The Constitution of the Kingdom

A 33-Session Journey through the Sermon on the Mount & the Sermon on the Plain

SESSION TWENTY-NINE — Known by Their Fruits

Part Six: The Two Ways · Texts: Matthew 7:15–20; Luke 6:43–45

The Texts

> **Matthew 7:15–20** *Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits… A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit… Thus you will know them by their fruits.*
>
> **Luke 6:43–44** *No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit.*

Wolves in Sheep's Clothing

The Sermon's closing appeal continues, and Jesus turns from the choice of the road to the danger on it — the people who will try to lead us down the wrong one while looking, for all the world, like the right kind of guide. "Beware of false prophets," he says, "who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves."

Do not miss how unsettling that image is. The wolf does not come snarling, in a wolf costume; you would see him coming a mile off. He comes dressed as a sheep — gentle, familiar, one of the flock, trustworthy. The whole danger is the disguise. False teaching almost never announces itself as false; it comes wearing the wool, using the right words, quoting the right verses, wrapped in warmth and confidence. So Jesus, who a chapter earlier told us not to set ourselves up as judges of other people's souls, now insists that we must, absolutely, learn to tell the real from the counterfeit — and he hands us the one reliable test.[1]

Let's search the Scriptures together.

Not Condemnation — Discernment

Hold this session and the one on the log and the speck together, because at first glance they seem to pull against each other. Back in the seventh chapter's opening, Jesus said, "do not judge." Here he says, in effect, "you had better judge carefully." Which is it? Both — and there is no contradiction, once you remember the distinction we drew. Jesus forbids condemnation: setting yourself on the bench as judge of another person's soul. He commands discernment: the clear-eyed ability to tell good teaching from harmful, a true guide from a false one. In fact, refusing to discern is not humility; it is negligence. A shepherd who will not tell a sheep from a wolf "because who am I to judge" has abandoned the flock to be devoured.[2]

[1] Unless noted, Scripture is quoted from the New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition (NRSVue), the base translation for this course. Matthew 7:15–20, with related sayings at Luke 6:43–45 (a tree and its fruit) within the Sermon on the Plain. This is the second of the Sermon's closing two-ways warnings.

And notice who this warning is chiefly about. Not your ordinary neighbor — Jesus is not telling us to eye everyone in the pew with suspicion, inspecting their private lives for flaws. He is warning about prophets, teachers, leaders — the ones who stand up to speak for God and shape what a whole community believes and becomes. The stakes are highest there, because a false teacher does not just go astray; they take a crowd with them. So the test that follows is meant, first, for the ones who would lead us.

The One Reliable Test

And here is that test, and it is beautifully simple: "you will know them by their fruits." Not by their words — words are cheap, and the false prophet is fluent in all the right ones. Not by their charisma, their crowds, their confidence, their platform, or their polish — a wolf can have all of those in abundance. Not even by the miracles they claim or the God-talk they pour out. By their fruits. By what their life and their teaching actually produce, over time, in the real world.[3]

"A good tree cannot bear bad fruit," Jesus says, "nor can a bad tree bear good fruit." It is a farmer's common sense. You do not finally judge a tree by how lovely its leaves look in spring, or how impressive its height, or what the sign nailed to its trunk claims it is. You wait, and you watch, and you taste what it grows. A tree that keeps producing bitter, poisonous fruit is a bad tree, no matter how good it looks or how loudly it insists otherwise. And the fruit takes a season to ripen — which is why this test requires patience. You cannot always spot a wolf in a single sermon. But give it time, and watch what grows: that never lies.

What Counts as Good Fruit

So we have to ask the obvious question: what is the fruit we are watching for? And the answer is the whole Sermon we have been climbing. Good fruit is the greater righteousness — mercy, humility, justice, honesty, love, and above all love for the least. A teaching, and a teacher, that produces those things in people — that makes them gentler with the weak, braver for the wronged, more generous, more honest, more like the Jesus of the Beatitudes — is a good tree, whatever else you make of it. And bad fruit is what betrays the Sermon: teaching that breeds contempt instead of mercy; that flatters the powerful and burdens the poor; that produces pride, exclusion, greed, cruelty, fear; that leaves a trail of wounded and used-up people behind it while the teacher grows rich and adored.

