



The Sermon on the Mount Study  
**Bible Study Session 27**  
**Matthew 7:15-20 : Topic 26**

Study By  
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**Greek NT**

7.15 Προσέχετε ἀπὸ τῶν ψευδοπροφητῶν, οἵτινες ἔρχονται πρὸς ὑμᾶς ἐν ἐνδύμασιν προβάτων, ἔσωθεν δέ εἰσιν λύκοι ἄρπαγες. 7.16 ἀπὸ τῶν καρπῶν αὐτῶν ἐπιγνώσεσθε αὐτούς. μήτι συλλέγουσιν ἀπὸ ἀκαιθῶν σταφυλὰς ἢ ἀπὸ τριβύλων σῦκα; 7.17 οὕτως πᾶν δένδρον ἀγαθὸν καρποῦς καλοῦς ποιεῖ, τὸ δὲ σαπρὸν δένδρον καρποῦς ποιηροῦς ποιεῖ. 7.18 οὐ δύναται δένδρον ἀγαθὸν καρποῦς ποιηροῦς ποιεῖν οὐδὲ δένδρον σαπρὸν καρποῦς καλοῦς ποιεῖν. 7.19 πᾶν δένδρον μὴ ποιοῦν καρπὸν καλὸν ἐκκόπτεται καὶ εἰς πῦρ βάλλεται. 7.20 ἄρα γε ἀπὸ τῶν καρπῶν αὐτῶν ἐπιγνώσεσθε αὐτούς.

**Gute Nachricht Bibel**

15 Hütet euch vor den falschen Propheten! Sie sehen zwar aus wie Schafe, die zur Herde gehören, in Wirklichkeit sind sie Wölfe, die auf Raub aus sind.

16 An ihren Taten sind sie zu erkennen. Von Dornengestrüpp lassen sich keine Weintrauben pflücken und von Disteln keine Feigen. 17 Ein gesunder Baum trägt gute Früchte und ein kranker Baum schlechte. 18 Unmöglich kann ein gesunder Baum schlechte Früchte tragen und ein kranker gute. 19 Jeder Baum, der keine guten Früchte trägt, wird umgehauen und verbrannt werden.

20 An ihren Taten also könnt ihr die falschen Propheten erkennen.

**NRSV**

15 Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. 16 You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? 17 In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus you will know them by their fruits.

**NLT**

15 "Beware of false prophets who come disguised as harmless sheep, but are really wolves that will tear you apart. 16 You can detect them by the way they act, just as you can identify a tree by its fruit. You don't pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles. 17 A healthy tree produces good fruit, and an unhealthy tree produces bad fruit. 18 A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can't produce good fruit. 19 So every tree that does not produce good fruit is chopped down and thrown into the fire. 20 Yes, the way to identify a tree or a person is by the kind of fruit that is produced.

**The Study of the Text:<sup>1</sup>**

**1. What did the text mean to the first readers?**

This second pericope of the conclusionary appeal to decision by Jesus issues a stern warning against disciples following after "false prophets" who teach a perverted version of the Kingdom of Heaven. Who were these people? Insiders? Or outsiders? Pharisees or supposed Christians? These are part of the questions posed by the text that need to be answered. How relevant is the warning to our world today? Another important issue needing to be addressed. Also, what insight can be gleaned from the Lukan parallel in Luke 6:43-45?<sup>2</sup> This text in Luke surfaces at about the same place in his version of



<sup>1</sup>Serious study of the biblical text must look at the 'then' meaning, i.e., the historical meaning, and the 'now' meaning, i.e., the contemporary application, of the scripture text. In considering the historical meaning, both elements of literary design and historical aspects must be considered. In each study we will attempt a summary overview of these procedures in the interpretation of the scripture text.

<sup>2</sup>Luke. 6:43-45 (NRSV): "43 "A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can't produce good fruit. 44 A tree is identified by the kind of fruit it produces. Figs never grow on thorn bushes or grapes on bramble bushes. 45 A good person produces good deeds from a good heart, and an evil person produces evil deeds from an evil heart. Whatever is in your heart determines what you say."

GNT: 6.43 Οὐ γὰρ ἐστὶν δένδρον καλὸν ποιοῦν καρπὸν σαπρὸν, οὐδὲ πάλιν δένδρον σαπρὸν ποιοῦν καρπὸν καλόν. 6.44 ἕκαστον γὰρ δένδρον ἐκ τοῦ ἰδίου καρποῦ γινώσκεται· οὐ γὰρ ἐξ ἀκαιθῶν συλλέγουσιν σῦκα οὐδὲ ἐκ βᾶτου σταφυλὴν τρυγῶσιν. 6.45 ὁ ἀγαθὸς ἄνθρωπος ἐκ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ θησαυροῦ τῆς καρδίας προφέρει τὸ ἀγαθόν, καὶ ὁ πονηρὸς ἐκ τοῦ πονηροῦ προφέρει τὸ πονηρόν· ἐκ γὰρ περισσεύματος καρδίας λαλεῖ τὸ στόμα αὐτοῦ.

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the Sermon as does Mt. 7:15-20 in Matthew's version of the Sermon, and it also fulfills a similar role in the conclusion of the Sermon.

### Historical Context:

"False teaching" was a major issue in apostolic Christianity. This emphasis in part was inherited from the Jewish origins of Christianity which also put a lot of negative criticism into what was labeled 'false teaching' in first century Judaism.

