

A Tree and Its Fruit

Matt 7:15-23

In this section of his sermon on the mount, Jesus gives a stark warning to his hearers about false prophets. We've already seen how he warned them about the scribes and teachers of the law. The commentaries agree that Jesus probably has the same people in mind here. What is a false-prophet? A prophet purports to speak on behalf of God, and the scribes and teachers of the law were the prophets of their day. he calls them false prophets because what they were teaching were not God's words but their own watered down versions of God's word and their big issue, as we have already seen, was legalism.

Wolves in Sheep's Clothing

These are pretty strong words from Jesus. He says they come in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. Elsewhere he calls them hypocrites, whitewashed graves full of dead men's bones. They look fine on the outside, they look like everyone else, but underneath things were not right. Outwardly they seem very devoted to the Lord but their true motives are selfish - they need to control people, to be thought of as someone important, they crave respect and they earned their living by 'lording it over the common people' and controlling their religious observances. They did not shepherd them or care for them and serve them as Jesus did. And what annoyed them so much about Jesus was how, out of a deep genuine love, he taught them the truth that sets people free. He never tied them up in loads of religious rules and regulations that always left them feeling inadequate and guilty, which is what they did.

He said "you will know them by their fruit". What was the fruit of their leadership and teaching? Jesus said "*they tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to help*" them. Whenever Jesus taught, he was very challenging, but his words gave hope and encouragement, faith and resolve to his hearers. Jesus' words gave life and strength, so much so that people said they had never heard anyone teach with such authority. It was not just his clarity and his dogmatism, but the faith that surged into the hearts of his listeners that made them believe, "I really can live like this. My righteousness really could actually surpass that of the scribes and teachers of the law!"

Jesus illustration of the tree and its fruit is a very important principle. The only way we really know what people are is by the fruit they produce. A crab apple tree looks very similar to a cultivated apple and has similar flowers, but its fruit is very different. Crabs are small hard and sour compared to the larger sweeter

apple. Hard to distinguish until the fruit is produced, crabs have fruit that is very showy but very sour. Gardeners grow crab apples for show not for food, they start the season with masses of beautiful flowers and end with masses of small brightly coloured sour fruit. This is just the sort of thing Jesus is talking about. Do we want a show or do we want something that feeds others? The scribes and Pharisees showed off, they didn't feed the hungry. Jesus talks about grapes and figs rather than apples, but the principle is the same. He also speaks about thorns and thistles, which are both sharp and prickly and do not produce edible fruit. Similarly these spiritual leaders were thorny; they made things over complicated and easily took offense, they could really be quite frightening and you wouldn't want to oppose them or get on the wrong side of them.

Doing things in Jesus name. Read vs 21-23

Jesus then speaks of those who purport to act 'in my name'. Those who use the name of Jesus and claim to be Christians are not always what they seem. This is a huge problem in the world today. There are not many who truly own the name of Jesus today, in our secular society. Those who do the will of the Father in heaven are few and far between, yet some do say 'Lord, Lord' but do not 'seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness' and do not lay up treasure in heaven but lay it up on earth and do not pray for God's kingdom to come. They may say the right things; 'Lord, Lord' but they actually 'practice lawlessness'. This is ironic because such people tend to champion the law, like the scribes and Pharisees. They are judgmental, censorious, critical and full of legalism, but all the while neglect the true law of love and do not obey God from the heart. Jesus calls them hypocrites.

This passage has actually become a favourite of the very people that Jesus is warning against. They pick up on a term like false-prophets and a statement like "*Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.'*" v 22-23. For centuries it has been taught that after the NT was completed the Lord chose to withdraw the amazing signs that Jesus had done and the early church also experienced such as casting out evil spirits and healing and more specifically prophecy and speaking in tongues.

These are mentioned in the Bible, and were real for the early believers, but they say that these were not meant for today so God permanently withdrew them from the church, as they were no longer needed, as we now had the NT. This

teaching is called cessationism. Spiritual manifestation have **ceased** and anyone claiming to prophesy, speak in tongues, cast out demons or heal the sick are misled, deluded or, at worst, possessed by the devil themselves. All such people must be the false-prophets that Jesus is talking about here. At the beginning of the 20th C, when believers were first getting baptised in the Spirit with speaking in tongues, the church in general were very hostile and censored such practices as demonic delusions. Pentecostals had to form their own churches. In the 1960s the experience of baptism in the Spirit with speaking in tongues, prophecy and healing began to spread through believers in many main line churches during the Charismatic movement and also movements like Newfrontiers sprang up, with a vision to see NT church life restored.

There is not one shred of biblical evidence that prophecy, casting out unclean spirits and healing would ever be withdrawn, certainly not in these words of Jesus and today the same things that happened in Jesus' day are happening all over the world. Jesus is saying that even those who were false prophets would claim to be doing the same signs that genuine followers of Christ would be doing; but it would cut no ice with the Lord because signs are no indication of what sort of tree we are. Signs are like blossom not fruit and every tree has blossom. God can use anyone, even a donkey. How God is using us, how many we have led to the Lord or how many healings we have performed or how many demons we have cast out is no indication of anything. No, fruit is something the Spirit produces inside us that can produce sustenance and nourishment for others.

