



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

Study By  
*Lorin L. Cranford*  
 cranfordville.com

**Greek NT**

15 Προσέχετε ἀπὸ τῶν ψευδοπροφητῶν, οἵτινες ἔρχονται πρὸς ὑμᾶς ἐν ἐνδύμασι προβάτων ἔσωθεν δὲ εἰσὶν λύκοι ἄρπαγες. 16 ἀπὸ τῶν καρπῶν αὐτῶν ἐπιγνώσεσθε αὐτούς. μήτι συλλέγουσιν ἀπὸ ἀκανθῶν σταφυλὰς ἢ ἀπὸ τριβόλων σῦκα; 17 οὕτως πᾶν δένδρον ἀγαθὸν καρποῦς καλοῦς ποιεῖ, τὸ δὲ σαπρὸν δένδρον καρποῦς πονηροῦς ποιεῖ. 18 οὐ δύναται δένδρον ἀγαθὸν καρποῦς πονηροῦς ποιεῖν, οὐδὲ δένδρον σαπρὸν καρποῦς καλοῦς ποιεῖν. 19 πᾶν δένδρον μὴ ποιοῦν καρπὸν καλὸν ἐκκόπτεται καὶ εἰς πῦρ βάλλεται. 20 ἄρα γε ἀπὸ τῶν καρπῶν αὐτῶν ἐπιγνώσεσθε αὐτούς.

**La Biblia  
 de las Américas**

15 Cuidaos de los falsos profetas, que vienen a vosotros con vestidos de ovejas, pero por dentro son lobos rapaces. 16 Por sus frutos los conoceréis. ¿Acaso se recogen uvas de los espinos o higos de los abrojos? 17 Así, todo árbol bueno da frutos buenos; pero el árbol malo da frutos malos. 18 Un árbol bueno no puede producir frutos malos, ni un árbol malo producir frutos buenos. 19 Todo árbol que no da buen fruto, es cortado y echado al fuego. 20 Así que, por sus frutos los conoceréis.

**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.

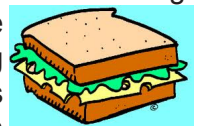
**NLT**

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 Outline of the Text:<sup>1</sup>**

This second unit in the conclusion to the Sermon continues the appeal to decision begun in vv. 13-14, but with a different thrust. The Jewish background of 'two ways' provided the backdrop to vv. 13-14, but here the Old Testament prophets and their frequent warnings against false prophets in ancient Israel frames Jesus' words in vv. 15-20. Ironically, in the historical setting of the Sermon, the 'false prophets' were primarily the Pharisees of Jesus' day. For Matthew's initial readers some thirty to forty years later in Syria, the 'false prophets' were primarily the leaders of the Jewish synagogues who were pressuring these Jewish believers in Christ to abandon their Christian faith in favor of traditional Judaism in the synagogue. Unfortunately, false prophets abound in our world both inside and outside the Christian church. Thus, the warning remains all the more relevant to believers in the modern world.

The passage divides itself into two nature divisions: 1) a warning, and 2) the reason for the warning. The warning echoes many such warnings found among the prophets of the Old Testament. The rationale for the warning builds off a core principle stated in both vv. 16 and 20, thus providing inclusio boundary markers. This axiom is fleshed out with illustrations from the natural world as the 'meat' in the sandwich between the two 'pieces of bread.' This material is brought together in a chiasmus with balance and symmetry.<sup>2</sup>



<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>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 ele-

- 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 literary setting of the passage, as illustrated in the chart at the end of this lesson, places the text as the second of four units of scripture texts (vv. 13-27) that together comprise the Conclusion of the Sermon. Images of gates - roads and house foundations bracket this appeal to decision and characterize the nature of discipleship commitment with graphic pictures. Between these two sets of images come two warnings, vv. 15-20 & 21-23, urging correct decision making about following Jesus. Our passage in vv. 15-20 is the first of these two warnings, and urges disciples to not be deceived by false teachers.

Crucial to the interpretation of the passage is the meaning of 'false teachers.' One has to take a close look at the historical setting both of Jesus' speech in the late 20s, and then of Matthew's initial target audience in the 70s of the first Christian century. Then, one can make more solid links to our day and apply this warning to modern believers. Arbitrary association of the phrase 'false teachers' with specific groups or individuals in the modern world has no validity with solid exegetical foundation, and can push the interpreter into the 'false teacher' category himself / herself. Careful examination of the rationale for the warning will uncover the spiritual principles highlighting why false teaching represents serious danger to the Christian community. This is very important to understand in an age where naive inclusiveness is the name of the game, and exclusiveness is unpopular.

## I. **Be on guard against false teachers, v. 15**

15 Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

15 Προσέχετε ἀπὸ τῶν ψευδοπροφητῶν, οἵτινες ἔρχονται πρὸς ὑμᾶς ἐν ἐνδύμασι προβάτων ἕσθωθεν δὲ εἰσὶν λύκοι ἄρπαγες.

This very short warning is loaded with rich concept, and the source of one of the well known idioms in western society, 'a wolf in sheep's clothing.' Central to understanding this is learning what believers are to do, and in regard to whom they are to do it.

