

# Matthew 7:15-20

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, I want to tell you how much I've felt at home this last week and a bit.! It's just been, it's really curious how you can live in a foreign country for a long time.

Come home to worship in a home church in many ways and find such a wall. Thank you. I continue to lift your church family, we do, in Virginia to the Lord.

And thank God for his work among you. As we come to his word this morning, let's bow our heads in prayer. Father, we remember what the psalmist says.

And we take it as a very practical indication of praise and dependence. I rejoice in your word like one who finds great spoil, like one who finds great treasure.

Lord, help us this morning as we come to your word, not to treat it as something rote or ritual, but to come to you as people who need this food, who should be delighted at this treasure that we found.

[ 1 : 24 ] Because this is really the way that you feed us. This is really the way that you sustain us and guide us. This is the way that you rebuke us and encourage us. And we pray that that might be the case this morning, Lord.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Okay, so our passage is Matthew 7, verses 15 to 20, taken from this section of the Lord's Sermon on the Mount.

I like to tell myself that London is still my city, that I know the way around it. But the fact is I'm rubbish at finding my way around London now.

GPS, if anything, has made it more difficult. That doesn't seem to make sense to me. Here's the case. I remember a few years ago I was trying to get to St. Paul's to meet my brother for dinner. There was a restaurant right there. And I said to myself, it's a huge great cathedral. Sooner or later it can show itself. But it didn't. So in desperation I asked someone who was standing nearby whether he could point me in the right direction.

[ 2 : 31 ] He turned out to be Russian. He gets out his map and with tremendous authority tells me, this is the direction you should be going. Go in this direction. Go. So I set off and 15 minutes later I turned up at the Tower of London.

Leave us to say I was late for dinner. So at this point in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is telling us who you listen to matters. That's his theme.

It's the lesson of these verses after all that he's said. Because being a follower of Jesus requires discernment. And there are three warnings which Jesus gives us here about those who will show us a wrong way if we listen to them.

If you want to know, he's saying, whether you can trust the person who's directing you, you should heed these three things at a minimum. So let's look at the passage. It'll be helpful if you have it open in front of you.

I'll try and stick as close as I can to the text. So verse 15, what does Jesus say? Jesus says, Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing.

[ 3 : 43 ] And this I think is the first warning. We're called to challenge and to verify. To beware, you may know, comes from an old English word meaning to put your guard up, to be wary.

If a soldier is on watch at his or her post and somebody approaches and they don't know them, he or she will likely challenge the person who goes there.

And if they have a weapon, if the soldier has a weapon, they will raise it in readiness. And Jesus is telling us this is an appropriate posture to adopt towards someone who claims to speak for God.

You're not attacking the person themselves when you are being wary, or you're not insulting them when you are putting yourself on guard. But in a sense, mentally, you are challenging them.

Who goes there? Who do you belong to? What words will you give me? How is what you've said or what you've done in line with the gospel? And you'll notice that Jesus says we have two

vulnerabilities.

[ 4 : 52 ] The first is we have a vulnerability of need. The connection between teachers and sheep might not be immediately obvious to us now, but it was a familiar metaphor in the Old Testament in Jeremiah when God's people have rejected his authority and his teachers.

They turned deliberately to false shepherds, to false prophets. And God himself says to these false prophets as if they were shepherds of the sheep, you have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them.

How would those people gather a flock in the first place? Well, because sheep need shepherds. Remember Jesus said that when he looked at the crowds.

They were like sheep without a shepherd. That's what makes us vulnerable. We need shepherds. And so we will flock to people who appear to be so. But second, see, we have a vulnerability of familiarity.

Wolves will come to us, Jesus says, in sheep's clothing. You remember Churchill famously said of his rival Clement Attlee that he was a sheep in sheep's clothing. He saw him as no threat at all.

[ 6 : 08 ] But Jesus said these false teachers are like sheep in sheep's clothing. They are ravenous, meaning hungry wolves, where the flock is ordinarily much more vulnerable and so needs the shepherd to protect it from wolves.

