

"Fruit"

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[0 : 00] After college, I had the privilege of going to Europe. While I was in Geneva with some college friends, I went with one of them to a Rolex store to purchase for her father to give to her mother for a 25th anniversary a very nice watch.

The salesman took us into the store, sat us down at a table, pulled out a velvet board for us to look at these on, gave us gloves, and then we were able to look at and to handle these amazing, beautiful watches.

They were beautiful. They were literally weighty, and they kept perfect time. Many years later, I had a chance to buy a Rolex for myself.

It was on the streets of Asia from a street vendor, it cost me the equivalent of about \$10. It, too, was beautiful, and it, too, was heavy.

But within weeks of taking it home, the band had broken. It did not keep time. As you might imagine, I did not know it was a Rolex. In fact, I called it my Folex at the time.

[1 : 14] But I thought maybe, maybe it was good enough that I could walk around with a cool fake, and that would be enough. But it failed spectacularly.

Can you imagine if my friend had bought a Folex thinking it was the real thing to give and spent all that money on a fake?

Interestingly, the U.S. website on immigration and customs enforcement has this to say. Counterfeit products not only attack the name and value of a known business, but in many cases can cause harmful and sometimes fatal consequences for the unsuspecting buyer.

How important it is to know the difference between a real and a fake. And how much more is that true in the world of spiritual truth and life?

Today, many speak for God in this world and put themselves forward as spiritual leaders. And pseudo-leaders can do much harm and be spiritually fatal to those who follow them.

[2 : 30] How then do we navigate this challenge? How can we avoid becoming an unsuspecting buyer? Jesus speaks to us about this today.

We're continuing in the Sermon on the Mount. This is a series we've been going through. We're in Matthew chapter 7. We're going to be in verses 15 through 20. If you're reading the Pew Bible, that's page 762.

If you want to turn there, the passage will also be up on the screen when we read it in a few minutes. But Jesus, if you remember, if you haven't been here, you're visiting, let's just recap.

Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount is talking about what does it look like, what does life look like in God's kingdom? What do the people who inhabit God's kingdom look like?

What is their character? What is their heart? What are the dynamics when God rules? And what does a follower look like when they're following their king, Jesus?

[3 : 31] And near the end of this series, this long sermon in chapter 7, Jesus has a series of contrasts. There are two weights, two gates, two fruits, two foundations, as we'll see in the future, bringing clarity where there might be confusion about what Jesus' kingdom really is.

And this week, Jesus warns us about leaders in God's kingdom. He says there are good and bad, and we must be aware of the bad, for they bear bad fruit that leads to spiritual destruction.

They are to be in God's kingdom repudiated and resisted. So, let's read what Jesus has to say to us, and then we'll unpack it together for a few minutes.

Matthew chapter 7, verses 15 through 20. Matthew chapter 8, verse 15.

Will you pray with me?

[5 : 13] Lord Jesus, we ask this morning for your help as we hear and listen to and sit under your word. Lord, I pray that you would give me clarity of speech and thought as I proclaim your word.

Lord, I pray for all of us that we would have hearts to receive your truth this morning. Lord, that you would help us through this word. Lead us into your life and your kingdom, we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. So, Jesus warns us to reject pseudo-leaders and to follow true leaders who follow Him. We're going to unpack this in three steps.

This is for your outline, people. First one is what the reality of the danger of pseudo-leaders. The second one is the discernment between pseudo and true leaders.

And the third point will be the source of true believers abiding in Jesus. So, the first thing that Jesus tells us, the reality of the danger of pseudo-teachers.

[6 : 20] Now, I'm using the word pseudo because it's actually what's in the original text. If you look at this, it is a pseudo-prophet that Jesus uses the word prophet here. By that simply means someone who speaks for God.

And so, I'm going to use the word teacher. You could insert preacher or spiritual leader into that. But a pseudo is a fake, someone who is false, right?