This is a piercing test, and it cuts close to home in every age, including ours. Because a great deal of what gets said in God's name grows unmistakably bad fruit — and does it in sheep's clothing, with a Bible in hand and the right words on its lips. Jesus gives us permission, and

[2]"False prophets" were a live danger in Israel's Scriptures—those who cried "peace, peace, when there is no peace" (Jeremiah 6:14) and told the powerful what they wanted to hear, while the true prophets were driven out (cf. Session Nine, on Luke's woe: "woe when all speak well of you… for so their ancestors did to the false prophets"). The warning is chiefly about teachers and leaders, not a mandate to treat every neighbor with suspicion.

[3]"You will know them by their fruits" (7:16, 20) makes conduct, not charisma or claim, the test. This is discernment, which the Sermon commands, as distinct from condemnation, which it forbids (7:1; see Session Twenty-Five): we judge the fruit of teaching—its effect on the vulnerable, its love or its harm—without appointing ourselves judges of souls.

more than permission — a command — to look past the wool and the words to the fruit, and to name a bad tree a bad tree when we see the harvest of harm it leaves. That is not being judgmental. That is guarding the flock, exactly as he told us to.

A Word of Balance

Two cautions, so this good tool is not misused. First, the fruit test is not a license for the suspicious, cynical heart to go hunting for wolves under every pulpit and behind every face — the same Jesus warned us about the log in our own eye. Discernment is not paranoia; we watch the fruit soberly, patiently, and with humility, knowing we are trees under inspection too. And second, remember that good and imperfect are not the same thing. A good tree is not a flawless tree — no teacher is without fault, and a stumble or a bad day is not the poison fruit of a wolf. We are looking for the settled pattern, the consistent harvest over a season — not for a single blemish we can seize on to dismiss someone. The test is meant to protect the vulnerable from ravenous wolves, not to arm the merciless with a new way to condemn.

Freedom for Others

Put it to our thread, and notice that this whole warning is, at heart, protective love. Jesus is not teaching us to be suspicious for our own sake; he is teaching us to guard the flock — and the ones a false prophet most endangers are always the vulnerable, the trusting, the ones with the least power to protect themselves. To learn discernment is to become someone who can stand between a wolf and a sheep. And there is a searching turn back on ourselves in it: the same test we apply to teachers, we must be willing to have applied to us. What fruit is my own life growing — in my home, my church, my corridor? Am I leaving people gentler and freer and more loved, or wounded and smaller and used? So ask with me: whose fruit have I been dazzled by, when I should have tasted it? And what is the honest harvest of my own tree? *Freedom for others may cost us a leader we admired, or an illusion about ourselves — what can we lay down?*

Around the Table — For Discussion

- The danger is a wolf in sheep's clothing — harm that looks godly. Where have you seen bad fruit grown in God's name, wearing the right words?
- "Do not judge" (Session Twenty-Five) and "beware of false prophets" sit close together. How do you tell condemnation from the discernment Jesus commands?
- The test is fruit, not charisma or crowds or confidence. What are we most easily dazzled by instead of the fruit?
- What does "good fruit" look like, in the Sermon's terms — and how would you know a teaching by it over time?
- Freedom for others may cost us something. Turned on yourself: what is the honest harvest of your own tree lately?

This Week — A Practice

Two movements. First, taste the fruit. Pick one voice you take in regularly — a preacher, a podcast, an author, an account that shapes how you see God and neighbor — and instead of asking "is it impressive?" ask "what fruit does it grow?" Does it make you more merciful, more just, more humble, more loving toward the least — or more fearful, more contemptuous, more sure of your own rightness? Let the harvest, not the polish, be your guide. Second, inspect your own tree. Ask, honestly and without cruelty, what fruit your life has been growing lately in the people closest to you — and take one small step to tend it. Then bring back what you found. This Kingdom, like all the rest, is learned in the doing.