By modern western patterns of reasoning, the idea of false teaching assumes that a 'correct teaching' exists and is based upon some acknowledged standard that serves as a source of authority. In both Jewish and Christian heritage, as well as in Moslem orientation, this assumes the existence of a sacred scripture or scriptures as the authority base. Through the idea of 'inspiration' in both Judaism and Christianity certain writings are regarded as sacred scripture because they are assumed to be divinely inspired writings. This implies that, although the words of sacred scripture were written down by various individuals, ultimately these words reflect the mind of God and thus stand as the authoritative standard setting forth God's will. Correct teaching, i.e., 'orthodox teaching,' then becomes the proper interpretation of this standard, the Bible. False teaching, often labeled as heresy, then represents improper interpretation of this standard. The 'false teacher' is one who promotes this incorrect interpretation.

Was this the way Jesus and the apostles thought? The answer is basically no. The pattern of reasoning to conclude heresy or false teaching went a different direction than rather than the one in modern times.<sup>3</sup> Walter C. Kaiser provides a helpful summation of the Israelite heritage of 'false prophets' out of the era of the Old Testament based on Jeremiah 23:9-39:<sup>4</sup>

The fullest discussion of charges that could be brought against false prophets can be found in Jeremiah 23:9-39. Jeremiah condemns the pseudoprophets on four grounds: (1) they are men of immoral character (v. 14 "they commit adultery and live a lie"); (2) they seek popular acclaim with their unconditional pledge of immunity from all imminent disasters (vv. 17-22); (3) they fail to distinguish their own dreams from a word from God (vv. 25-29); and (4) they are plagiarists who steal from one another words allegedly from the Lord (vv. 30-39). Rather than having a "burden" from the Lord, they themselves were another burden both to the Lord and to the misled people!

In the beginning era of Christianity false prophets continued to be a problem inside Christianity, as Kaiser summarizes:

False prophets continued to make their presence felt well beyond the days of the Old Testament; indeed, Jesus warned his disciples, and through the apostles, he warned the early church about the character and teachings of such frauds.

As was characteristic of false prophets in the Old Testament, their New Testament counterparts were also motivated by greed ( 2 Peter 2:3 2 Peter 2:13 ), exhibited arrogance ( 2 Peter 2:18 ), lived immoral lives ( 2 Peter 2:2 2 Peter 2:10-13 ), and generally could be described as ungodly persons (Jude 4).

The classical encounter between true and false prophets of God in the New Testament is Paul and Barnabas's rebuke of the Jewish magician Bar-Jesus on the island Paphos ( Acts 13:6-10 ). The Holy Spirit informed Paul that Bar-Jesus was full of deceit and a false prophet. Bar-Jesus belonged to the same line of pseudoprophets as the prophetess Jezebel from the church of Thyatira ( Rev 2:20 ).

Nor does the danger stop in the New Testament, for present-day believers are warned to test persons who make prophetic claims. For example, if anyone denies that Jesus has come in the flesh, that person is not a true prophet from God ( 1 John 4:1-3 ).

In the endtimes, false prophets will attempt to deceive the world's populace into following the false prophet, the beast, and Satan himself ( Matthew 24:1 Matthew 24:24 ; Rev 16:13-14 ; 19:20 ; 20:10 ) even by performing miracles and signs. But this will be the last time false prophecy is seen, for Christ's return will destroy the whole institution of false prophecy along with its sponsors: Satan, the beast, and the false prophet.



<sup>3</sup>For more details see my "Encountering Heresy: Insight from the Pastoral Epistles," *Southwestern Journal of Theology*, Spring 1980.

<sup>4</sup>See Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. "False Prophet," *Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*.

Both in Judaism and in early Christianity, the character of the individuals, as well as the content of teaching, was a major issue. False prophets lived a deception, pretending to be one thing but actually being something very different. This along with the destructive teaching brought ruin upon those who came under their influence because example played an important role in the influence of the teacher. Consequently, a clear mark of identification of the false teacher was his character, especially when the falseness of his teaching was not so obvious.

In addition to attacking false teachers, false teaching is condemned as well, as Sam Hamstra notes.<sup>5</sup>

The use of the term “doctrine” in Scripture is important for at least three reasons. First, it affirms that the primitive church was confessional. The first generation of believers confessed apostolic teaching about the significance of the life of Christ. They delivered a body of information that included facts about Christ with interpretation of their importance. Second, the use of the term reflects development of thought in the primitive church. Didaskalia [διδασκαλία] is used in the Pastorals with reference to the sum of teaching, especially of that which had come from the lips of the apostles. Doctrine plays a small role in Judaism and in the New Testament apart from the Pastoral Epistles, and yet is very important in the latter. By the time of the Pastorals the apostolic message had been transformed into traditional teaching. Third, it affirms the indispensable link between spirituality and doctrine. Christianity is a way of life founded on doctrine. Some disparage doctrine in favor of the spiritual life. Paul, however, taught that spiritual growth in Christ is dependent on faithfulness to sound doctrine, for its truth provides the means of growth (Col 2:6). The apostle John developed three tests for discerning authentic spirituality: believing right doctrine (1 Jo 2:18-27), obedience to right doctrine (2:28-3:10), and giving expression to right doctrine with love (2:7-11). Faithful obedience and love, then, are not alternatives to sound doctrine. They are the fruit of right doctrine as it works itself out in the believer’s character and relationships.



True teaching, often labeled ‘sound teaching,’ focused on the Gospel of Jesus Christ as its foundation and essence. An example of an apostolic statement of faith is found in Rom. 1:1b-6 (NRSV):

the gospel of God, 2 which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, 3 the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh 4 and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, 5 through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, 6 including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,

Here is the Gospel in summary form, and it stands as the core standard for true teaching of doctrine.<sup>6</sup> Further insight comes from 1 Timothy 1:3-11 (NRSV):<sup>7</sup>

3 I urge you, as I did when I was on my way to Macedonia, to remain in Ephesus so that **you may instruct certain people not to teach any different doctrine, 4 and not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies** that promote speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith. 5 But the aim of such instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith. 6 Some people have deviated from these and turned to meaningless talk, 7 desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make assertions. 8 Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately. 9 This means understanding that the law is **laid down** not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy

<sup>5</sup>See Sam Hamstra, Jr., “Doctrine,” Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary of Bible Theology.