How much more vulnerable is the flock that takes into its trust a shepherd, who is actually a wolf? The guard is down. The shepherd appears to wear sheep's clothing, but on the inside, his motivation is not to feed the sheep, but to feed upon them.

So, although we know this phrase, a wolf in sheep's clothing, pretty well, I think it's worth asking what danger does such a person actually present? Well, the danger, though, lies in the fact that we don't see the wolf.

What we see and pay attention to is the wolf's clothing. We see and assume that this teacher is like us. I think this is obviously our vulnerability generally in our own day and age.

This person sounds like me. This person looks like me. This person produces the right sound bites. They're saying the kinds of things that I would say if I could. They must be a friend.

[ 7 : 24 ] I can let my guard down. We assume that being like us, we can trust this person when they're teaching us because they will have our best interests at heart.

So I think this is the terrible danger for Christians, and this has been the testimony of history. Those Christians who let down their gospel guard are enormously vulnerable to being led astray.

Such people are to horribly mix our animal metaphors, sitting ducks, for deception. So we're told, I think, to challenge and to verify.

Second, we're to observe and match, verses 16 to 17. Jesus continues, You will recognise them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes or figs from thistles?

So every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. Having warned us that there are wolves we don't easily see, Jesus shows us now the way to spot them.

[ 8 : 27 ] You can recognise this because, although the wolf can disguise its identity, the tree cannot notice disguise its fruit.

Grapes, he tells us, are not grown from thorn bushes, nor figs from thistles. If you're tasting a thorny grape or trying to choke down some thistly fig, it may be because it's not all that it's claiming to be. You may have difficulty recognising a false teacher, even when they're right in front of you. But Jesus says you will recognise them by their fruits if you're paying attention, if you're looking out for their patterns of behaviour.

Why is Jesus putting it this way? Well, frankly, because we ourselves can be so reluctant to join the dots and to, with a beloved teacher or a preacher or a leader, hold them accountable in this way.

We are disinclined to doubt such people. And there are really two sides to this, I think, to evaluating the fruit or teaching of a preaching ministry.

[ 9 : 35 ] One is what we might call technical, and the other is biographical or organic. On the technical side, we should have clear expectations in our own mind about the way that someone should teach the Bible.

Look for the text, first of all. A friend and I were at a Bible conference three years ago in the Midwest, and one of the big names in Reformed Evangelicalism gave the opening address, where he warned us by giving us nine things he thought we should be watching for to look out for false teachers.

And one of those, he said, was you should be watching out for people who don't teach from the Bible. And the irony was that he himself, in his nine points, as magnificent as they were, didn't refer to the text of the Bible once in his otherwise excellent talk.

It's not rocket science, is it? A Bible teacher, that is someone who derives their authority to speak because they claim to know and be directed by the Bible, should more than occasionally refer to the Bible.

Preachers have different styles, but you should be able to trace the argument line and the conclusion from the text that they say they are expounding. Here's another example.

[10:55] I was visiting a friend in Idaho some years ago. We went to worship at his church. I don't recall what the Bible passage was, but the application was, watch out for Hillary Clinton and the US government are bringing in weapons through the town to suppress the local population.

Whether that was true or not, I'm pretty sure Hillary and the US Army are not called out in the pages of Scripture. Maybe Revelation. Thirdly, look for balance.

Is there one aspect of Christian teaching or experience here which is being emphasised, and other parts which are being wholly neglected, again, in a broad aspect of someone's teaching ministry?

This isn't necessarily false teaching, and it's not picked up immediately, but persistent teaching in one direction to the exclusion of other vital gospel themes indicates an unbiblical imbalance.

Paul tells the elders in Acts 20, I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.

Now, it may be difficult for a preacher to cover everything, but the question, I think, for us, even in a given passage is, is there balance there?

[12:10] Is the balance that's given in the text of the Bible presented in the sermon? One of the ways that we often get caught up, Presbyterians love to focus on divine sovereignty, the idea that God's in charge, and of course he is, but human responsibility is equally the theme of scripture.

Is it also being presented? Fourthly, be careful of teachers who are majoring on the minors. Often this will be their own pet theory, their unique interpretation of a given text.

