

# OpenTheo

## Matthew 7:15 - 7:20



### Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this teaching, Steve Gregg discusses the dangers of false teachers and prophets in the church. He points out that just because someone claims to be a Christian and speaks biblical language, it doesn't necessarily make them trustworthy. Jesus warns us to observe the fruits of their teachings, and Gregg emphasizes the importance of examining everything they say, particularly those things that are urgent. He also reminds us that true prophets will always speak in accordance with Scripture.

### Transcript

Today we'll be turning to Matthew chapter 7, verses 15 through 20, and this is part of the Sermon on the Mount, which we have been studying together in these sessions for some little time now. We are in the process of teaching through the book of Matthew, verse by verse, and for quite a while now we've been lingering in these chapters 5, 6, and 7, which contain the Sermon on the Mount. I hope you've been able to catch much of that.

If you have not, I hope that you'll be able to benefit from whatever portion of it you can catch. Anyway, we have in this passage a warning against false prophets. In Matthew 7, verses 15 through 20, Jesus said, Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.

You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.

Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore, by their fruits you will know them. Now, it's clear here, several things are clear.

One is that there is a danger of being led astray by false prophets. Now, a false prophet is a person who professes to be speaking for God, but really isn't. And there are many who profess to speak for God, and not all of them would be speaking in the prophetic way that we normally think of.

Some saying, Thus saith the Lord, and giving an oracle like some of the prophets in the Bible did. Of course, there are people who do that, and there are people who are true prophets, and there are people who are false prophets of that type. But really, anybody who professes to speak for God, it could be me, it could be someone else you listen to on the radio, it could be a pastor of your church, or of some other church, it could be somebody coming to your door with another gospel, but anybody who professes to be a spokesman for what God wants you to know could be one of these false prophets.

Now, Jesus has just said in verses 13 and 14, that you need to enter into the narrow gate, and not be led on the wide road. He said there are many that find the wide road, but very few on the narrow road. Well, there will be some who will profess to be teaching you where that narrow road is, but they will be false teachers.

There will be some who will be broadening the road for you in their religious teaching. There are some pastors, some preachers, some Christian authors, who would give you permission to do things that really the Bible would caution you against. There are some who would say that you're saved even if you're disobedient to God.

This is certainly not taught anywhere in the Bible, but there are some people who teach it today. They think they're teaching a grace message. Actually, they're teaching an antinomian message.

They're teaching a message of false grace. They're like the ones that Jude mentions, who turn the grace of God into license, or into permission to sin. That is a false teaching.

But there are many out there who teach something that will get you off of the narrow road and onto the broad road if you follow their teaching. So Jesus tells you, since you need to stay on the narrow road, beware of those that would lead you astray off of that path. He refers to such people as false prophets.

And although, of course, in the Bible a prophet is a specific thing, it is a person who speaks actual oracles directly from God. Yet, there are many false teachers, false apostles, false prophets, false elders that are referred to in Scripture. I won't take you to all the passages that speak of them, but, for example, in Acts chapter 20, Paul talks to the elders of the church of Ephesus and tells them there will be false elders that will arise among them, wolves in sheep's clothing, the very term that Jesus used here of false prophets.

He says they will come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they're ravenous wolves. Well, in Acts chapter 20, Paul mentions there will be elders that would rise up who are wolves in sheep's clothing. So they're false elders.

We are told of false teachers that would arise in 2 Peter chapter 2, verse 1. There are false apostles mentioned by Paul in 2 Corinthians chapters 10-12. So we know that

whether it's false prophets or some other kind of false ministry, these are the ones that will lead you astray if you listen to them and follow them. And therefore Jesus says, beware of them.

Now, when none less than Jesus grabs you by the shoulder and says, beware, beware of this, He is saying there's great danger that you might overlook and you might fall into a trap if you're not paying attention. So let me urge you to beware. Now, how do we beware? We need to be wary.

We need to be aware of the dangers of false prophets and we need to know how to recognize them. It says, first of all, that they come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Isn't that interesting? Sort of like the Aesop's fable about the wolf in sheep's clothing, who put on sheep's clothing so he could get among the flock.