<sup>6</sup>“Christianity is a religion founded on a message of good news rooted in the significance of the life of Jesus Christ. In Scripture, then, doctrine refers to the entire body of essential theological truths that define and describe that message ( 1 Tim 1:10 ; 4:16 ; 6:3 ; Titus 1:9 ). The message includes historical facts, such as those regarding the events of the life of Jesus Christ ( 1 Cor 11:23 ). But it is deeper than biographical facts alone. As J. Gresham Machen pointed out years ago, Jesus’ death is an integral historical fact but it is not doctrine. Jesus’ death for sins ( 1 Cor 15:3 ) is doctrine. Doctrine, then, is scriptural teaching on theological truths.” [Sam Hamstra, Jr., “Doctrine,” Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary of Bible Theology]

<sup>7</sup>GNT: 1.3 Καθώς παρεκάλεσά σε προσμείναι ἐν Ἐφέσῳ πορευόμενος εἰς Μακεδονίαν, ἵνα **παραγγείλῃς τισὶν μὴ ἑτεροδιδασκαλεῖν 1.4 μηδὲ προσέχειν μύθοις καὶ γενεαλογίαις ἀπεράντοις**, αἵτινες ἐκζητήσεις παρέχουσιν μᾶλλον ἢ οἰκονομίαν θεοῦ τὴν ἐν πίστει. 1.5 τὸ δὲ τέλος τῆς παραγγελίας ἐστὶν ἀγάπη ἐκ καθαρᾶς καρδίας καὶ συνειδήσεως ἀγαθῆς καὶ πίστεως ἀνυποκρίτου, 1.6 ὧν τινες ἀστοχίσαντες ἐξετράπησαν εἰς ματαιολογίαν 1.7 θέλοντες εἶναι νομοδιδάσκαλοι, μὴ νοοῦντες μήτε ἅ λέγουσιν μήτε περὶ τίνων διαβεβαιοῦνται.

1.8 Οἶδαμεν δὲ ὅτι καλὸς ὁ νόμος, ἐάν τις αὐτῷ νομίμως χρῆται, 1.9 εἰδὼς τοῦτο, ὅτι δικαίω νόμος οὐ κεῖται, ἀνόμοις δὲ καὶ ἀνυποτάκτοις, ἀσεβέσι καὶ ἁμαρτωλοῖς, ἀνοσίοις καὶ βεβήλοις, πατρολώαις καὶ μητρολώαις, ἀνδροφόνοις 1.10 πόρνοις ἀρσενικοῖταις ἀνδραποδισταῖς ψεύσταις ἐπιόρκοις, καὶ εἴ τι ἕτερον **τῇ ὑγιαίνουσῃ διδασκαλίᾳ** ἀντίκειται 1.11 **κατὰ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς δόξης τοῦ μακαρίου θεοῦ, ὃ ἐπίστευθην ἐγώ.**

and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, 10 fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is **contrary to the sound teaching** 11 that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

The implications of this core affirmation will represent the expanding concepts of doctrine, as defined by the ancient Greek words of διδασκαλία and διδαχή.<sup>8</sup> In the later writings of the New Testament especially the emphasis upon correct belief over against false teaching grows and becomes a major theme of many of the documents of the New Testament, such as 2 Timothy, 2 Peter, Jude, Titus, 2 & 3 John et als. First century Christianity struggled with growing influences from false teachers who claimed divine authority for their ideas but in reality they merely took ideas from the surrounding paganism and dressed them up with the shallow appearance of being Christian. The writing of Matthew's gospel came during the era of this exploding problem in Christian churches all over the eastern Mediterranean world. Consequently, one would expect the gospel writer to stress aspects of Jesus' teaching that addressed this issue.

Thus, Jesus' words about false teachers stands in a larger context of the New Testament with its Jewish heritage that must be understood clearly before we know how to apply the concepts to our day.

### **Literary Aspects:**

The literary dimensions of the text are an important part of the process of understanding.

### **Literary Form:**

As has been true for most of the material in the Sermon, this passage stands as a Logion Jesu, a Saying of Jesus.

The passage is constructed of a warning (v. 15) with an amplification in vv. 16-20 that is bracketed by the maxim of 'knowing them by their fruits' in vv. 16a and 20. This material is brought together in a chiasmus with balance and symmetry.<sup>9</sup>

#### **1 From their fruits you will understand them.**

- 2 Neither do they gather grapes from thorn bushes
- 3 Nor do they gather figs from briars.
- 4 Thus every good tree produces good fruit
- 5 Every rotten tree produces evil fruit**
- 5' A good tree is not able to produce evil fruit,**
- 4' neither is a rotten tree able to produce beautiful fruit.
- 3' Every tree not producing beautiful fruit is chopped down
- 2' and is thrown into the fire.

#### **1' Therefore from their fruits you will understand them.**

The primary thrust of the amplification is to be seen in statements 5 and 5', which stress character and actions. This material is a combination of proverbs, common in that time, about good and bad trees and fruit. It is bounded by the same maxim on recognizing people's character by their deeds.

The Lukan parallel in 6:43-44<sup>10</sup> is similar but also has its distinctives as Donald Hagner notes:

<sup>8</sup>The idea of teaching has many nuances of meaning inside the New Testament. Cf. the Louw-Nida Greek Lexicon under topics 33.224-33.250 for over two dozen terms related to the action of teaching and the content of teaching, which are to two core categories of meaning. These two nouns form the base for most of the terminology related to the content of teaching, which then stands as the foundation for doctrine or Christian belief.

