. Now ask yourself another question. "Is it possible for me to knowingly hurt the one I love and not feel bad about it? If we answer yes to this question, then we are deceiving ourselves. The very fact that we don't feel bad about hurting a certain person means that we don't truly love that person.

When we apply these three tests to our lives, we are simply allowing ourselves to discover whether or not we are hurting the One we say we love. The tests are not meant to force us to doubt our love for God. They are meant to help us see whether or not we are hurting God by not being the kind of person He wants us to be and by not doing what He wants us to do. If we discover we are hurting the God we love, then we will certainly feel bad and we will do what must be done to correct the situation. If we don't feel bad about hurting God, then the tests prove that our love for God is not genuine. They prove that we are counterfeit Christians.

The majority of Christians who call themselves evangelicals believe in the doctrine of assurance of salvation. In other words, they believe it is important to know that you are saved and that you cannot lose your salvation.

But as we talk about the problem of self-deception, let us keep in mind that the assurance of our salvation must be rooted and grounded in love. Let me paraphrase some verses from the Book of 1 JOHN that talk about assurance of salvation. *"God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God and God in him. We know that the bond of love we have between ourselves and God is real, because the Holy Spirit witnesses to our spirits that it is real. The reason we can have confidence on the Day of Judgment is because we know that God loves us and we know that we love God. Perfect love drives out fear."* And then, we have those famous words from ROMANS 8, words of one who has assurance of his salvation. *"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

So, when we apply these tests to our lives, and discover that we do not have a passing grade, it does not necessarily mean we are not saved or we have lost our salvation. If you find out that you do not have a passing grade and feel bad about it because it grieves you to hurt the One you love so very much, then there is no reason to doubt your salvation. The test has proven your salvation to be true. But, if you fail these tests and you don't feel bad about it, then the tests have proven your Christianity to be counterfeit.

The first test that we looked at last week was the "test of difference." When we apply this test to our lives, we discover whether or not we broke away from the crowd when we decided to become Christians in the first place. We also discover whether or not we are presently going the way of the crowd by rushing after things that will be destroyed in the end.

TODAY WE COME TO THE SECOND TEST. IT IS THE TEST OF fruits. It is more difficult to understand than the first test, because it involves an evaluation that takes in other people as well as ourselves. **At this second checkpoint we are testing our ability to recognize truth.** And, our ability to recognize truth says a lot about the genuine nature of our Christianity. True sheep will be able to recognize the voice of the True Shepherd. They will be able to tell the difference between the voice of the True Shepherd and the voice of the false shepherd.

Jesus said, **"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves."** Can you recognize a false prophet when you are around one? Can you recognize whether you, yourself, are playing the role of a false prophet? Your ability to recognize

the false prophet or your inability to recognize the false prophet will help you to understand whether your Christianity is real or whether it is fake.

Of course, the immediate question that confronts us now is this: Who are these false prophets that Jesus is talking about? Some commentators believe the false prophets are the people who proclaim things that are obviously false, like making a prediction that does not come true. Other commentators say this is a reference to people who proclaim the truth but live the lie. They don't walk the talk. They say that this is what Jesus meant when He said, "**By their fruit you will recognize them.**" In other words, not by their talk, but by their walk you will recognize them.

Now I am going to complicate things by saying that I believe these two viewpoints are both partially right and they are both partially wrong. We will not understand what Jesus is talking about here if we only look at the talk or if we only look at the walk of another person. We must look at both. And when we look at both, the thing that makes the person a false prophet is not going to be obvious. It is not going to be someone who making a prediction that obviously does not come true. And it is not going to be someone who has behavior that obviously contradicts what the Bible teaches. What Jesus is talking about here is far more subtle.

The picture Jesus paints is not one of wolves in the middle of a herd of sheep. Rather, it is wolves dressed in sheep's clothing who are mixed in with the sheep. The real difficulty about this kind of false prophet is that, at first, you never imagine he is a false prophet. In JUDE 4, there is a reference to people of bad influence who have "secretly slipped in among you." They look like right people. They have the look of sheep. Nothing in their speech or behavior seems terribly wrong. In fact everything seems right. This is the picture that Jesus is giving us.