These are those who will come to speak from God and for God, but do not. They actually speak for themselves. They come to represent God, but they don't represent God in their character and actions.

They're those who come to lead others to God, but they don't actually lead them to God. They lead them astray to other places. And we see this because Jesus says, these pseudo-teachers, pseudo-leaders are like wolves in sheep's clothing.

They come and they look good. They wear a very disarming guise. They look like another one of the sheep. They look like another one of the sheep.

[7 : 26] But inwardly, they are ravenous. There is something at their core and in their heart where they are seeking not to bless, but to devour or to destroy.

And sometimes it's not always a conscious, malicious effort. but sometimes they are self-deceived and therefore lead people astray, but it's a serious issue because they are, in fact, spiritually damaging.

They're characterized by pride, by self-importance, by a lack of compassion and care for people. They build their own kingdoms rather than pointing people to Jesus' kingdom.

And in doing so, they use people rather than serve. And like ravenous wolves, they leave death and destruction behind.

So this is the warning Jesus gives us in verse 15, and it's remarkable when you start to read the breadth of Scriptures, and I'm leaving out the Old Testament, even in the New Testament, how often this is repeated.

[8 : 39] Jesus, later in His ministry in Matthew 13, has a long condemnation of the Pharisees as false teachers of their day. Why?

Because they laid spiritual burdens of keeping the law but could not help them to do it. They did deeds not to serve God and to please Him, but to be seen by others so that they might be built up.

Jesus says they sought for power and position through their spiritual leadership. They followed the letter of the law but ignored the heart of the law as they were presenting themselves as spiritual leaders.

The Pharisees appeared good on the outside, but inside were full of greed and selfishness. They posed as spiritual without being spiritually alive. They were fundamentally hypocrites, and Jesus confronted them and said, this is the first place where we see this.

It's the Pharisees, the Jewish leaders of the day, were leading people astray. And we see this most clearly. Why? Because they rejected Jesus Christ Himself.

[9 : 45] Because those who knew the Old Testament, they knew the law and the prophets, they knew the whole scope of God's work in history should have been longing for and waiting for the Messiah.

And yet when He came, they rejected Him and protected themselves in their own spiritual power and their own spiritual piety and their own spiritual processes.

They did not come to know the true Savior that God had sent. And Jesus says they are misguided and they are dangerous and they will lead people to destruction.

And it's not just Jesus during His ministry. We see it throughout the rest of church history as well. We see it in the pages of the New Testament. So, in Acts 20, when the Apostle Paul is blessing and ordaining and leaving the elders in the church of Ephesus behind, he says, I know...this is in chapter 20, verse 29... I know that after my departure, fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.

And from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them. And friends, we could keep going.

[11 : 06] We'll reference some other passages later in the epistles where we see this again and again. We read earlier this morning in 1 John chapter 4 that John warns that there will be those who will lead people astray and that we're to test our leaders to see whether they are true or not.

Because false leaders lead people away from the truth of God, the person of Jesus, and the gospel. And as they do that, they produce spiritual destruction.

And we, friends, need to be aware and to heed Jesus' warning. There are always those who will come and they will look good. And we need to be aware.

We need to be discerning. We need to be careful. But this, of course, leads us to the question, does it not? How do we tell? How do we know? Jesus goes on.

And this is what he tells us in verses 16 through 20. This is our second point where Jesus helps explain how do we discern pseudo and true leaders. And he uses a series of images, as he typically does, which are both simple, profound, and challenging.

[12 : 21] So, we're going to look into it and see how it, you know. His first one is to say, well, how do we discern? There's always a correspondence between the identity of something or the nature of something and the fruit that it produces.

So, if you have a thistle plant, it's not going to make grapes. Right? He says, if you have a... I'm sorry. He says, if you have a thorn bush, it's not going to make grapes.

If you have a thistle plant, it's not going to make figs. Right? You're not going to get a watermelon from an orange tree. It's just not going to happen. Right? So, the nature... He says, look at the nature of the thing and its fruit.