<sup>9</sup>"After the introductory warning of v 15, this passage reveals a carefully designed structure, including chiasm. Thus a, v 16a, corresponds verbatim to a', v 20, as an inclusio; b, v 16b, corresponds to b', v 19 (this is the weakest part of the chiasm, although both elements refer to unfruitfulness); and c, v 17, corresponds exactly to c', v 18, which restates the thought negatively in terms of impossibility. Symmetry and parallelism are also to be found within certain elements of the larger structure. This is especially true of vv 17 and 18. V 17 contains two exactly parallel lines except for the very slight alteration in line 2, where the adjective σαπρόν, "decayed," precedes the noun δένδρον, "tree." The two lines of v 18 are exactly parallel except for the omission of the verb δύναται, "is able," in the second line. The parallelism of this passage probably derives from the form the material took in oral tradition, but the chiasmic structure here probably derives from the evangelist himself, as does the joining of this material to v 15. This passage is quoted in abbreviated form in Justin, Dial. 35. 3 and Apol. 1.16.1213." [Donald A. Hagner, vol. 33A, *Word Biblical Commentary : Matthew 1-13*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 181]

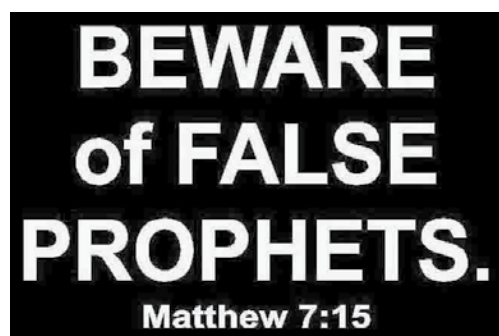
<sup>10</sup>Luke. 6:43-45 (NRSV): "43 "A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can't produce good fruit. 44 A tree is identified by the kind of fruit it produces. Figs never grow on thorn bushes or grapes on bramble bushes. 45 A good person produces good deeds from a good heart, and an evil person produces evil deeds from an evil heart. Whatever is in your heart

Our passage finds a parallel in Luke 6:43–44 (which continues in v 45, paralleling Matt 12:35). Luke 6:43 states the tree/fruit relationship negatively and thus is more like v 18 than v 17. Luke 6:44 parallels v 16. Again, however, Matthew’s form of the logion in v 16a is directed to the false prophets (for the logion applied to trees, cf. 12:33c). In this verse, Luke’s order, “figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush, differs from Matthew’s, as does the vocabulary to some extent. Luke and Matthew here probably depend on Q<sup>11</sup>, with Matthew making slight adjustments of the logion in its application to false prophets.

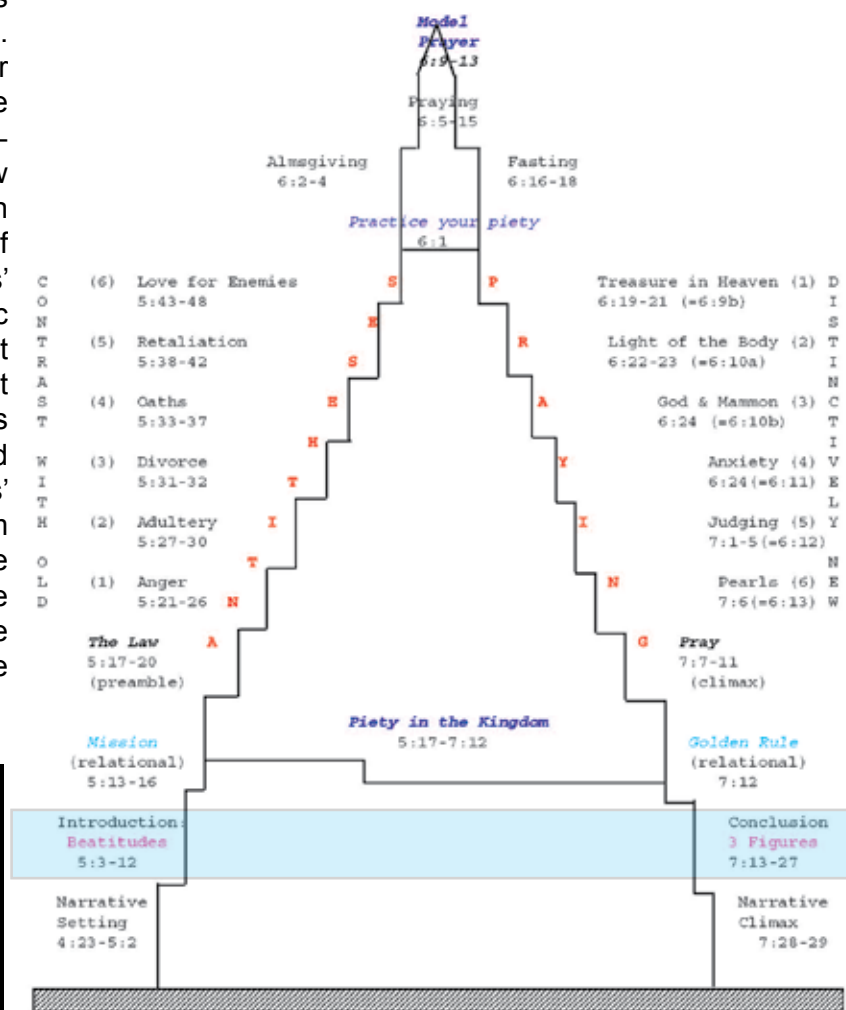
Luke applies the principle to the broader application of discipleship in general rather than to false teachers as does Matthew. But the principle remains the same; just the application of it differs.