The next time I preach I want to take a careful look at the testimony of a false prophet recorded in MATTHEW 7:22. The false prophet says, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?" Everything in that testimony sounds good. Both the proclamation that Jesus is Lord and the good actions to back up the proclamation are there.

SO IF THESE PEOPLE SOUND RIGHT AND LOOK RIGHT, THEN HOW in the world are we supposed to tell if they are false prophets? What is their basic problem? To help answer this question, let me take you back to the Book of Jeremiah. In that book there were many false prophets who all had one thing in common. What they had in common is revealed in JEREMIAH 8:11. This is what that verse says about false prophets: "They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace."

There is a sense in which we can say that every Christian is called to be a prophet. I am not talking about the gift of prophecy that enables certain people to communicate truth in a special way so people from his generation can clearly understand. Not everyone has that kind of gift. What I am

talking about is the duty every Christian has to use his words and deeds to proclaim truth in a way that will cause conviction. This is what Jesus meant when He said that we are to be the salt of the earth. When salt enters a wound, it hurts. When a Christian is placed in an environment of sin, his words and actions will expose the sin making some people feel very uncomfortable. His words and actions will cause people to become convicted.

Jeremiah was a true prophet. He upset a lot of people by revealing to them that they had a serious problem. But, the false prophets tried to dress the wound as if it were not serious. False prophets try hard to make people feel good about themselves. They don't deal directly with the terrible wound called "sin" that festers in the hearts and lives of people both in the church as well as outside of the church. The false prophet does not like to confront sin head on, and that is his main recognizable flaw.

Jesus said that we could recognize a false prophet by his fruit. The fruit of the false prophet is both audible and visual. You can see it and you can hear it. *Let's first consider the fruit that is audible, that is the very words spoken by the false prophet.*

As you listen to the false prophet speak, you get the impression that there really is no serious problem at all. Or, if there is a serious problem, the problem lies with bigoted, narrow-minded people like Jeremiah who constantly say that there is a problem.

I recently heard a market report that talked about advertisers who are now targeting the gay community, because they know the gay community has billions of dollars to spend. You can now expect to see more and more ads in newspapers and magazines and on television that will promote the gay lifestyle, because the advertisers want their money, and because it is becoming the trendy thing to do. Organizations that cater to weddings will increasingly be displaying ads that will depict gay weddings and marriages as being trendy and attractive. I can guarantee you that it will become more difficult in the future for a person to stand up and say, "This is wrong." It will become more and more difficult to point out the wrong, because more and more people will be saying, "There is nothing wrong, and you are bigoted by saying there is something wrong."

The false prophet will rarely say anything that will upset the majority of people. If the majority of people think some kind of activity is sin, he will agree. If they don't think it is sin, even though it is, he will also agree or he will say nothing. He will not deal directly with the wound that needs healing. Related to this characteristic of not confronting sin head on is a neglect to talk about hell and the wrath of God and the final judgment. These are subjects that are not popular to talk about these days. Man's total inability to save himself is also not emphasized. You will rarely hear the false prophet saying that it is only the blood of Jesus Christ that can save you from going to hell and that you must confess your sins and repent and admit you cannot save yourself. The false prophet does not speak in a way that will convict people of their need to turn to God for salvation from sin. The words of the false prophet fail to bring about this kind of

conviction in the hearts of people who hear him speak.

The words of the false prophet sound good. They tell us to look to Jesus and forget about the troubles of the world. This is not a totally wrong thing to say, but to say it in a way that discourages a person from examining himself is wrong. The Bible tells us to examine ourselves and to prove ourselves and to use this last section of the Sermon on the Mount to test ourselves.

Let's now consider some of the behavior characteristics (or fruit) of a false prophet. The main problem we just noticed about the words of the false prophet is also the main problem with his actions. His actions fail to convict people of their need to admit they are sinners and repent and turn to God for salvation. And, here are some of the reasons why the actions of the false prophet fail to convict other people.

