

¹⁵ “Be on your guard against false prophets who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravaging wolves. ¹⁶ You’ll recognize them by their fruit. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ In the same way, every good tree produces good fruit, but a bad tree produces bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree can’t produce bad fruit; neither can a bad tree produce good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ So you’ll recognize them by their fruit.

²¹ “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. ²² On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, didn’t we prophesy in your name, drive out demons in your name, and do many miracles in your name?’ ²³ Then I will announce to them, ‘I never knew you. **Depart from me, you lawbreakers!**’^{[b][c]}

²⁴ “Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ The rain fell, the rivers rose, and the winds blew and pounded that house. Yet it didn’t collapse, because its foundation was on the rock. ²⁶ But everyone who hears these words of mine and doesn’t act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. ²⁷ The rain fell, the rivers rose, the winds blew and pounded that house, and it collapsed. It collapsed with a great crash.”

²⁸ When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, ²⁹ because he was teaching them like one who had authority, and not like their scribes

Buyer Beware

Buyer beware used to mean something. It meant that the buyer is responsible to examine, judge, and test a product before he makes a purchase because there are no returns. The buyer buys at his own risk and should examine the product for imperfections. But the modern trend in laws is to protect the consumer, minimize the importance of his roll and this law: buyer beware. It makes you stop and think before you just do something because it comes at a great risk to one’s own bank account, health, or well-being. But it sure is nice to have standards and warranties guarding us against unseen imperfections.

So Jesus takes, “buyer beware” and cuts it down to “beware.” There are things in this life that can do serious damage to body and to soul. He doesn’t want his church to buy into bad theology because you will bear personal responsibility. He wants us aware because this comes at a great risk to one’s spiritual health. Jesus’ concern is for you, your safety, so he also takes “Buyer beware” and addresses the seller, “Hawkers and Charlatans Beware.” Yes, there is a special place in hell for people who twist the words of Scripture.

But are you aware, concerned, carefully heading the cautions in scripture? Or have we become the self-entitled consumer buying junk knowing the government will always bail out the consumer? Or are we more like the cautious consumer who takes responsibility for his own purchases, and carefully pours over the product before each purchase? Maybe you’re thinking, “Who cares? We’ve got bigger problems, like riots, looters, viruses. There can be no greater risk for the body is temporal and God can restore that but the soul is eternal and there is only one of two places we will remain. False prophets have longer lasting effects than pandemics.

Sadly, so many ignore the obvious warnings of false preachers and think, “Close enough, I’ll be fine.” Their message is rarely close and it is certainly never enough for salvation. So Jesus sends off his disciples and us with a warning, as you head off to college or into the world he says, “*I’m sending you out like sheep among wolves.*” There are dangers that surround you but Jesus has promised to keep you safe. Beware and listen to his Word.

Jesus has just delivered the Sermon on the Mount. He has preached for three chapters on what it means to be a disciple of Christ. He is coming to a close; the people are excited to go home, when he wraps up with a simple lesson. A simple lesson – if you want grapes go to grapevines. If you want figs find a fig tree. A good tree produces

good fruit a bad tree produces bad fruit. If you want good fruit do not go to a worthless tree. You won't find grapes on thorn bushes. You won't find figs on Star Thistle. Good trees bear good fruit. Bad trees bear bad fruit. Makes you wonder how many ways Jesus could have said the same thing.

The real message isn't about how to select trees and find food to eat but rather how to identify food fit for feeding on. Either something is fit to be eaten or it is poison. Even if there is just a little bit of poison in water, it's still poison and it will kill you. But how can you tell? Do you find the smallest traveling companion and say, "Eat this...how you feel?" Of course not. Do you look really closely? Find out if the preacher wears tight pants or a man bun. While these are obviously poor lifestyle choices and do send up some warning flags they do not determine the quality of their fruit. In order to determine whether a tree is good or bad, you have to examine the fruit of a tree.

We aren't to look at outward appearances... Wolves come in sheep's clothing. They won't look like wolves. Outwardly they will appear righteous, upright, and hardworking. The devil masquerades as an angel of light. False prophets will look good on the outside, maybe even better. They say things that are appealing to the sinful nature. Jesus says they will prophesy in his name, drive out demons, and perform miracles. They don't exactly come out proclaiming, "False prophet." Instead they are loving, engaging, and nurturing. We must look at the fruit of a prophet and examine what they say.