**Literary Setting:**

The literary setting of 7:15-20 is charted out in the diagram to the right as a part of the conclusion of the Sermon. This emphasis continues the either / or declaration begun in 7:13-14 with the two ways teaching. Some see in 7:15-20 an interruption to the smooth flow toward a climax in the Sermon. But given the circumstances of the influence of false teachers in the Judaism of Jesus’ day and in the emerging apostolic church in the second half of the first Christian century, this emphasis is not unexpected or out of the ordinary. As such 7:15-20 becomes the second pericope calling for response to Jesus’ teaching about entering the Kingdom of Heaven. The warning nature of the pericope advocates not turning to false interpretations of this teaching or else the entrance to the Kingdom will be blocked.



**The Literary Structure of the Sermon on the Mount**  
*Matthew 4:23-7:29*



Source: Lein L. Cranford, *Study Manual of the Sermon on the Mount: Greek Text* (Fort Worth: Scripta Publishing Inc., 1988), 320. Adapted from Gunter Bonikamm, "Der Aufbau der Bergpredigt," *New Testament Studies* 24 (1977-78): 419-432.

**Literary Structure:**

The thought flow of 7:15-20 is easier to grasp when presented in a block diagram as below that is based on the language of the original Greek text.

determines what you say.”

GNT: 6.43 Οὐ γὰρ ἐστὶν δένδρον καλὸν ποιοῦν καρπὸν σαπρὸν, οὐδὲ πάλιν δένδρον σαπρὸν ποιοῦν καρπὸν καλόν. 6.44 ἕκαστος γὰρ δένδρον ἐκ τοῦ ἰδίου καρποῦ γινώσκεται· οὐ γὰρ ἐξ ἀκαθῶν συλλέγουσιν σῦκα οὐδὲ ἐκ βάλτου σταφυλὴν τρυγῶσιν. 6.45 ὁ ἀγαθὸς ἄνθρωπος ἐκ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ θησαυροῦ τῆς καρδίας προφέρει τὸ ἀγαθόν, καὶ ὁ πονηρὸς ἐκ τοῦ πονηροῦ προφέρει τὸ πονηρόν· ἐκ γὰρ περισσεύματος καρδίας λαλεῖ τὸ στόμα αὐτοῦ.

<sup>11</sup>Q Q “Qumran”, “Qere” Qere (To be “read.” Masoretic suggested pronunciation for vocalized Hebrew text of the OT), or Quelle (“Sayings” source for the Gospels)

155 <sup>7:15</sup> **Beware**  
of false teachers  
who come  
to you  
in the clothing of sheep,  
but  
are ravenous wolves.

<sup>7:16</sup>  
156 **you will understand them.**  
from their fruits

157 **do they gather grapes**  
neither  
from thorn bushes,  
nor  
158 **do they gather figs**  
from briars?

<sup>7:17</sup>  
159 **every good tree produces good fruit,**  
and  
160 **every rotten tree produces evil fruit.**

161 <sup>7:18</sup> **a good tree is not able to produce evil fruit,**  
neither  
162 **is a rotten tree able to produce beautiful fruit, are they?**

163 <sup>7:19</sup> **every tree is chopped down**  
when it doesn't product beautiful fruit  
and  
in the fire  
164 **----- ---- is thrown.**

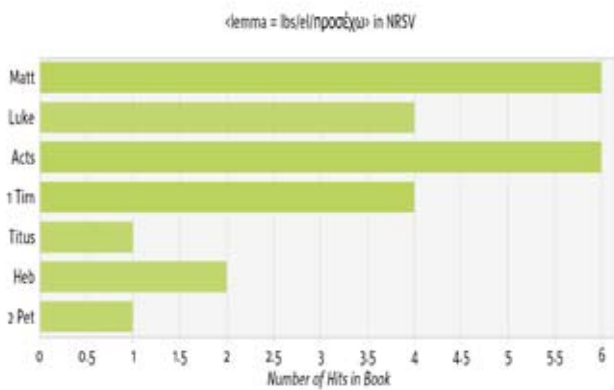
<sup>7:20</sup>  
165 **you will understand them.**  
Therefore  
from their fruits

The pericope naturally falls into two sections: **(1)** the warning in verse 15 (# 155) that is followed **(2)** by an amplification in verses 16-20 (#s 156-165) giving a rationale for the warning. The bracketing of the explanation by the identical statements in # 156 and # 165 form an *inclusio* pulling this material together into a single unit of thought. The argument of the explanation depends upon the logic of widely used comparisons to daily life and the natural world. The point of the comparison is the consistency between inherent nature and actions, i.e., fruits, and is set forth in the bracketing parallel declaration in statements 156 and 165. The spiritual axiom that outward actions will ultimately betray one's true inward character is the foundation of these comparisons. The contrast between the natural world in its consistency and the inconsistency of humans is sharply drawn here, and elsewhere in the New Testament, e.g., James 3:7-12. This reflects the ancient Jewish wisdom tradition of carefully observing life and how it works as a product of God's creation. By such observation one can the learn much about God.

### Exegesis of the Text:

**Warning, v. 15:** "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves" (Προσέχετε ἀπὸ τῶν ψευδοπροφητῶν, οἵτινες ἔρχονται πρὸς ὑμᾶς ἐν ἐνδύμασιν προβάτων, ἔσωθεν δὲ εἰσὶν λύκοι ἄρπαγες.).

The concept of 'beware' (Προσέχετε ἀπὸ) is literally to 'hold your attention in so that you protect yourself from.' Thus, the idea is to be alert to the dangers of something. The verb occurs 24 times in the



New Testament with six of them in Matthew's gospel. It possesses a wide range of meanings, but with the Greek preposition ἀπό and with the verb in the imperative mood the idea of being on guard against a danger is the appropriate meaning.<sup>12</sup> The present tense of the imperative verb conveys the idea of ongoing alertness being necessary. The danger of false prophets is a continuing danger necessitating our constant alertness.