It will often be exotic, which is part of the reason that we're interested in it. The rule is, I think, that if a teacher has their own view, they should make that clear in the sermon.

They should say, hey, you know, guys, be watching out for this. This is my own crazy idea about the text, which I found. I remember a visiting speaker when I was at college on the south coast, a brilliant man, double first of Cambridge, and he asked the question of the atonement, what happened to sin at the cross?

And his theory is that God somehow sucked it up into the cross, at Calvary, as if the cross was a big vacuum cleaner. It was a creative idea, but not obviously the idea of the passage.

[13:34] And this is the connection, I think, with what's organic or biographical. Who is this teacher, who is a preacher really up there for? Who is he representing? Is he up there for what God has to say, because that is the role of the biblical teacher or preacher, to expose what God has said, or is he up there for himself, and consequently is he putting his ideas into the passage that aren't properly found there?

Is Jesus the hero of the story and the sermon? Is Jesus the hero, evidently, of this person's life? So this is the question, I think, for any Christian teaching ministry.

They won't all look the same, but are they about Scripture? Would you be able to say to a friend, when you talk about a church that you've been going to, I think you can reliably say it at this one, but perhaps of another, are they reliably sticking to the text?

Are their conclusions, the conclusions of the passage? Is the hero of the story, the Jesus of the Bible, or something else? And positively, is there an organic way to tell good fruit?

In a sense to ask, are the contents inside the box matching the labelling on the outside of the box? Because Jesus says, verse 17, every healthy tree bears good fruit, and every diseased tree bears bad fruit.

[15:04] One of my favourite stories in this regard is about Corrie ten Boom, the Christian writer and speaker, who you will know would often speak after the war around Berlin.

She was speaking at one point on Micah 7, which is one of her favourite texts, it was, how God forgives our sins and then puts our sins at the bottom of the sea and puts a sign on the surface saying, no fishing.

Some of you may know the specific story of how she was speaking in Berlin in 1947, and after her talk, as people were coming up to greet her, she saw one particular person approaching and she

recognised him immediately, even though this was some years after the war, he had been a guard at Ravensbrück concentration camp, when members of her family, including her own sister, had died.

And the man came up to her and he told her that he had become a Christian since that time, and he was sure that God had forgiven him for what he had done, and he said, but I need to hear it from you.

Will you forgive me? And this is what she writes, and I've always been so struck by the organic nature of this when it comes to the Gospel. And I stood there, I whose sins had every day to be forgiven, and I could not forgive him.

[16:22] Betsy had died in that place. Could he erase her slow, terrible death simply for the asking? Jesus, help me, I prayed silently. I can lift my hand, I can do that much.

You supply the feeling. So woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretch out to me, and as I did so, an incredible thing took place.

The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joint hands, and then this healing wall seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. I forgive you, brother, I cried with all my heart.

I think that's Gospel fruit. I think that's a teacher who's done the hard work and is prepared to humble herself before the Lord when it comes to walking the walk.

That is the evidence of the inside matching the outside. So I think for any of us, is the Bible simply something that we are being taught and have intellectually accepted, or is it being lived out in the fruit of a changed life?

[17:31] It takes wisdom, doesn't it, to discern what is from God and what is not. But we are being told there are clues. Our Lord is telling us here, walls are not as disguised as they suppose.

You can identify the tree by looking at the fruit. And thirdly and finally, wait and hope, verses 18 to 20.

We are to be hopeful even as we wait. Growing up, we had this apple tree in our garden. I've often thought that sounds like an idyllic British childhood, growing up with an orchard and a gun.

This was a ratty old apple tree, barely surviving. I remember as autumn faded, almost to give a kind of unwarranted honour to the tree, I would pick the apples on the tree and taste them to see if they had ripened.

And often they were quite small and they were sour, odd, bitter, hard. And I've learned since that you can eat wild crab apples, because that's what they were.

[18:44] And you can cook them even better. But if you eat them straight off the tree, a steady diet of them swallowing their seeds and their core, you will slowly be poisoned yourself by metabolised cyanide.