Jesus himself has the same imagery. Now, sheep, of course, in the Bible are Christians. Or at least in Jesus' analogy, they would be harmless people.

Sheep are harmless. Wolves are dangerous. But in the larger picture of the biblical teaching, the sheep are God's own people and the wolves are not.

The wolves are those who would harm God's people. Now, a wolf, or let's put it this way, somebody who wants to harm God's people, who wants to harm Christians, can do so in one of two ways. One way would be to have a frontal attack.

In fact, there are times when the church has been persecuted by overt atheistic or Muslim or some other religious or ideological camp that did not in any sense pretend to be Christian and just made a frontal attack and waged war of persecution against Christians. That's one way that the enemy may seek to attack and hurt Christians. The other way is much more subtle, and that is to bring corruption and error into the church unnoticed.

In Jude, we are warned about false teachers who have crept in unawares into the church. These are people who are wolves, just like the ones that would come on like a frontal attack, but they have come in sheep's clothing. They're disguised as Christians.

Now, I hope that you'll take this seriously. We're talking about people here who look like Christians. They are acting like they are Christians.

They are professing to be Christians. They are among the sheep. They are in the church.

Please think about this for a moment. We're not talking about the cultist. We're not talking about the atheist or the communist.

We're not talking about the Muslim. We're talking about the person who's in the church

who looks just like a Christian. Now, how do you know? I mean, if they look like a Christian, that's what certainly a sheep's clothing suggests, is that outwardly they have the appearance of being a sheep.

It's what's hidden from you. It's what's in their heart that is really corrupt. But for all outward appearances, they appear to be Christians.

Well, how will you know the true from the false? Well, Jesus goes on and says in verse 16, You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit.

Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cast down and thrown into the fire. So these bad trees, they go into the fire. They're lost.

And his final statement in verse 20 is, Therefore, by their fruits you will know them. Okay, you need to know the false from the true, the false teachers, the false prophets, the false apostles, the false elders, from the true ones. How do you know? Jesus makes it very clear.

You know them by their fruits. Well, okay, what are their fruits? Now, Christians who, of course, have read the New Testament, may immediately think of Paul's comments in Galatians 5, 22, and 23 about the fruits of the Spirit, and say, Ah, we will know the true from the false by the fruits of the Spirit. And that's love, joy, peace, gentleness, meekness, self-control.

But you know, these areas, what we call the fruits of the Spirit, can be counterfeited. It's true. There are other religions that have the appearance of peace and of joy and of self-control and of goodness that they impart to their people, which are not really of the Spirit.

And after all, are these not the very things that constitute the sheep's clothing? What Jesus is saying is you can't tell by looking at them necessarily that they are wolves. They look like sheep. Now, if you look at a person and he seems to have the fruit of the Spirit, let's say he seems very loving or peaceful or joyful or self-controlled, that could be a true fruit of the Spirit, or it could be the sheep's clothing he's wearing.

That is not the fruit by which you know them. Because, really, if we're supposed to recognize a true prophet by the fruit of the Spirit, how do we know for sure that the fruit that we see is fruit of the Spirit and that it's not a counterfeit of the same? Well, we can understand a little better what is meant by the fruit of a false prophet by comparing it with a similar passage over in Luke. Many times these passages in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew have parallels in Luke.

And in Luke 12, verses... I'm sorry, not Luke. I'm wrong about that. We're talking about

Matthew 12 here.

So, if you were turning to Luke, my apologies. Turn to Matthew 12. Jesus makes a very similar statement to that which we find here in verses 33 through 37.

Now, listen. If you're paying attention, you'll notice a very close parallel. Matthew 12, 33.

Now, were you paying attention? Did you notice this? This paragraph begins with this statement. Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or else make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for a tree is known by its fruit. That's the very thing that Jesus is talking about in Matthew 7. The tree is known by its fruit.

And then he expounds on it. If you are evil, how can you speak good things? He says a man who is good in his heart will speak good things. A man who is evil in his heart will speak evil things.

