

The Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 7:15ff: Hearers and doers

“[Jesus] reminded them that it is necessary to walk in a way that goes contrary to the common opinion... They were going to face inward anxieties as well as outward difficulties, but they are not to despair. 'Therefore do not be thrown into confusion,' Jesus says in effect, 'for nothing will happen that is new or strange. Remember that the ancient adversary is forever introducing deception as if true.'” (John Chrysostom, *The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 23.6*)

A TREE AND ITS FRUIT

1. In 7:15-20, Jesus warns of false prophets, who are as wolves in sheep's clothing (see also Mt 7:15, 22; 2 Pet 2:1; 1 Jn 4:1). Just about every NT letter addresses false teachers or prophets or apostles or Christs, with a variety of false teachings. Noting the verses preceding these, we may particularly think of those false prophets who fail to teach the narrow way of discipleship. Stott likens the false prophets to those of the OT:

One of the major characteristics of false prophets in the OT was their amoral optimism, their denial that God was the God of judgment as well as of steadfast love and mercy. They were guilty, Jeremiah said to the people, of “filling you will vain hopes... They say continually to those who despise the word of the Lord, 'It shall be well with you'; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart they say, ‘No evil shall come upon you.’” [Jer 23:16-17] Similarly, God complains: “They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace.” [Jer 8:11] (199)

Carson describes one of these false prophets as follows:

From the context we can infer they are not advocating the narrow road of Jesus. He may not be wildly heretical in other areas; indeed, he may set himself up as a staunch defender of orthodoxy. But the way which he commends is not narrow or disturbing, and therefore he can gain quite a hearing... There is nothing in their preaching which fosters poverty of spirit, nothing which searches the conscience and makes men cry to God for mercy, nothing which excoriates all forms of religious hypocrisy, nothing which prompts such righteousness of conduct and attitude that some persecution is inevitable. It is even possible in some instances that everything these false prophets say is true; but because they leave out the difficult bits, they do not tell the whole truth, and their total message is false. (135-136)¹

This reminds us that a healthy spiritual life requires that one be confronted with and called to repent of one's particular sins.

- (a) What are the voices in your life which call you to repentance and remind you of the narrowness of the road which leads to life? (E.g., friends, family, preaching, small group, Bible reading, devotional reading,

¹ John Chrysostom has an interesting take on the false prophets referred to in this passage: “It does not seem to me that ‘false prophets’ here refers to the heretics but rather to person who live morally corrupt lives while wearing a mask of virtue. They are usually called frauds by most people.” Whether or not he is right in his identification of the “wolves,” it is a good reminder that to draw some “sheep” astray it is sufficient for a member of the church who compromises in his discipleship and who is likeable to rise to power—as they often do.

prayer, etc.)

- (b) Where do you currently feel the Holy Spirit moving you to repentance (whether from sins of commission or omission)?
2. Jesus presents false prophets as not bearing spiritual fruit. From Mt 5-7, as well as Mt 3:8-10; 12:33-37; 24:24-26, what might “fruit” refer to?
 3. From Jesus’ warning in 7:15 we know that false prophets may be dangerous (“beware”!) and may be deceptive, appearing as fellow members of the Body. As Keener puts it, they may “cost the spiritual lives of some disciples”, presumably by leading them away from the true Gospel. Let us take these to be true of certain false teachers and leaders as well. From John 10:11-13 we learn that they put their own well-being above that of their followers, and from Paul's dire and heartfelt warning of Acts 20:29-30 we see again that they may arise from within the church, drawing some away with their “perverse” teachings (cf. Also 2 Pet 2).

Jesus provides the *fruit test* to detect these disguised false prophets by their character, which we see from 12:33-37 is revealed in their words—“every careless word you utter.” Paul and 1 John add to this a *doctrinal test*—are the teachings consistent with Scripture? Paul gives a further test, which is the *effect* their teaching has on their followers: Does it “eat its way like gangrene” and upset their faith (2 Tim 2:17-18; cf. Stott 202-3), promoting ungodliness (2 Tim 2:16) and division (1 Tim 6:4; 2 Tim 2:23; Tit 1:11, 3:9)?

Can you think of an example of a false teacher who has arisen in a church you’ve been a part of? What safeguards are in place to prevent false teachers from gaining influence? Do they work?

“LORD, LORD”

4. 7:21-24 is paralleled by this famous passage from James:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill’, and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (2:16-17)

As Carson puts it, “It is true, of course, that no man enters the kingdom of God because of his obedience; but it is equally true that no man enters the kingdom who is not obedient.”

Even accepting this, 7:21-24 may present an apparent puzzle, namely that the person in question not only professes the correct beliefs, he also prophesies, works miracles and casts out demons in Jesus’ name. Surely this is one who is effective at prayer! Yet we know from James 5:16b, “The prayer of the *righteous* is powerful and effective.” We tend to think that God would not choose to work so powerfully through one he does not even *know* (v. 23).

Put in Paul’s language, the false disciple shows an abundance of the gifts of the Spirit but not the fruit of the Spirit. (The “super-apostles” of 1, 2 Corinthians also come to mind.) In contrast, we can each likely name some mature believers who exhibit tremendous Christlikeness—a wealth of the fruit of the Spirit—but through whom God has not chosen to work with such “supernatural” power.

Why is that? Can we learn anything from this about the nature of prayer, or of what it means to know Jesus?

Or is there a different resolution to this apparent conundrum?

5. Carson writes on 7:21-24:

Cheap grace preaches forgiveness without repentance, church membership without rigorous church discipline, discipleship without obedience, blessing without persecution, joy without righteousness, results without obedience. In the entire history of the church, has there ever been another generation with so many nominal Christians and so few real (i.e., obedient) ones? And where nominal Christianity is compounded by spectacular profession, it is especially likely to manufacture its own false assurances. (139-140)

Jesus warns of a trap for the unwary, that there will be those who are sincerely convinced they are saved yet are not. Without engaging in self-flagellation or finger pointing, can we look at each of the pairs Carson lists and say that each component is present in healthy amounts in ourselves and in our church? How might such a list give direction for our personal devotions and our corporate leadership?

THE TWO HOUSES

6. The first and second century sages debated whether works or wisdom was more important. One compares a person with much wisdom but few righteous works to a tree with an abundance of branches but few roots—and thus unstable. An early-second-century rabbinic parable reads,

Elisha ben Abuyah says: “One in whom there are good works, who has studied much Torah, to what may he be likened? To a person who builds first with stones and afterward with brick: even when much water comes and collects by their side, it does not dislodge them. But one in whom there are no good works, though he studied Torah, to what may he be likened? To a person who builds first with bricks and afterward with stones: even when a little water gathers, it overturns them immediately. [*Rabbinic Commentary on the NT*, T. Lachs, p. 150.]

One thing these hold in common with Jesus' teaching, in contrast to other world religions, is the anticipation of a final, impending global and yet personal *Crisis*. Yet at the same time, there is the promise of the consummation of creation, an end to suffering, and great joy in the world to come.

How does your knowledge of the “wrath to come” influence the way you interact with non-believers? How does it affect the way you think of growing old and dying?



Fun fact: The Didache, the early-second-century church manual, lists a few ways to identify false prophets, including what might be called the *Moocher Test*: “Let every apostle, when he comes to you, be received as the Lord; but he should not abide more than a single day, or if there is need, a but if he abides three days, he is a false prophet. And when he departs let the apostle receive nothing save bread, until he finds shelter; but if he asks for money, he is a false prophet.” (11:5-9)