But this passage has hardly been used in context. Among many Christians this passage is used to cause careful introspection, "Am I a true Christian, a good Christian, a Christian that God will welcome into paradise, "Well done good and faithful?" This passage has caused many to stand on shaky shifting ground, "Not everyone who says to me LORD, LORD, will enter the kingdom of heaven." The point of this passage is not for us to determine if we are in or out but to determine if a prophet is in or out. These words are written so that we would look at the quality of the product preached and handle accordingly – rotten or refreshing.

God has given us specific tests we can use to determine if a prophet is indeed a false prophet. Deuteronomy 18:22 *"If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the LORD does not take place or come true, that is a message the LORD has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him."* If a prophet contradicts what God says in his Word, they are not a prophet. The open hypocrisy to the outright contradiction of God's Word gives them away.

But, but, but... what if... they're really close. It doesn't matter. Either they are in line with God's Word or they are teaching falsely. But we'd like to believe minor theological differences should be set aside for the sake of fellowship. Churches should drop their difference and stand together. But who determines a minor teaching or a major teaching? Does God care when we relegate a part of his Word to the minor category when we simply don't like what he has to say? Suddenly we're taking our word over God's, not because scripture isn't clear but simply because we don't like scripture to offend our worldview. And when some "preacher" tells us what we want to hear rather than what we need to hear. It's not physical harm we face but spiritual. It can be long lasting.

And Jesus takes it seriously. He calls them ravenous wolves due to the damage they can do to this flock. They teach a something other than Christ and that cannot save. They lead away from Christ. They undercut Paul and the rock solid foundation of Christ Crucified for the sins of the world. This (objective justification) is the teaching on which the church either stands or falls. Without Christ the fruits are rotten and unfit to eat.

And their works is greeted by, *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven. We shouldn't be surprised at the fact that these false teachers are destined for destruction. Jesus tells them off, "Away from me, I never knew you."* But they're full of excuses, *"We prophesied in your name, didn't we?"*

But here is the scary part. Those who have been deceived by these false prophets are held accountable for their actions. The wolf in sheep's clothing isn't the most dangerous place to be. It's the sheep who continues to lie down and keep company with those in sheep's clothing. You are the most dangerous to yourself. That's why Paul

wrote to Timothy, “*Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers*” (1 Timothy 4:16).

That scares me because I bear personal responsibility and I know how many times I’ve failed to identify or have fallen for a false teaching. Jesus proclaims that “*Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*” and, “*I never knew you.*” But that also is tremendous comfort to me. This is how serious God takes his Word, mess with it and you mess with God. This is how much God cares for his people that he threatens those who would harm them. There is also comfort for you people of God. It doesn’t matter how much you know about God, how your life looks, how good you’ve been, or how well you hold it all together, what matters is being known by God. God knows you.

Isaiah 49:16 Behold, he says, “*I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.*” You are mine. He calls us his own and claims us as his children in baptism. There he places his name over us. Isaiah writes, “*Before I was born the LORD called me, from my birth he has made mention of my name.*” There is no buyer’s remorse when he purchased you with his holy precious blood. What he accomplished on the cross, he accomplished with you in mind. He still comes to you in a very personal way and gives you his living giving body and blood to reassure you, “*You’re sins are forgiven. Yes, you child of God.*” I know you.

There is no spiritual inquisition of one’s soul to determine, “Am I saved?” It’s the difference between building on shaky ground or a solid rock. One will lead you to uncertainty, to not knowing whether you have ever been good enough, the other leads you to the foot of the cross where he says, “It’s finished.” it is on this Word that you can build and trust even when you don’t feel known or loved by God. During those times you do the will of the Father. You hear his words and you listen to them. To do the will of the Father is to believe the one he has sent, to be disciples of Jesus, to repent and believe.

Does Jesus want us to have a process of introspection causing us to question if we are connected to Jesus? Absolutely not. Rather, “By their fruits you will recognize them.” Notice it has nothing to say about you and everything to say about others.

With this Word we can inspect the fruits of pastors and those who claim to be someone when they are not. Jesus wants you to inspect them not because he wants to make my life more difficult but he wants you to be certain of forgiveness. The Holy Spirit guides us safely through the wolves. That rock will stand. You know the rock and you know the house. The rock is Jesus Christ. He will not be moved. The house is his church built on that rock and the gates of hell will not prevail.

Buyer beware, no – false prophets and wolves beware – the Son of God has come and he knows me and you by name. You’ve been put on notice and I am well aware of who I am. More important than anything I could ever know about him is that he knows me. To him be the glory. Amen.