Isn't that exactly parallel to Jesus saying a good tree produces good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit? It's quite clear that the fruit that he's referring to is the words that come out of their mouths. You can judge them by what they say. So, a false prophet is known by what he says.

That's the fruit. There's confirmation of this back in Jeremiah chapter 11. Jeremiah was a true prophet, of course.

However, in chapter 11 of Jeremiah, verses 18 and 19, he learned of a plot that people were making against him to kill him. It says, Now the Lord gave me knowledge of it, and I know it, for you showed me their doings. But I was like a docile lamb brought to the slaughter, and I did not know that they had devised schemes against me, saying, Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, and let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name may be remembered no more.

Now, notice they were talking about killing Jeremiah. And they said, figuratively speaking, let us destroy the tree with its fruit. Well, he was the tree, and the fruit was his prophecies.

They didn't like his prophecies, so they thought they'd get rid of that by killing him. Notice he says, I was like a docile lamb among them, but in danger. Because why? There were wolves, and he was a sheep.

He was not a wolf in sheep's clothing, as some false prophets are, but he was a tree that had fruit. And they wanted to cut down the tree and get rid of the fruit. What were they after? They wanted to eliminate his prophesying.

They didn't like his message. What Jesus is saying is that the fruit of a prophet, whether true or false, is his message. You will know them by their message, by what they say, not

necessarily by their behavior.

They may look perfectly like a sheep. They may act exactly like a Christian. And in many senses, they may even talk like a Christian, but there will be things that they say that will make it clear that they are wolves.

Now, this agrees perfectly with the Old Testament warnings about false prophets, because twice Moses warned the people of Israel that there would be false prophets, and told them how to recognize a false prophet from a true one. Very useful. In Deuteronomy 13, 1-3, Moses said, If there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, and gives you a sign or a wonder, That's pretty impressive.

and the sign or the wonder comes to pass with which he spoke to you, And he said, That is, if this prophet 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. Now notice this.

Here is a case of false prophets. Moses warns against them. These false prophets might do true signs and wonders.

They may give you a sign or a wonder, and it actually comes to pass. So here we have prophets that have some kind of supernatural backing. But it's not from God.

They are trying to lead you after other gods, or in other words, away from the true God. Lead you away from what you know, and what God has revealed to you. It is their message, in other words, that shows them to be false prophets.

They may have signs and wonders as impressive as true prophets have. But their message gives them away. And notice he says, by allowing you to be confronted with these false prophets, God is testing you to see if you are loyal to him or not.

Are you? When someone comes to you with a false message that is contrary to what God has said in the Scripture, and they look like a godly person, they look Christian, are you loyal to God? You are being tested. Will you be loyal to the truth that God has revealed, or will you go after this error of this false prophet? Also in Deuteronomy chapter 18, God was warning the Jews about false prophets, and it says in verse 20, In other words, you can tell a false prophet by what he says. In this case, he makes a prediction and it doesn't happen.

Well, then God wasn't speaking by him. You can tell he's a false prophet. So Moses, in Deuteronomy 13 and in Deuteronomy 18, gives two very good tests of how to know a false prophet.

One is if he leads you away from the truth that God has told you. Secondly, if he makes a

prediction and it doesn't come true. In either case, the person is shown to be a false prophet.

Whatever else may be impressive about him, beware of him. He may look like a sheep, but he's a wolf in sheep's clothing, even if he may not be fully aware of it. Beware yourself.

Now notice, both of these things that Moses said had to do with judging a prophet by what he says. He predicts something, or he teaches a doctrine, or he leads you astray. This is what identifies a person as a false prophet, or likewise a false teacher.

It says in 2 Peter 2 and verse 1, There were false prophets among the people, and likewise there shall be false teachers among you, who shall privily bring in damnable heresies. Okay? Damnable heresies is how you know a false teacher. Now, what is a damnable heresy? How do you know if a false teacher is telling the truth or not? Now, you'll find many teachers, probably including myself, may tell you things that you haven't heard maybe before.

They might not agree with what your church teaches. I don't know. You may find that people teach things that are unfamiliar to you, but that doesn't mean they're heresies.