**a. Keep alert.** The biblical phrase **Προσέχετε ἀπὸ** couches the warning as a present tense imperative verb, which carries with it the responsibility of continual alertness to danger, not just random or infrequent danger. 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 **ἀπὸ** and with the verb in the imperative mood the idea of being on guard against a danger is the appropriate meaning.<sup>3</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.

---

ments 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 **σαπρὸν**, "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>3</sup>Foll. by **ἀπὸ τίνος** *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.]

**b. False teachers.** “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>4</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>5</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 end times, 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.

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.

**The label.** 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>6</sup> Consequently, these efforts have been futile and without

<sup>4</sup>For more details see my “Encountering Heresy: Insight from the Pastoral Epistles,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology*, Spring 1980.

<sup>5</sup>See Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. “False Prophet,” *Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*.

<sup>6</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 Lagrangé (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

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>7</sup> These are fake Christians who preach a false gospel and deceive people into

---

(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 *TM*, pp. 73–5; Hummel, pp. 64–5), against enthusiasts (so Kingsbury, *Structure*, p. 151; Burnet<sup>t</sup>, pp. 234–47), against rigorous, legalistic Jewish Christians opposed to the Gentile mission (Guelic<sup>h</sup>, pp. 391–3; Gundry, *Commentary*, 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>7</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., "Prophet, 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 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 2:20. The 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

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.

**Their character.** 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>8</sup>

Almost every word of this clause appears more often in Matthew than in Mark or Luke.<sup>9</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>10</sup> 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>11</sup> 573:21 and recall Aesop’s fable of the wolf in sheep’s clothing (date uncertain).<sup>12</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>13</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>14</sup>. 17:1: always μηλωτή) is in view (so Böcher<sup>15</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>16</sup>n 89–90; Jn 10:1–30), and among them counterfeit Christians (cf. 7:21–3) have taken up residence. Compare Did<sup>17</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 is 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.

## II. Why? 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.**

16 ἀπὸ τῶν καρπῶν αὐτῶν ἐπιγνώσεσθε αὐτούς. μήτι συλλέγουσιν ἀπὸ ἀκανθῶν σταφυλὰς ἢ ἀπὸ τριβόλων σῦκα; 17 οὕτως πᾶν δένδρον ἀγαθὸν καρποὺς καλοὺς ποιεῖ, τὸ δὲ σαπρὸν δένδρον καρποὺς πονηροὺς ποιεῖ· 18 οὐ δύναται δένδρον ἀγαθὸν καρποὺς πονηροὺς ποιεῖν, οὐδὲ δένδρον σαπρὸν καρποὺς καλοὺς ποιεῖν. 19 πᾶν δένδρον μὴ ποιῶν καρπὸν καλὸν ἐκκόπτεται καὶ εἰς πῦρ βάλλεται. 20 ἄρα γε ἀπὸ τῶν καρπῶν αὐτῶν ἐπιγνώσεσθε αὐτούς.

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>8</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>9</sup> ὅστις (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>10</sup> id. Did. Didache

<sup>11</sup> *ox. Gr. Dox. Gr.* H. Diels, ed., *Doxographi Graeci*, Berlin, 1879.

<sup>12</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>13</sup>Zahn T. Zahn, *Das Evangelium des Matthäus*, 4th ed., Leipzig, 1922.

<sup>14</sup>Clem. 1 Clem. 1 Clement

<sup>15</sup>O. Böcher, *Christus Exorcista*, BWANT 96, Stuttgart, 1972.

<sup>16</sup>1 Enoch

<sup>17</sup>Didache

The parallel to this part of Matthew's narrative in Luke 6:43-45<sup>18</sup> stresses true commitment over against phoney commitment, and does not contain the warning that is found in Mt. 7:15. Luke's conclusion to the Sermon in 7:43-49 only contains the images of trees and building foundations, and thus brings the Sermon to a close with a slightly different emphasis than is true in Matthew.<sup>19</sup>

**a. Being fruit inspectors.** 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. Here we must especially note that primary emphasis is given to character reflected in behavior, and not to the 'accuracy' of their teaching. The heart of the danger with such teachers is their influence on the living of others, and not just on their false ideas. Here is where modern Christianity often fails, by just focusing on ideas being taught.

**b. The character of trees.** How are they recognized as false prophets? By their fruits, ἀπὸ τῶν καρπῶν αὐτῶν. Fruits represents outward actions by these individuals.<sup>20</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 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>21</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!

<sup>18</sup>NRSV: "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."

<sup>19</sup>A slight connection of Luke 6:46-47 to Matthew 7:24-25 exists, and will be examined in the study on the Matthew text.

<sup>20</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]

<sup>21</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.

Thus the people of God must stand in firm opposition to such people. And we must learn to recognize them for who they are.

### Diagram of the Sermon on the Mount Mt. 7:15-20

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.

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> from their fruits  
156 **you will understand them.**

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

<sup>7:17</sup> thusly  
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> Therefore  
        from their fruits  
165 **you will understand them.**

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.