And the Latin word for crab apples is malus, which means evil or wicked. I think time is the perspective at the core of this passage. It will require some time, sometimes, to evaluate ministries or time for them to show what they really are.

Time is the perspective we often miss in evaluating good trees from bad trees. when Jesus says a healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit and a diseased tree cannot bear good fruit, what are those things?

They are ultimate pictures of a whole life evaluated from God's perspective. It's not helpful, I think, for us to be suspicious of everybody, nor is it helpful to take up the dubious hobby of heresy hunting.

Because what you usually discover at the end of the day, if you're honest, is not only how off-base this person might be, but how off-base your own heart can be. We've all done it, I think, in the last few years, the rush to judgment when Christian ministries have failed spectacularly.

[20:07] And you want to tell yourself, well, I knew it all the time. I think we have to be intentional with ourselves. we have to be brilliant about the way that we evaluate a teaching ministry and our own hearts, too.

Even if someone is diverting a little, but regularly from the gospel, we should be looking out for something that takes time to taste. Are the apples of this teaching ministry sweet?

Are they producing growth? Is there the authentic taste of Christ about them? Not of perfection, necessarily, in this person's life, but of the humility and joy of the gospel that's shown not only in their teaching, but in the way they live.

And if you're not finding that, the encouragement, I think, is to find counsel about that thing, but also to find a better diet and to select a different teacher.

I have found that one of the authorities, the false authorities I often have to contend with, is my own self. The Bible tells us our consciences wrongly condemn us.

[ 21 : 21 ] In a way, they're teaching us. Our own hearts can deceive us. Our minds are so easily swayed and run after the latest thing. They need transforming, Scripture tells us.

They need renewing. We're to set our minds on things above. I remember George Burwer, the former leader of Joffre Asian Mobilisation, used to talk to himself audibly and say, Mr. Body, we're not going there today.

In the same way, I do that sometimes with my mind. Mr. Mind, we're not going there right now. And I think when it comes to teaching, we have to be in the same mind, not just uncritically accepting whatever feeling or thoughts crosses our minds, but rather to get into the habit of preaching the gospel to ourselves, renewing our minds from the promises of Scripture.

I was moved by a story from the New York Times last week. This is about something that happened in Washington right by the White House a few weeks ago.

There was a lightning strike and three people were killed instantaneously. And one person survived. A 28-year-old woman, a woman called Amber, with burns all down one side of her body.

[ 22 : 41 ] Her heart stopped immediately. The EMTs were there, emergency people, and they came and they managed to revive her heart. It lasted for another 11 minutes and then stopped again and they revived her again.

And she's describing her experience now and she says she's in awful pain. She feels like she's going to die most days. But when she does that, she remembers her aunt who battled cancer.

And when it's at its worst, she cries out at the top of her lungs, I'm grateful. I'm grateful. And I thought of that command in 1 Thessalonians 5, which may be that woman's aunt knew.

Give thanks in all circumstances for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. And you think about all of those times in your life where in one way or another, whether it be from a pulpit or from a teaching ministry or from a book or from what your own experience, perhaps the experience of pain is telling you and in a sense it's attempting to teach you at those moments we need to apply gospel hope to it.

We need to remember gospel promises. So I want to end by saying this. This is the encouragement I think ultimately from these verses, isn't it? Jesus says a healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit.

[ 24 : 04 ] And ultimately Jesus says every healthy tree bears good fruit. So what ultimately makes one tree or another?

The Bible says in Philippians chapter 1 He who has begun a good work in you will bring it to completion. He will bring it if you will to ripen him.

You didn't plant the seed, he did. You haven't caused the growth no matter what you might ultimately think he has. You won't determine ultimately all the fruit of your life and what it will produce.

He will. Yes, you must avoid the counsel of the wicked. Yes, you must plant yourself as Psalm 1 says by streams of living water. Yes, you must bear fruit in keeping with repentance as you can.

But if it's something like my experience you'll bear a number of crap apples too daily. But wait, he's saying, and hope because even through the storms and amidst the wolves God is ripening you for his glory.

[ 25 : 14 ] That's right.