Because if the... And then he goes on and he explains these things by saying, there's always a correspondence between the health of a plant and the fruit that it bears.

Right? And so, a healthy tree produces good fruit. A diseased tree produces bad fruit. And then he says it in the opposite just to make sure that we got it right.

[13 : 24] A healthy tree can't produce bad fruit. And a diseased tree can't produce good fruit. Now, I know some of you are like botanists and are probably going, well, that's not really... No, it's a lot more complicated than that.

Jesus is using an image to make a point. So, let the point stand. Right? What is at the core of the tree, whether it's healthy or not, can be seen by the fruit.

The nature of the tree, whether it's a thistle or a thorn or an orange tree, will be seen by its fruit. Right? So, this is his point.

Look at the fruit. He even says it twice in this. You will know them by their fruits. This, of course, leads to our next question, doesn't it? Well, what are the fruit that we're supposed to be looking for?

How do we know? What are we discerning in that? Well, I think that... It's fascinating. Commentators have all sorts of discussions about it. It's this. It's that. And I actually think that they're all partly right.

[14 : 31] And the ones who have the broadest view are all right. Because I think the image of fruit in Scripture is actually pretty broad. And I'm going to try to summarize it in three different aspects of what kind of fruit are we looking in.

One is their doctrine. What do they teach? Do they teach truth according to the Scriptures? Or do they teach beyond or less than the Scriptures themselves? The second thing is character of life.

Who are they in their person? And how do they live in their relationships? And even in their private life, in their hearts. And the third thing is their ministry results.

And I'll explain that when we get to that. So, first, let's think about doctrine for a minute. Does their teaching match the truth of Scripture? Throughout the history of the church, the church has gone astray when people have either added to what the Scriptures say to make it say more than it actually does.

Or when they've, like Thomas Jefferson and a couple other people, taken their scissors and just cut out the parts they don't like and just eliminate those. And they've created their own new Bible with their own framework.

[15 : 46] So, in the book of Galatians, the Apostle Paul warns, There are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preach to you, let him be a curse.

In the church of Galatia, there is those who had come and said, Yes, the gospel is a gospel of grace through faith in Jesus, but you also have to keep the law. And you have to keep doing all the law, and that's how you are good with God.

And Paul said, That's not the free gospel of grace. That is not saved by faith through grace alone, not from work so that no one may boast. So, we see there that people were adding on to the law, or adding on to what the Scripture said in order, in their false teaching.

Then, 2 Timothy, Paul warns again the church in Ephesus. He says this, For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears. They will accumulate for themselves teachers who suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth, and wander off into myths.

Friends, how much do we see this in our world today? How tempting is it for those who stand in a place like this to preach God's Word to please the spirit of the age, to accommodate the values of the world around us so that people will want to come to church, want to be a part of this.

[17 : 25] And so, the temptation is to distort the truth of Scripture so that people will be happy with what we say.

And some of that may be eliminating things, and some of that may be adding things, like wandering off into myths, speculative statements about this or that.

Let me just pick on a few that in our world today, it's tempting for people. Is Jesus really the only way to God?

I mean, that's pretty arrogant, isn't it? Can He really be so limiting and so narrow? And so, people teach, you know, Jesus is a great way to God, but God's bigger than that.

He'll accept you however you come. How often is that the form of teaching in some churches? Or, let me just run through others. The Bible is merely a human, fallible work, not reliable as God's Word.

[18 : 34] Or, the God who rules over the universe is a God of process just like us. He's along for the ride. He doesn't know what's going to happen either. Let's figure it out together. What a great journey God has invited us on with Him.

Or, God can't clearly be saying that greed is a bad thing or that He would limit our sexual activity in the world.

He doesn't really want to speak to our money or our sex lives in that way, does He? Like, isn't He a God of love? Doesn't He want to let us do what we want? So, we see that there's so many ways in which a tempted, the temptation is there.