The danger is from 'false prophets,' τῶν ψευδοπροφητῶν. Who were these people that Jesus was mentioning here? Many efforts to identify individuals in Jesus' day have been attempted, but the text provides no real clues to whom Jesus was referring.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, these efforts have been futile and without success. Were they outsiders? Insiders in the Christian communities? Jews? Non-Jews? In the Jewish tradition of false-prophets in the Old Testament? Or, Gentile false prophets coming out of paganism? These and many more related questions have been raised in the effort to identify this group historically. The tendency is to link them to the scribes and Pharisees during Jesus' time. And then to Gnostics, or Proto-Gnostics in the early 70s at the time of the writing of Matthew's gospel. But none of these suggestions has substantial evidence in support.

Contemporary New Testament scholarship has moved a different direction. Perhaps, the reason for the very generalized nature of the warning is that the term was intentionally left general so that it could equally apply to different individuals and groups when the criteria for a false prophet was met. In the eleven times the Greek term ψευδοπροφήτης is used inside the New Testament, only once is a person identified historically. This was a Bar-Jesus identified as a 'Jewish false prophet' in Acts 13:6. In the other ten uses, the term either in the singular or plural forms is generic without specific individuals or groups being named. The New Testament writers indicate either the presence of such individuals in their day or else they predict a flood of such people in the end times prior to Jesus' return to earth.<sup>14</sup> These are

<sup>12</sup>"Foll. by ἀπό τινος *beware of, be on one's guard against someth* (TestLev<sup>i</sup> 9:9; TestDa<sup>n</sup> 6:1.—B-D-F §149; Rob 577)" [William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 879.]

<sup>13</sup>"The major question concerning 7:15–23 is easy enough to ask. Who exactly are the false prophets? An answer, however, is not so easily returned. The options seem to be three. (1) Jewish opponents. According to Lagrang<sup>e</sup> (p. 152), the false prophets should be identified with the Pharisees (so also Hill (v), who thinks this true only for 7:15–20; 7:21–3 concerns another group). According to E. Cothenet (v), we should think of the Zealots. Others have nominated the Essenes (Hjerl-Hanson (v); Daniel, 'Faux prophètes' (v)) or even known figures, including Bar Kokba and Simon Magus (see the critical review by Davies, *SS<sup>M</sup>*, pp. 199–202). (2) Christian opponents. A gamut of choices falls under this heading. Scholars have discovered polemic against Gnostics or Paulinists (so Weiss, *History* 2, p. 753), against antinomians (see Baco<sup>n</sup>, p.348; Barth, in *TI<sup>M</sup>*, pp. 73–5; Humme<sup>l</sup>, pp. 64–5), against enthusiasts (so Kingsbury, *Structur<sup>e</sup>*, p. 151; Burnet<sup>l</sup>, pp. 234–47), against rigorous, legalistic Jewish Christians opposed to the Gentile mission (Guelic<sup>h</sup>, pp. 391–3; Gundry, *Commentar<sup>s</sup>*, pp. 132–3), or against individuals who cannot be specified (Aun<sup>e</sup>, pp. 222–4). (3) Strecker (p. 137, n. 4) has defended a third possibility: the evangelist is not lashing out against any particular group but delivering a standard eschatological warning: false prophets will arise in the latter days, so beware!" [W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 701]

<sup>14</sup>One of the issues here is whether prophets existed in the early church, and then whether the 'gift of prophecy' came to an end with the close of the New Testament era. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Propher, Prophetess, Prophecy," Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology, has a helpful discussion of this issue:

Old Testament prophecy came to an end with Malachi, approximately four hundred years before the time of Christ. No formal declaration was made that prophecy had ceased; it was only as time went on that the people began to realize that divine revelation had been absent for a period more protracted than ever before. Three times in the book of 1 Maccabees, written

fake Christians who preach a false gospel and deceive people into following them: “But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive opinions. They will even deny the Master who bought them — bringing swift destruction on themselves.” (2 Pet. 2:1, NRSV).

Thus the more helpful approach is to identify the ‘marks’ of a false prophet from our text and supplement it with insights from the remainder of the New Testament.

In verse fifteen two distinguishing traits are given: 1) they come into the Christian community disguised as ‘wolves in sheep’s skin’ and 2) they are hugely destructive to the Christian community.

**Wolves in sheep’s skin**, οἷτινες ἔρχονται πρὸς ὑμᾶς ἐν ἐνδύμασι προβάτων. The imagery is dramatic and means that these individuals have come into the believing community to gain respect and a following, as Davies-Allison note:<sup>15</sup>

Almost every word of this clause appears more often in Matthew than in Mark or Luke.<sup>16</sup> Does ἔρχομαι carry an eschatological sense (cf. 11:3; 16:27–8; 17:10–12; 24:42–4), or does it allude to the itinerant behaviour of the false prophets (cf. Did<sup>17</sup>



during the events of the revolt against the Syrian Antiochus Epiphanes in days following 168 b.c., the fact that there was no prophet in Israel was noted with sadness (4:46; 9:27; 14:41).

Suddenly, Jesus Christ, the greatest of all the prophets, and the one anticipated in Deuteronomy 18:15-19, appeared on the scene. The title “prophet” is applied to him about a dozen times in the Gospels. His forerunner, John the Baptist, was considered by Jesus to be the last of the prophets who prepared the way for the coming of the Messiah. In fact, John the Baptist formed the natural dividing point between the Old Testament prophets and those who were to come in the New Testament, as Matthew quoted Jesus as saying of John, “For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John” ( Matt 11:13).

