

Q. What is the fruit by which we are to know people? (Matthew 7:16)

A. In Matthew 7:16, Jesus says, "Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?" Although Jesus explains in other passages and also right in the immediate context of this verse what He meant by "fruits," that has not stopped people from interpreting "fruits" in imaginative ways. I'm going to briefly list what some of these imaginative but wrong ideas are and then point out from the context precisely what Jesus meant by "fruits."

First, let's read the verses in question:

Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.

Matthew 7:15-20

What the Fruits Are Not

1. *Character and/or The Fruit of the Spirit:* Some Bible teachers believe that what Jesus means by "fruits" is character. John MacArthur seems to think that "fruits" means more than one thing, and he says, "Number one, fruit is character, fruit is character. What kind of character, what kind of personality, what's his attitude and his motive and his thinking, perspective toward life? What kind of actions, what kind of lifestyle, what kind of pattern? All that character involves, from what I think to what I do" ("Beware of False Prophets, Part 2," <http://www.gty.org/Resources/Sermons/2254>).

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Certainly, it should be obvious that we should avoid a leader who has, for example, a reputation for having a harem among his female followers. But things are rarely so obvious. How am I supposed to vet every Christian teacher I hear? How can I know the personal life of every Christian writer I read? There have been televangelists who were on the air for many years before a scandal came out exposing their character. Even pastors who mixed with their congregants every week have eventually been revealed as having been very skillful in hiding a darker side of their lives. And MacArthur even mentions *thinking*. We, according to John MacArthur, are supposed to judge someone's character by what he thinks. I don't know about you, but I haven't passed a proficiency test as a mind reader.

Yes, there are definite criteria for an elder (e.g. 1 Timothy 3). But these criteria are specific and objective, and they are not what Jesus is speaking of in Matthew 7. It should be evident that to go around trying to judge someone's character can lead to judgmentalism and a witch-hunt mentality. But, as we shall see, Jesus' way of determining false prophets is very specific and very clear.

Similarly, we can become judgmental in trying to determine whether someone is producing the fruit of the Spirit found in Galatians 5:22. Since none of us perfectly displays the fruit of the Spirit, such "fruit-of-the-Spirit-inspecting" can become a serious problem among Christians. Seeing as Jesus has just condemned the critical attitude of condemning others for what we perceive as their sinful or unChristian behavior in Matthew 7:1-4, it is absurd to suggest that He would then turn around and tell us to judge someone by whether we consider he is producing the fruit of the Spirit. I will have more to say about this later. But we should expect that if Jesus is going to tell us that we can know someone by his fruits, then Jesus is going to give us a very objective standard by which to make that determination.

2. *Converts*: This is further divided into two subcategories.

a. Numbers of Converts. It is difficult to understand how anyone reading Matthew 7 can conclude that the "fruits" Jesus is talking about have anything to do with numbers of converts. There is absolutely no place in the context where Jesus is talking about numbers. He is talking about quality of fruit—good fruits and evil fruits. Yet this folk interpretation, based on no critical thinking, persists. It is supposed that someone bringing in great numbers of people must be a "good tree" because he is bringing in "good fruit" (large numbers of people). This is a very widespread interpretation. We hear such things as, "Look

at how many people he is reaching in his ministry. Surely, God must be blessing him with this good fruit."

By this thinking, Satan must be the best tree of all because his converts are virtually the whole world (Revelation 12:9). Jesus, by comparison, must be a "corrupt tree" because, at the end of His earthly ministry, "the number of names together were about an hundred and twenty" (Acts 1:15). If you say that Satan's converts do not claim Christianity, then I disagree. Many do, but they are still deceived (Matthew 24:5; 2 John 1:7). Billy Graham, Rick Warren, and Joel Osteen, according to this interpretation, would qualify as good trees, whatever they may teach, whatever methods they may use to gain their converts.