And there are many churches and many voices in the world that would say exactly these things and ask these questions and present God differently than what the Scriptures say.

One more example about false teaching. In Matthew 24, Jesus warns us, Then if anyone says to you, look, here's the Christ, or there He is, do not believe it.

[19 : 46] For false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders and will lead so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. And the idea here is that there will be those who will come and they will say, I am the Savior and I can tell you the way to get to Jesus.

Look, there He is. And I'm the conduit for you to get to Him. And I'm going to come with great signs and powers. Friends, if you're ever wanting to do a deep dive, go read Jonathan Edwards' surprising narrative of the work of God or the religious affections to see a sane, robust evaluation of the great awakening in its strengths and weaknesses and what is truly a work of God and not.

It's a great work. It's a great reading for you. But recognize that those who have impressive ministry displays, who present themselves as having special knowledge, ultimately are putting themselves in the center of their ministry, and they're making their particular gifts and particular words of truth and knowledge the center of it.

And friends, this is so dangerous. Because it leads us astray. Because the Scriptures regularly testify that it's all about Jesus.

He is always the focus. He is always the head. And when we teach false doctrine, inevitably it leads us away from Him and not towards Him.

[21 : 26] And it has serious consequences. Secondly, we need to look at the fruit of their actions, their character. What does this look like?

Well, friends, we've been spending a long time. You can go back and listen to sermons going back to August of last year when we started preaching on the Beatitudes. To think, what are we looking for in the character of leaders?

Right? Poor in spirit. Mournful. Meek. Hungry for righteousness. Merciful. Pure in heart. Peacemaking. Persevering in opposition. As Jesus has gone along in the Sermon on the Mount, heart attitudes of pursuing purity of heart, of our eyes, of our bodies, sexually honoring the institution of marriage, seeking reconciliation rather than anger and strife.

Going the second mile to bless your enemies and to love them. As it goes on, it then says, they should be people who have personal practices of spiritual disciplines, that they engage with their loving Heavenly Father in generous giving, in persistent prayer, in fasting, so that their hearts would be right with God, so that they might know the blessing of knowing the Heavenly Father who has served them.

So that's a good place to start, right? Here's a second place you can go from there. Go to Galatians 5, because there Paul talks about the fruit of the Spirit at work in believers, and the fruit that we should look for should not be there in those.

[22 : 59] So in Galatians 5, 19, he says this, now the works of the flesh, that is our sinful nature, are evident, sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.

So that's a list of these should not characterize leaders who are following Christ. This is what a pseudo-leader may have in their heart.

And then he goes on, he says, but the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such things there is no law.

So friends, this is what we should look for in our leaders. Character. Spiritual leaders should do this. You all know that, you know, three classic pitfalls for spiritual leaders are money, sex, and power.

Are we...do you see your leaders being careful to pursue God in the way that they interact with these areas of life? Are they careful, accountable, humble, self-sacrificial?

[24 : 21] Do they show a real love for others or do they use others? Do they deny themselves or do they promote themselves? Selfishness is in some ways the root of so much of false teaching and false teachers.

They're in ministry ultimately for themselves, not to serve others. And thirdly, briefly, the fruit of their followers.

What is it look...what is their ministry results? We can see people who have massive crowds following them. Now remember, go back to Pastor Nick's sermon from last week. The way is broad that leads to destruction.

The way is narrow that leads to life. We should not be surprised that there may be very popular people in the world who are not true teachers, but who are these false teachers.

Because we know that people will follow them because they're making an easy path. But it doesn't lead to life in Jesus. We also know that leaders can be seen to a large extent.

[25 : 32] I want to be a little careful with this, but can be seen by the fruit of what are their people like? What are the people who follow these people like? What are they known for?

I'm going to pick on one guy. Mark Driscoll was a man that God used, it seemed, for many years. And I think, and I want to just say this, and I think God did use him.

I think that by God's grace, despite the man's ultimate character and heart that has disqualified him, in my opinion, from ministry, God did use him.

