

***"The Christian Attitude Toward Error"***

*Matthew 7:15-20*

**B. This warning of Jesus has application and value to every accountable soul.**

1. Our destiny depends upon the fruit we bear. (Galatians 6:7-10.)
2. A principle that seems to run through the entire Bible is that "whatever is useless and evil shall finally be swept away." -- Johnson.
3. ***"Either make the tree good and its fruit good..."*** (Matthew 12:33a.)
  - a. *"Blessed is the man...his delight...the law of the Lord."* (Psalm 1:1-3.)
  - b. *"He that soweth unto the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap eternal life."* (Galatians 6:8a.)
  - c. How not to fail. (2 Peter 1:5-11.)
  - d. Christians are designed and programmed by the Divine Husbandman to bear "good fruit." (Romans 7:4; Ephesians 2:10.)
4. ***"Or make the tree corrupt and its fruit corrupt."*** (12:33b.)
  - a. *"The wicked are not so, but are like the chaff..."* (Psalm 1:4-6.)
  - b. *"The way of the wicked shall perish."* (1:6; cf. Galatians 6:8a.)

**IV. "THEREFORE BY THEIR FRUIT YE SHALL KNOW THEM."**

(Matthew 7:20.)

- A. The value of this lesson, drawn by Jesus from the law of sowing and reaping, in identifying false teachers, is rich beyond human estimate.
  1. The law makes possible order, harmony, and profit in human effort.
  2. It enables us to aim, plan, and work toward worthy, beneficial goals.
- B. This law is especially valuable in character growth and human progress.
  1. It enables sinners (us) to determine our destiny here and hereafter.
  2. We are, in a true sense, and to an extent, the master of our lives.
- C. **Make your tree good and its fruit good: Graft Christ in.** (James 1:21-25.)

--Charles E. Crouch

INTRODUCTION —

- I. JESUS CAME TO DO AND TO TEACH THE WILL OF GOD. (Hebrews 10:4; 1:1,2; Acts 1:1.)
  - A. This includes the right attitude toward both truth and error. (John 8:31,32; 2 John 9-11.)
  - B. There is nothing man needs to know, concerning *"life and godliness,"* which is not revealed in the New Testament. (John 14:24; 16:13,14; 2 Peter 1:3.)
- II. TRUTH IS OPPOSED TO ERROR AND THE CHURCH JESUS BUILT IS "THE PILLAR AND BULWARK OF THE TRUTH OF GOD. (1 Timothy 3:15.)
  - A. Jesus plainly warns of the dangers of false prophets, teachers, and teaching. (Matthew 15:13,14; 24:4,5; Mark 13:22.)
  - B. Because of what false teaching and false teachers do to people, and because Jesus loves people, he opposes error and false doctrine.
  - C. Jesus hates sin, but loves sinners; he hates error, but loves truth; therefore, he must condemn error.
- III. Since the church was given the two-fold duty of upholding truth and right, while dealing with human faults and those in error; and since there are fatal mistakes made in determining what is right and wrong, it becomes very important to learn the correct means of identifying truth and separating it from error.
  - A. Some fatal mistakes have been made in separating truth from error because men relied upon the following rules of identification:
    1. "Does it please me personally?"
    2. "What do the scholars say about it?"
    3. "What has been the custom?"
  - B. This passage in the sermon on the mount sets forth clearly the Lord's way--the right way--of identifying religious truth and error (Matthew 7:15-27), and it plainly predicts the destiny of false prophets. (7:19-23.)

DISCUSSION —

## I. THE LORD'S WARNING. (7:15.)

### A. *"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing..."*

(15a)

1. The occasion of this warning against deception is what Jesus had just said concerning the way of life and the way of destruction. One reason so many travel the broad way is they are deceived by false teachers.
2. "A false prophet...is one whose teaching is untrue--contrary to the word of God." The Bible is our standard, our only standard. Jesus is our Guide, our only Guide. (2 Timothy 3:16,17; John 14:6; Acts 4:12.)
3. *"Sheep's clothing:"* Deceitful workers, whose aim is to widen the narrow gate and straitened way, often masquerade as pious, harmless saints, with long prayers, assumed humility, giving large sums to the poor, etc., while their real intention is the conduct of wolves among sheep.

### B. *"...But inwardly are ravening wolves."* (15b)

1. Their disposition, nature, and work is destructive.
2. *"Ravening"* describes the ferocious, wolflike manner in which they do their harmful work.
3. Any teacher who deliberately and wilfully deceives others, by his own opinions, speculations, and/or theories, instead of simply teaching the word of God, is under the Lord's condemnation in this verse. Though Jesus here mentions only hypocrites, the fact that a false teacher may be honestly mistaken does not change the deadly nature of his teaching.

## II. HOW TO IDENTIFY AND AVOID FALSE GUIDES. (7:16-18.)

### A. **The sure test:** *"By their fruits ye shall know them."* (16a)

1. This uniform principle of life requires time, but it is certain.
2. Men, as well as trees, are known by what they produce.
3. One may assume and pretend to be what he is not, but in time his real nature will become manifest.
4. A wolf in sheep's clothing cannot always act and sound like a sheep.

### B. *"Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?"* (16b)

1. Grapes and figs were two of Canaan's most highly valued fruits; thorns and thistles were its most common and noxious plants.
2. One may gather a few faulty apples from a good apple tree, but its fruit is still according to its own nature.
3. Never, however, does a thorn tree produce grapes or a thistle figs.

### C. **A law of nature:** *"Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but the corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit."* (17)

1. Fruit is borne by every tree according to its kind: *"The tree is known by its fruit."* (Matthew 12:33.)
2. This best known and unfailing law of nature is applied by Jesus to human and spiritual life. The "seed" of God's kingdom, properly sown and received into honest hearts, brings forth certain fruit: Christians. (Luke 8:15.) "A bucket can spill from it only what it contains."
3. The doctrine of Pharisees produced Pharisees; of Sadducees, Sadducees.
4. That doctrine which produces parties, sects, divisions, and denominations is not the work of true prophets but of false. (Galatians 5:19-21.)

### D. **An unfailing rule:** *"A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit."* (18)

1. The fruit borne by a tree declares its kind, and to expect anything else is to "expect the impossible."
2. The criterion which determines a teacher's faithfulness to God is not his charming personality, great intellect, eloquence, or generosity, but the character and fruit of his teaching, measured by the divine standard: the word of God. True gospel teaching does not produce sinners, nor does false doctrine produce genuine Christians.
3. The nature and tendency of one's doctrine identifies the teacher as true or false, regardless of his innocent appearance or pious claims.
4. The force of the Lord's teaching in this passage must be honestly accepted and courageously applied today, or we and others must suffer the cruel hazards imposed by following false teaching. (Matthew 15:13,14.)

## III. THE DESTINY OF FALSE PROPHETS. (7:1; cf. Matthew 3:10-12.)

### A. **Into the fire:** *"Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire."* (19)

1. Dead and barren trees are fit only for fuel. The Lord speaks of the awful doom of false prophets and those who are deceived by them.
2. It is "a solemn warning against the personal ambition and the pride of opinion which are the chief incentives to false teaching." --McGarvey.