What was the nature of prophecy in the New Testament? Were the New Testament prophets as absolutely authoritative as their predecessors?

Many interpreters divide the New Testament prophetic phenomena into two classes: (1) the authoritative prophecies demonstrated by the apostles and their associates who functioned much as the Old Testament prophets did; and (2) a type of prophetic activity that made no claims to being the very word of God, but which was for the “strengthening, encouragement and comfort” of believers ( 1 Cor 14:3 ). It is this second type of prophetic activity in the New Testament that has drawn so much current interest, especially if the argument also holds that this gift of prophecy is still operative in the church today.

Usually the case for sustaining the argument that the New Testament apostles are linked with the Old Testament prophets as authoritative recipients of the word of God is made by noting that the Book of Hebrews avoids applying the word “prophet” to Jesus, but uses instead the word “apostle” ( 3:1 “fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess”).

What about this other type of Christian prophecy where believers, who prophesy, do not regard themselves as the bearers of the very words of God? Did not the apostle Paul teach in 1 Corinthians 13:8-9 that “where there are prophecies, they will cease For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears.” When would that cessation of prophecy take place? After the early church had matured? Or after the completion of the canon of Scripture? Probably neither of these suggested termination points answers the completion of the perfection process. Perfection cannot be expected before Christ’s second coming. Thus, the believer’s present, fragmentary knowledge, based as it is on the modes of knowledge now available to us, will come to an end.

How long, then, will prophecy last? The argument at this point now shifts to Ephesians 2:20the church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (also see Eph 3:5 ). If the apostle Paul refers here to two different functions or gifts the apostles and the prophets of the New Testament and the gift of prophecy was so foundational in building the Christian church that it does not continue to our day; its foundational work has been completed. But if, as others contend, the expression “apostles and prophets” refers to one and the same group in a type of figure of speech called a hendiadys, where two distinct words connected by a conjunction are used to express one complex notion (“apostles-who-are-also-prophets”), then the gift may still be operative today. However, no Greek examples of two plural nouns in this type of construction have yet been attested even though the construction is known in other combinations of words.

Two answers are given, therefore, to the question of the termination of New Testament prophecy by modern interpreters. All agree that classical Old Testament prophecy and apostolic prophecy that delivered to us God’s authoritative Scriptures have ceased. Others feel, however, that a secondary type of Christian prophecy continues today in the tradition of the New Testament prophet Agabus ( Acts 11:28 ; 21:10 ) and the prophets of 1 Corinthians 12-14. This second group is subordinate to the teaching of the apostles and subject to the criticism and judgment of the body as two or three individuals prophesy in the regular meetings of the church.

<sup>15</sup>W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 701-702.

<sup>16</sup> ὄστις (Mt: 29; Mk: 4–5; Lk: 21), ἔνδυμα (Mt: 7; Mk: 0; Lk: 1), and πρόβατον (Mt: 11; Mk: 2; Lk: 2) in particular are favourites of his.

<sup>17</sup> id. Did. Didache



11:1, 4), or does it simply denote their presence or appearance (cf. 20:28; 21:32)? For ‘sheep’s clothing’ see *Dox. Gr*<sup>18</sup>. 573:21 and recall Aesop’s fable of the wolf in sheep’s clothing (date uncertain).<sup>196</sup> The expression appears neither in the LXX nor, as far as we have been able to determine, in any extant Jewish text from antiquity. Although a symbolic interpretation is usually—and probably rightly—taken for granted by modern interpreters, as it was by most early Christian writers (cf. Justin, *Dial.* 35; *1 Apol.* 16; Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 1, preface; Acts Thomas 79; Ignatius, *Eph.* 5 long recension), Zahn<sup>20n</sup>, p. 314, and others have argued that the prophetic garb (cf. 1 Kgs 19:13, 19; 2 Kgs 2:8, 13–14; Heb 11:37; 1 Clem<sup>21</sup>. 17:1: always *μηλωτή*) is in view (so Böche<sup>22r</sup> (v); Hill (v)). However one decides that issue, the sheep are the congregation, the people of God (cf. Num 27:7; Ps 78:52; 1 E<sup>23n</sup> 89–90; Jn 10:1–30), and among them counterfeit Christians (cf. 7:21–3) have taken up residence. Compare Did<sup>24</sup>. 16:3: ‘In the last days the false prophets and corrupters shall be multiplied, and the sheep shall be turned into wolves’. (In *Midr. Rab.* on Est 10:2 Israel is portrayed as a sheep in the midst of wolves (= Gentiles).)

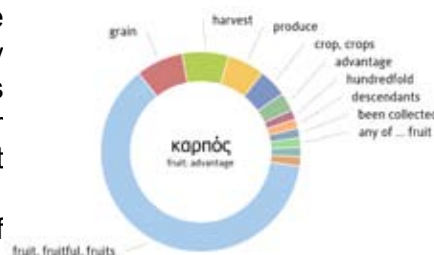
Deception of the people of God is their intent. Their motives are not mentioned here. In other places, greed is frequently the motive behind such activity.

**Ravenous wolves**, ἔσωθεν δέ εἰσιν λύκοι ἄρπαγες. Although outwardly appearing peaceful, inwardly their nature is that of a hungry wolf intent on destroying the flock. Their actions, whether by their own design or not, have the impact of destroying the flock of God. By their false teaching of the Gospel they bring spiritual ruin. The horrible impact of their work is hard to imagine completely. God’s people are led into a way of religious devotion contrary to the will of God and into a path that brings down God’s wrath and punishment. Most likely implied here as elsewhere in the New Testament is that wrong ideas about the Truth of God leads to wrong behavior. Both bring about God’s anger and punishment, as 7:21-23 will assert.