But in the end, right, how many people who followed him showed evidence of being like him? They abused power.

They didn't show themselves accountable. They were careless in their love for other people. They were not, they didn't show humility, but instead a pride and even an arrogance or an attacking spirit at times.

[26 : 36] Now, again, I want to be really careful because it's messier than that, and we'll get to the messiness in just a few minutes about how do we navigate that. But what does the followers of a particular spiritual leader look like?

Do they hold the truth with grace? Do they know the fundamental, do they exhibit the fundamental characteristics of one who knows the gospel?

I am a sinner. I don't deserve anything from God. God has so graciously loved me in Christ and saved me and rescued me from myself and my self-destructive habits.

I need other people in my life. I know that I, even in my ministry, it is not me. I need to be John the Baptist. He must increase.

Jesus must increase in our law, and I must decrease. These are the things that you look for. The gospel that says, this is all of grace.

[27 : 37] It's not about me. It's about God and what God has done for us and what God is doing in us and what God will do at the end of the day. And friends, we can look for that.

The aroma of the gospel, the feel of the gospel, the nature of the gospel in the hearts of those who follow. And note that you see in verse 19, right, that the consequences really are dire.

There are two ways. A bad tree that bears bad fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. And this is actually the final way that we know, because our judgments may not be perfect.

Our judgments may be fallible as we seek to evaluate leaders. But in the end, we know that God will judge them rightly.

And those who are bad trees will face destruction because they have not lived out a life of regenerate, faithful, following Jesus.

[28 : 43] They have built their own kingdom rather than serving in the kingdom of Jesus. And there will be a final judgment.

And they will be found to be those who face condemnation, not welcome. Okay. So now we need to talk for a few minutes about just the messiness of this, right?

Because, look, the church has failed this in many ways, right? And Jesus isn't surprised by this because he told us, beware of this.

This is what's going to happen. You know, in the parable of the wheat and the tares says, this will continue all the way till the end. This is always going to be a challenge. Having said that, we need to acknowledge the church has failed to hold fast to unpopular doctrines throughout history.

It has bent its knee to the world around us. The church has also failed to properly hold its pastors and leaders accountable when hidden sins have been revealed.

[29 : 51] The church has failed at many times to hold to gracious orthodoxy. The church has failed to find gospel unity, charity, and clarity.

And why is this? So, Pastor, I think we fall off on one side or the other, right? Some of us fall into the danger that Jesus actually warned us about just a little bit of a while ago at the beginning of chapter 7, where he says, don't judge one another, right?

I'm going to call this the scrutiny frame. There are some of us who scrutinize our leaders, every leader, with a sense of mistrust. We delight to become the heresy police and the champions of cancel culture within the church.

We want to make quick judgments, and we have a condemning spirit. This is a danger that is in our hearts that we need to be careful of. We need to ask ourselves, in our disagreements, are we still being humble and meek?

In our discernments, are we being gracious to read people rightly and not to allow straw men and overreactions? In our opposition to pseudo-teachers, are we still treating them with dignity, even as we oppose them strongly?

[31 : 09] In our strength of conviction, do we still have grace for those who follow them, seeing their need? So, one of the dangers is that we become this hypercritical place.

And I think in our world of being, our polarized world today, I think this is a real danger. But I also think that there is a grave danger, and this is actually the one I think Jesus is more weighing in on for this passage, is that we are not as discerning as we ought to be as a church, that we love to idolize people and find things that seem good to us without really testing them according to the Scriptures.

We give these people unthinking devotion and trust without really examining it. And Jesus says we need to be careful.

We need to think carefully about what we hear and what we see and what we fill our minds with. We need to evaluate according to the Scriptures those who lead us.

And that's not only in this church, but it's also in your media intake, in the books that you read, in your broader intake of spiritual input into your life.

[32 : 26] Jesus says we need to draw lines at time and to confront falsehood and evil. I will just say this.