The way to know if they are true or false is to go to the Scriptures. Every prophet that God sends will speak agreeably with the Scriptures themselves. If they do not, they are a false prophet.

Now, just because your church may teach something that may turn out not to be biblical, doesn't mean that you should trust it just because it's your church, or your favorite teacher on the radio, or favorite author, or Christian TV personality, or whatever. The Word of God is the Word of God, and whatever does not agree with it is false. In Isaiah chapter 8 and verse 20, the prophet Isaiah was warning not to go to false prophets and also occultists, and he said, Whoever does not speak according to this word, there is no light in him.

If they do not speak according to this word, he said, there is no light in them. You will know a prophet by his fruit, and the fruit is his words. Because Jesus said, just as a tree produces the fruit that comes from its inner nature, so does a man speak that which comes out of his inner nature.

That's why every man will be judged by every idle word that he speaks. Those idle or careless words we speak show what's in our hearts, because Jesus said, out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. So what a man speaks in the name of God will disclose whether he's a true prophet or a false prophet, a true teacher or a false teacher, a true apostle or a false apostle, a true elder or a false elder.

Now, by the way, many of you listening can probably think of someone that you've been

exposed to. They might be someone who holds an office in your church, might be somebody that you know from some other place, some other person professing to be a Christian, and their message is maybe they've got something you're not sure about that they're saying, and they're saying, oh, this is the gospel, this is what the Bible teaches, or whatever. How do you know if they're true or false? They might be an elder in your church, they might be the pastor.

They might profess to be a prophet or an apostle, who knows. They might simply be a teacher, like myself on the radio or somewhere else that you listen to teaching. You must compare what they say with the word of God, and if they do not speak according to this word, there is no light in them.

That is what Isaiah said in Isaiah chapter 8 and verse 20. Now, Jesus said you cannot gather figs from thistles or grapes from thorn bushes, and likewise you can't get good truth consistently from a bad prophet, a false prophet. Now, it is of course not the case that a bad tree can never produce one specimen of good fruit.

An apple tree that is usually not a very good producer and is not a very healthy tree might yet produce a good apple once in a while. Likewise, an apple tree that is good might produce a bad apple once in a while. Perhaps not very often, because the tree generally produces the kind of fruit that shows whether the tree is good or bad.

But Jesus is not saying that you'd never hear one good word out of a false prophet or out of a false teacher. Generally speaking, in order to be deceptive, a person can't lie all the time or else he'll be caught too quickly. It's too easy to get caught in a lie.

Usually false teaching and false prophets cloak what they have to say, their distinctive error, in an environment or in a matrix of true things. The Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, have tremendously false doctrine about Christ, but they cloak much of their teaching in some true things. There are some things that the traditional churches have overlooked, some issues, and have not done well.

When the Jehovah's Witnesses point out in the Scriptures that the church you go to may be wrong on this point or that point, or the traditions of the churches are wrong on this point, they can sometimes do that. So can other cults, because the churches do have their traditions. Sometimes the cults will be more correct on some issue than even the traditional church is.

But that's just the bait. The hook is the false doctrine about Christ Himself, the false gospel that they teach. We should not think that just because someone can show you that something is more biblical than what your church is teaching, that that person is necessarily not a false teacher.

Because you need to examine everything they say, and particularly you need to examine



what they say about Jesus. You need to examine what they say about the way of salvation. You've got to examine what they say about what God requires of you, and so forth.

Those are the issues that will determine whether you stay on the narrow gate or whether you walk on the broad path. Remember Jesus said that you have to enter the narrow gate by walking on the narrow path. False teachers, false prophets, what their game is, is to get you off that path onto their path.

Maybe to broaden the path so that you go off the narrow path, or even to take you on a side road that leads to destruction as well. Jesus is very adamant here in speaking to His disciples about this. You need to beware.

You need to strive to enter into the narrow gate. These things I cannot press upon you with too great an urgency. Your soul is at stake.

Do not play any games with it. Do not take any gambles with it. You only get one chance at this, and when you die, you will find out whether you've followed the narrow path.

You better read the scriptures and make sure you're on it. Thanks for joining us. Join us again next time.