

WEEK SIX:

“A Tree and Its Fruit”

Opening reflection

When you go to the grocery store, how do you choose your fruits and vegetables?



Read **Matthew 7:15-23 (NIV)**:

15 “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. **16** By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? **17** Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. **18** A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. **19** Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. **20** Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

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 who is in heaven. **22** Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ **23** Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’

1. What do you notice in this passage? What resonates with you?
2. In the context of this passage, what is “good fruit” and how does it help us determine who is trustworthy?
3. Compare this passage with Matthew 13:6-9. What is the hope for those who might be bearing bad fruit?



Dr. Diane Chen is Professor of New Testament at Palmer Theological Seminary, where she has been teaching since 2004. She loves being in the classroom and making biblical scholarship accessible to all in the church. She received the Lindback Award for Distinguished Teaching at Eastern University in 2018 and has contributed to several commentaries as well as authoring several books, including a commentary on the Gospel of Luke. Diane was born and raised in Hong Kong.

Listen in as Dr. Chen shares her insight on this text:

False prophets were not unknown to both Jesus' audience and Matthew's readers. Not only were there false prophets in the Old Testament who preached peace when God's imminent judgment was about to descend upon Israel, in the first century, there were plenty of false prophets spreading heresies in the early church as well.

This threat to the church is particularly sinister and damaging precisely because false prophets are not outsiders, but are often embraced as an integral part of the flock. Because by definition a prophet is God's mouthpiece and messenger, people are inclined to pay attention to what a self-proclaimed prophet has to say, thus giving him or her a platform of influence. Jesus says that false prophets present themselves like sheep, yet underneath the façade they are hungry wolves. They exploit trust, claiming that they have heard from God, and that they have the church's best interest in mind. Something even more ominous is that false prophets can themselves be deceived by their own deception! Self-deception leads them to be convinced that they are doing God's work—prophesying, casting out demons, and performing deeds of wonder in Jesus' name. Their lack of self-awareness means they are both deceived and deceiving! Here lies the danger of a perfect storm, when false prophets truly believe that they are serving God, and the people absorb everything they say as truth in total gullibility. The spiritual carnage is potentially devastating; the congregation splits, people feel betrayed, they lose their faith, and the witness of the church is ruined.

Jesus' word to the church, both then and now, is not to be cynical but to be vigilant, and not to be naïve but to be discerning. Even if churchgoers are not necessarily hoodwinked by miracles and prophetic utterances, how about bubbling charisma, grand visions, bright ideas, and people-pleasing clichés? The fact that time and again false prophets have infiltrated the congregations of God's people says something about the vulnerability of the church. Under what circumstances might a church be especially prone to following a spiritual Pied Piper? What theological hole might a false prophet seek to fill because the church lacks the knowledge and maturity to tell the difference between what is true, quasi-true, and downright false?

Always practical, Jesus provides a logical measuring stick: a good tree bears good fruit. The fruit in this context refers to one's deeds. Even false prophets cannot forever hide their deceptive tactics; the inconsistencies between word and action will sooner or later uncover their duplicity. On the part of the church, a healthy and reasonable

dose of “hermeneutic of suspicion” is not a bad thing. If practiced in humility and prayer, this kind of hermeneutic encourages truthful dialogue, builds accountability, and exposes manipulation.

While Jesus’ warning clearly has to do with the church guarding itself against false prophets, the word for the individual Christian addresses one’s integrity before God. The scene depicted in the last three verses is that of the final judgment, when false prophets face a rude awakening, that everything they think they have done in Jesus’ name is rejected by the Judge who sees all. Is this caution not also relevant to every Christian, whose work will be evaluated for its eternal value in the end? The last judgment is final. Time will have run out by then. There will be no more opportunity to buy time, fix past mistakes, or do it over. The consequence of the biggest self-deception of all is eternal separation from God. May everyone who calls Jesus, “Lord, Lord,” take his words to heart, so that rather than being cast out, each will find his or her place at the messianic banquet, celebrating with great joy in God’s kingdom.

1. What did you hear Dr. Chen say? Did anything challenge or inspire you?
2. How do we develop a “hermeneutic of suspicion” without slipping into judgment of others?
3. “False prophets are those who say ‘Lord, Lord’ – and that’s it. To say ‘all you need to do is believe in Jesus and you will be saved’ is to deform the gospel; to say ‘the narrow gate means confessing Jesus as Lord’ mistakes the notice that after one goes through the gate, one enters the ‘hard’ (that is, difficult) road that leads to life (Matthew 7:13-14)” (Amy-Jill Levine, 119). In what ways has the church promoted this kind of false teaching?
4. If you could ask Dr. Chen one question, what would it be?



At the heart of the matter

“Discernment should be based not by these prophets’ theology, not by politics, and not by what church they attend: discernment is based on what they do” (Amy-Jill Levine, 120).

1. The invitation from Jesus in this passage is to match up our words and our actions. Do you find this challenging to do? Why or why not?
2. In 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, Paul agrees with Jesus’s words in Matthew 7:22, when he says that someone can have good deeds, but lack love and a connection with Christ. How does this challenge you? How does this challenge the church?

Closing Reflection

“At any moment the nominal Christians may be separated from the real ones. We may even find that we are the nominal Christians ourselves. Here is a challenge to closer fellowship with Jesus and to a more loyal discipleship” (Bonhoeffer, 214).

Rather than cause for guilt or fear, how might you see this as an invitation to a closer walk with Jesus and what steps will you take to grow deeper?