One of the things we do here is as elders, we evaluate the praise music that we sing, right? And we're careful to make sure that they're doctrinally sound. We've wrestled as an eldership because some of the places, some of the sources of that music come from places where those are churches that we wouldn't fully agree with their doctrine.

Or we might even say that's a false doctrine. They're producing music that we read. And so we've wrestled with should we use that music or not? We do because we think that God can graciously use it.

But we don't want you to go to Elevation Church for your doctrine or to Bethel Church for your doctrine. So just so you know, that's out there. You can talk to us later about it.

But we need to be filtering through our reading, the music we listen to, the people we watch on YouTube, the podcasts we listen to, the tribes that we gravitate towards.

[33 : 43] We need to continue to let the Scriptures refine all of these things. And may God have mercy on us that we might have discernment in this.

So how do we have this discernment? What does it look like? How do we really... Because it... Listen, I stand up here to you this morning, and I know that I'm not perfect.

I know, one, that I still have sin in my heart, and I still live that sin out at times. So my heart is not perfect. And I pray that my doctrine would be clear, but I know that I may not be completely right on everything.

So how do we evaluate this? How do we respond to Jesus' warning here well? And I've been wrestling with this, and I think that... And this is my third point.

We'll close with this. The source of true leaders is those who abide in Christ. That's a very simple and a very challenging thing. But the reason why I say this is because Jesus Himself used a similar image in John chapter 15, where He says, Abide in Me, and I in you.

[34 : 57] As a branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in Me. So if you want to look for a leader who's going to bear good fruit, does he abide in Christ?

Does he have a vital, life-giving, spiritual relationship with Jesus our Savior? Is he like the branch that's been grafted into the tree and now draws all of its nutrients and all of its power to produce the leaves and the fruit that it comes from Jesus Himself?

This is where we can look. And this is the framework. Because here's the thing. The only leaders that don't become pseudo-leaders are those who have been joined with Christ and are transformed by Christ from their sin into being useful vessels for His kingdom.

And they do that by humble dependence. Not just at the beginning when they became a believer. Not just at the beginning when they didn't know anything about ministry. But 20, 30, 40, 50 years in, they're still the people who are depending on Christ, who know I can't bear any fruit apart from Jesus and His work in me and in those that I minister to.

And who know I'm just a steward of what God has done. I'm just a steward of the truth that God has revealed through Scripture.

[36 : 34] And as I abide in Christ, may God help me to do this so that you might see Christ as well.

This is, I think, the place where we can look and ask of our leaders, do they abide in Christ?

Because if they abide in Christ, Christ will produce in them the fruit that will make us have confidence that, yes, those are people who I can follow. And we never follow people slavishly.

The only person we follow like that without any reservation is Jesus Himself and the Scriptures. But when we see human leaders abiding in Christ, then we can follow them, and then we can trust, and we can see God's work.

And this is what it looks like in God's kingdom, that He will produce leaders like this, that He will produce some. But we must beware. It's said that when they train Treasury Department officials to tell fake currency from real, they do it by studying the real thing, the feel, the touch, looking at it carefully.

[37 : 55] Friends, this is what we need to do so that we're equipped to heed Jesus' warning in this passage. We need to look at Jesus. We need to know Him so intimately and deeply.

We need to know His Scriptures in an increasingly deep way, because when we do that, then we will be able to, in increasing measure, evaluate and know, and not be led by false teachers into destruction, but to be led by those who follow Jesus into His kingdom.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we confess to You this morning, Lord, our need for Your help and Your Spirit.

Lord, these are weighty things. Lord, we pray that You would help us. Lord, I pray for the leadership of this church, including myself.

Lord, may we be those who abide in You and who bear good fruit. Lord, we pray for us as a church that we would be discerning, that we would not be led astray on the paths of destruction, but, Lord, that we would walk in the ways of Your kingdom and of life.

[39 : 11] Help us, Lord, we pray. In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. Amen.