First of all, the passion for holiness in the life of a false prophet is not clearly seen. I know that behavior change is a gradual process for all of us, but passion for holiness is not a gradual process for a true Christian. The whole doctrine of the rebirth demands an immediate change in our desire to be holy because the God we love is holy. But this passion for holiness is not clearly evident in the life of the false prophet. You may hear him making fun of sin or laughing at jokes about sin. When sin is depicted in the news or on the television set or on the movie screen, you will not see him cringe with an expression of dissatisfaction. There is no passion for holiness that causes him to feel sick to his stomach at the sight of sin.

Another thing that is not clearly evident in the life of a false prophet is a willingness to be vulnerable when he has done something wrong by admitting the wrong he has done. We all do things that are wrong. We all violate Biblical principle from time to time. But how many of us are willing to share our sins with other people. James 5:16 urges us to confess our sins to one another, but the false prophet has trouble doing this.

And, related to this problem of failing to be vulnerable with other people is an overall lack of true humbleness. True humbleness is the ability to maintain a balance of attitude. If we are going to be humble, then there are two extreme attitudes that we must avoid. One is the attitude that we have no shortcomings and we are fully living up to our potential. False prophets with this kind of attitude will impress us with their skill and their busy activity and their positive outlook on life. The other extreme attitude we must avoid is not taking our shortcomings seriously. This attitude is opposite from the extreme that doesn't admit to the shortcomings. The false prophet with this kind of attitude admits his weakness and accepts it without any attempt to improve it. He may even laugh about it. Now true humbleness is the ability to avoid these two extremes. It is the ability to admit to one's shortcomings while, at the same time, working to improve the shortcomings. The false prophet tends to lack this ability.

So how do we visually recognize the fruit of the false prophet? The thing that makes the actions of the false prophet so destructive is that his actions fail to convict people around him of their own need to turn to God. A person who has a passion for holiness will convict me of my need to be holy. When someone in my small group confesses his sin to the rest of the people in the group, it often sets off a chain reaction where others will be convicted and desire to confess their sins as well and turn to God for help. And when a person allows others around him to know his own shortcomings and expresses his great desire to trust God so he can improve, then he will influence others with his humble witness. Revival takes place when the actions of many people cause other people to become convicted and change.

I AM TRYING TO GIVE YOU A DEFINITION OF THE SHEEP'S clothing prophet. What I am trying to do is not easy, because it will tempt us to judge people the wrong way. It will tempt us to place certain people on a black list or talk about them behind their backs or pronounce final judgment on them. These are things we shouldn't do.

On the other hand, we do need to watch out for false prophets. We need to know that a false prophet may be anyone, and even you and I can play the role of the false prophet. Whenever a person's words and actions fail to cause conviction in this world of sin, that person is playing the role of a false prophet. It is very important that we can recognize "salt-less-ness" when it is present. Our failure to recognize it only means that we are part of the problem and, most likely, are playing the role of the false prophet ourselves.

Revival takes place when people come under conviction that they are sinners who need to repent and turn to God for salvation. And revival will take place when God's people are doing their part to be true prophets.

Do you grieve when you hurt the God you love? Do you know that it hurts God when you are not speaking and acting in a way that causes people to become convicted of sin and turn to God? The Sermon on the Mount commands us to have that kind of influence, and the true Christian grieves when he realizes he is not obeying His Lord's command. If you are grieving for yourself and for others who, like yourself, are failing to be a good prophet, then the words of our Lord have done you good, and they will motivate you to change.

But, if you are not grieving over the fact that your actions and words do nothing to cause people to recognize their own need for salvation, then there is good reason for you to doubt your salvation. By not feeling bad about hurting the God you say you love, you have proven that you do not love Him. When we are deceiving ourselves, then it is good for us to be shaken into doubting the salvation we think we have. Because, the worse thing that can happen to us is to think we are Christians when we really are not.