Looking Ahead

Next session, Jesus presses the fruit test all the way to its most sobering point — and turns it, unnervingly, on the religious and the impressive. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father… Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you.'" It is one of the hardest sayings in the Sermon — and, rightly understood, one of the most clarifying about what following Jesus actually is.

Benediction

So go this week with your eyes open and your heart humble. Do not be dazzled by the wool, or the words, or the crowd, or the confidence — taste the fruit, and let a bad tree be known for what it grows, no matter how good it looks. Learn the holy skill of discernment, not so you can condemn, but so you can guard the ones a wolf would devour. And keep the test turned, always, on your own life too: may the harvest of your tree be mercy and justice and love, especially toward the least. Blessed are those who know a tree by its fruit, for they will not be led astray — and they will not lead anyone else astray either.

Love, practiced — not just professed — reveals the Kingdom among us.

Blessings,
Pastor Mick Finch

SESSION TWENTY-NINE

Introduction Video Script

Single presenter, to camera · target 5–6 minutes · warm, steady, unhurried

[Begin still.]

Welcome back to the table. The Sermon's closing appeal continues, and Jesus turns from the choice of the road to the danger on it — the people who'll try to lead us down the wrong one while looking, for all the world, like exactly the right kind of guide. "Beware of false prophets," he says, "who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves."

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[Not condemnation — discernment.]

Now hold this session and the log-and-the-speck together, because at first they seem to pull against each other. In the opening of chapter seven Jesus said, "do not judge." Here he says, in effect, "you'd better judge carefully." Which is it? Both — and there's no contradiction, once you remember the distinction. He forbids condemnation — setting yourself on the bench as judge of another person's soul. He commands discernment — the clear-eyed ability to tell good teaching from harmful, a true guide from a false one. Refusing to discern isn't humility; it's negligence. A shepherd who won't tell a sheep from a wolf because "who am I to judge" has abandoned the flock to be devoured.

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[The test.]

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this test takes patience. You can't always spot a wolf in one sermon. But give it time and watch what grows. That never lies.

[Good fruit.]

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[A word of balance.]

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[The thread and practice.]

So here's our question this week — freedom for others: this whole warning is, at heart, protective love. The ones a false prophet most endangers are always the vulnerable, the trusting, the ones with the least power to protect themselves. To learn discernment is to become someone who can stand between a wolf and a sheep. And there's a searching turn back on us: the same test we apply to teachers, we'd better let be applied to ourselves. What fruit is my own life growing — in my home, my church, my corridor? So: whose fruit have I been dazzled by when I should've tasted it? And what's the honest harvest of my own tree?

Two things to practice. First, taste the fruit — pick one voice you take in regularly, and instead of asking "is it impressive?" ask "what fruit does it grow?" More merciful and just and humble — or more fearful and contemptuous and sure of my own rightness? Let the harvest, not the polish, be your guide. Second, inspect your own tree — ask honestly, and without cruelty, what fruit your life has grown lately in the people closest to you, and take one small step to tend it.

Next time, Jesus presses this test all the way to its most sobering point — and turns it on the religious and the impressive. "Not everyone who says 'Lord, Lord' will enter… I never knew you." One of the hardest sayings in the whole Sermon.

[Slow. Land it.]

For now, go with your eyes open and your heart humble. Don't be dazzled by the wool, or the words, or the crowd, or the confidence — taste the fruit, and let a bad tree be known for what it grows, no matter how good it looks. Learn the holy skill of discernment — not so you can condemn, but so you can guard the ones a wolf would devour. And keep the test turned, always, on your own life too: may the harvest of your tree be mercy and justice and love, especially toward the least.

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