If you have been thinking that "fruits" in Matthew 7 refers to numbers of converts, numbers of people in a congregation, numbers of radio listeners, etc., read through Matthew 7 again. As you do so, notice that Jesus is speaking of the quality of the fruit, not the quantity. In fact, see also that in the verses immediately before Jesus speaks of false prophets and talks of "fruit," He says, "Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it" (Matthew 7:13-14). No, the "good fruit" are definitely not large numbers.

b. Character of Converts: This interpretation suffers from the same weaknesses as the one that says the "fruit" is the character of the prophet. By what criteria does Jesus tell us to judge someone's followers? Or does He, as I mentioned earlier, say at the beginning of the very chapter that contains our main text, "Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again" (Matthew 7:1-2)? There is an objective, impersonal standard that Jesus gives us to use to discern between a "corrupt tree" and a "good tree." But it is not character.

3. *Works:* This is one of the most common interpretations of "fruits." Preacher after preacher says that we must look at someone's works to know whether he is a Christian or a true minister of God. This means that we must look at how someone behaves and what he does. This, again, can lead to judgmentalism. But leaving that aside, I want to point out something else that looking at someone's character, looking for the fruit of the Spirit, and looking at works have in common. All of

these things are an outward appearance that can be seen. But Jesus said, "Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment" (John 7:24). Obviously, righteous judgment is something not connected with appearance. The "fruits" Jesus is talking about are not works. As we have already seen in Matthew 7:15, Jesus taught, "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves." The "sheep's clothing" is the outward appearance, the works that can look ever so pious. The appearance, the works, is not a good indicator of whether someone is a good tree. Real sheep and wolves in sheep's clothing can look the same. But there is a way in which wolves in sheep's clothing differ from sheep. Wolves howl while sheep baa.

What the Fruits Are

Jesus tells us in both the immediate context of the verses in question and in other verses what the fruits are. Let's first notice a similar passage:

Either make the tree good, and his fruit good; or else make the tree corrupt, and his fruit corrupt: for the tree is known by his fruit. O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things? for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things. But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.

Matthew 12:33-37

Notice these key phrases: "how can ye, being evil, speak good things?", "for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh," "every idle word that men shall speak," "by thy words thou shalt be justified," "by thy words thou shalt be condemned." Can it be any plainer that the "fruits" Jesus is speaking of are the words we speak, specifically our teachings, our doctrines? In fact, this is so clear that John Robbins writes, "The notion that fruit is doctrine or teaching, rather than works or behavior, is so clearly taught in Scripture that the dominance of the incorrect view must be attributed to our inability to read" ("Justification and Judgment," <http://www.trinityfoundation.org/journal.php?id=117>).

Jesus did not speak of these "fruits" in a way that should leave us guessing. Read Luke 6:43-46:

For a good tree bringeth not forth corrupt fruit; neither doth a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. For every tree is known by his own fruit. For of thorns men do not gather figs, nor of a bramble bush gather they grapes. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is evil: for of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh. And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?

Luke 6:43-46

Notice that even calling Jesus "Lord, Lord" is not a good enough fruit of the mouth. And, in case you are wondering, the emphasis of the part about "do not the things which I say" is not works, but doctrinal foundation. Let's look at this in more detail in Matthew 7. Right after Jesus speaks, "Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them," he says,

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

Matthew 7:21-23

Here we read of people who both profess Jesus as Lord and do good works. But Jesus denies that he knows them and says they are the workers of iniquity. Why? Because they are not founded upon Jesus' words.

Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock. And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it. And it came

to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine: For he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

Matthew 7:24-29

The word "sayings" appears three times in the above passage. Each time it is *logous*, a plural word with the basic meaning of "words." And what were the people astonished at?—Jesus' doctrine or teaching.

And how can we know whether someone is founded on Jesus' doctrine? The answer is simple. We can know whether someone is founded on Jesus' doctrine by that person's "fruits"—by what he teaches. Is he teaching the same things Jesus taught? Is his doctrine the doctrine of Jesus Christ? If so, he is a good tree. If not, he is a corrupt tree.

Character, works (even miracles), converts, and a profession of Jesus as Lord are all poor ways to distinguish a false from a true prophet. During His earthly ministry, Jesus Christ told us that the criteria we should use are the fruits a man produces—the words he speaks, his teachings, his doctrines. Years later, the apostle John repeated this criteria in his second epistle: "Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed" (2 John 1:9-10).

If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him.

John 14:23

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