**Explanation, vv. 16-20:** “16 You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? 17 In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus you will know them by their fruits.” (7.16 ἀπὸ τῶν καρπῶν αὐτῶν ἐπιγνώσεσθε αὐτούς. μήτι συλλέγουσιν ἀπὸ ἀκανθῶν σταφυλὰς ἢ ἀπὸ τριβόλων σῦκα; 7.17 οὕτως πᾶν δένδρον ἀγαθὸν καρποὺς καλοὺς ποιεῖ, τὸ δὲ σαπρὸν δένδρον καρποὺς ποιηροὺς ποιεῖ. 7.18 οὐ δύναται δένδρον ἀγαθὸν καρποὺς ποιηροὺς ποιεῖν οὐδὲ δένδρον σαπρὸν καρποὺς καλοὺς ποιεῖν. 7.19 πᾶν δένδρον μὴ ποιῶν καρπὸν καλὸν ἐκκόπτεται καὶ εἰς πῦρ βάλλεται. 7.20 ἄρα γε ἀπὸ τῶν καρπῶν αὐτῶν ἐπιγνώσεσθε αὐτούς.).

The graphic portrayal of the character of these false prophets is set forth in verses 16-20. The bracketing principle of ‘knowing them by their fruits’ in verses 16a and 20 form the foundational principle. The Greek verb ἐπιγνώσκω emphasis full recognition of these false teachers. Their character will become clearly recognizable. How? By their fruits, ἀπὸ τῶν καρπῶν αὐτῶν. Fruits represents outward actions by these individuals.<sup>25</sup> Outward actions will reflect the true inner condition spiritually of the individual, even when these actions attempt to disguise the inner reality.



Why is this so? And what does God do? The couplet parallels of

<sup>18</sup>ox. *Gr. Dox. Gr.* H. Diels, ed., *Doxographi Graeci*, Berlin, 1879.

<sup>19</sup>This fable *may* have been known in first-century Palestine; certainly one can detect the influence of some of Aesop’s fables on rabbinic literature; see H. Schwarzbaum, ‘Talmudic-Midrashic Affinities of some Aesopic Fables’, *Laographia* 22 (1965), pp. 466–83.

<sup>20</sup>Zahn T. Zahn, *Das Evangelium des Matthäus*, 4th ed., Leipzig, 1922.

<sup>21</sup>Clem. 1 Clem. 1 Clement

<sup>22</sup>O. Böcher, *Christus Exorcista*, BWANT 96, Stuttgart, 1972.

<sup>23</sup>1 Enoch

<sup>24</sup>Didache

<sup>25</sup>“The principle of 7:16 is known from other texts and must be judged a commonplace. See Ecclus 27:6; Jn 15:2–17; Gal 5:19–23; Jas 3:10–12; Ignatius, *Eph.* 14:2; 2 E<sup>n</sup> 42:14; *b Ber.* 48a. In Ecclus 27:6; Mt 12:33; Lk 6:43–5; and Jas 3:10–12, ‘fruit’ is speech, and people are known by their words (cf. Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 2:5:45). But in Mt 7:16–20; Jn 15; and Gal 5:19–23 a more comprehensive meaning is manifest: deeds in general. This is probably why Matthew, unlike Luke, has the plural, ‘fruits’, in 7:16, 17, 18, and 20 (although not in 19, this being a perfect reproduction of 3:8).” [W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 702-703]

vv. 16b-19

Are grapes gathered from thorns,  
or figs from thistles?  
In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit,  
but the bad tree bears bad fruit.  
A good tree cannot bear bad fruit,  
nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.  
Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down  
and thrown into the fire.

The progression of thought, in its appeal to the consistency of the natural world of trees and fruit, begins with the nature of a good tree and a bad tree. It moves to the destruction of the bad tree in the last couplet, based on the production of bad fruit. The Lukan parallel in 6:43-45 is even clearer.<sup>26</sup>

43 No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; 44 for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. 45 The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.

Thus one can fully recognize the false prophet by their fruits because of human nature and character eventually coming to the surface in the actions of these individuals. But this is challenging, and proved to be a challenge in early Christianity as well as today. Note Davies and Allison's comments:

The problem of false prophets was never really solved by early Christianity. If in Matthew, the Didache, Hermas, and the Acts of Thomas it is their general behaviour which proves determinative, other documents supply other criteria. According to 1 Cor 12:1-3, the confession, 'Jesus is Lord', is decisive (but see also 12:10; 14:29). Later, in 1 Jn 4:2, the confession becomes more specific: 'every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God'. In the last half of the second century, in 3 Cor. 3:34-8 (part of the Acts of Paul), disagreement with the apostle to the Gentiles or with the 'orthodox' tradition becomes the mark of the pseudo-prophet (assuming, that is, that the two itinerants of 3 Cor. 1:2 should be identified as prophets). Ps.-Clem. Hom. 2:6-12 records yet one more method: the true prophet 'always knows all things', speaks the truth, and utters only prophecies that come to pass.

Do we have false prophets in Christianity today? Unmistakably yes! Unfortunately they abound all across the spectrum of official Christianity. Many have shifted to using modern mass media outlets for pushing their heresy on to unsuspecting believers. And many of the people of God have been badly deceived by these charlatans! Thus the people of God must stand in firm opposition to such people. And we must learn to recognize them for who they are.

## 2. What does the text mean to us today?

- 1) How discerning are you in listening to people claiming to speak for God?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 2) Do you have enough scriptural understanding of the Gospel to recognize falseness?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 3) How much concern do you have for keeping yourself in God's truth? And for helping others do the same thing?

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<sup>26</sup>W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 706.