Deliverance Ministry

You know how firmly I believe in spiritual healing and casting out of demons today. I have benefitted from deliverance ministry massively myself and seen many dear brothers and sisters set free from things that tied them up for much of their lives. Deliverance ministry is a vital part of the work of the local church. However there are some groups that specialise in deliverance ministry in the UK that sadly lay a burden of legalism on those they are trying to help. Last week I prayed with someone who had become tangled up with such a group and needed setting free from fears that had been reinforced by their ministry. I have come across various ministries over the years that because their major focus is on inner healing and deliverance that they have gone 'over the top'. As they have prayed with people to set them free from demons it is easy to spot patterns and similarities and from these it is easy to make generalisations and then make up rules for ministry that are based on collective experience rather than on Biblical revelation. e.g. When you see lots of people being set free from an unclean spirit of addiction to alcohol it is easy to

conclude that it is better for Christians not to drink alcohol at all. They then start advocating that Christians should be teetotal. To strengthen this view it is easy to resort to fear mongering – if you drink alcohol, you will be possessed by an evil spirit. But the bible in no way teaches total abstinence. Jesus was not a total abstainer, and he was accused of having a demon! No the scripture teaches godly control, drinking in moderation, not getting drunk with wine but being filled with the Spirit. Let me give you some of the most shocking false-teachings that are advocated by various groups that specialise in deliverance and healing ministry in the UK today.

- The AV is the only inspired version of the Bible in English and all other versions are part of a demonic conspiracy to rob us of the true word of God.

- Easter and Christmas and Whitsun are demonically inspired and are rooted in paganism. If we celebrate Easter we are actually worshiping the pagan goddess Oestre and at Christmas we worshiping a whole host of demons associated with winter festivals. Christians should have nothing to do with any kind of midwinter celebration, which are all demonically inspired. Instead we should be returning to our Jewish roots and keeping the Jewish Passover to celebrating the cross and resurrection, the Feast of Tabernacles to celebrate the birth of Christ and the Feast of Weeks to celebrate the coming of the Spirit. These are the biblical feasts and we should celebrate these in the proper Jewish way with all the traditional Jewish rituals because they truly speak of Christ.

- Using drums or guitars in church worship can summon up demons, as rhythms attract demons that can prevent the Holy Spirit from working in our meetings.

- It is dangerous to watch war films, westerns, murder mysteries or any other violent programmes on TV, as by doing so we invite evil spirits of death, violence, anxiety and fear into our homes and into our bodies. Neither should we watch or read fantasy films or novels or science fiction as these are all demonically inspired and we can be demonised by reading or watching them.

- All drama, acting and role-play opens us up to spirits of hypocrisy and worse and believers should never have anything to do with the theatre, acting or drama.

- We should never go to sleep in a hotel room without first cleansing it from demonic spirits as we could become demonised in our sleep if we don't do this.

- We should never let any food enter our mouths without first sanctifying it by prayer, by saying grace, as we do not know in what way it might have been

affected by unclean spirits, e.g halal meat which can be possessed by evil spirits associated with Allah and if a butcher or a farmer is a freemason or into the occult their produce can carry curses or evil spirits that can get into us if we eat them without blessing the food, preferably with the traditional Jewish blessing for food.

- Taking part in personality testing such as Myers Briggs, which one often has to do with their work, labels us and if believe such labelling it can lock us into a demonic stronghold that will control our lives and the way we act and behave.

All such teaching sounds plausible, especially as those who teach are Spirit filled and have success in deliverance ministry and healing and may even come over as wonderfully loving and caring – but anything that produces the fruit of legalism, a fear of evil spirits and anxiety is bad fruit. It is false-teaching to say that if we do things without properly protecting ourselves by saying the right words and following all the proper rules and regulations, we will be demonised. This essentially amounts to putting faith in demons and submitting to them and honouring them instead of rejoicing in Jesus superior power and guardian grace. That is not to say that people have got demonised through all of these ways I have mentioned. But if so let's get the help and find the freedom that Jesus brings. Don't ever throw out deliverance ministry; I have needed massive amounts of prayer to free me from unclean spirits and spiritual strongholds and I think most of us need the same; but I am not going to look for demons under every chair and get paranoid about Satan and demons or give them any credence.

Let us do everything properly and biblically with grace and love and freedom from fear and any trace of legalism. Paul warned twice that legalism is like yeast. Just a tiny bit of legalism can spread and grow until it 'has worked through the whole lump of dough'. It totally contaminates everything. So we must beware of any kind of false teaching that contaminates us with legalism, Jesus urges caution of false-prophets but does not tell us to beware of demons or to fear them! The Lord is calling for us to fight against legalism in all its forms and to know the truth and truth will set us free and that will motivate us to be true prophets who speak the truth that God puts in their mouths, who set people free from unclean spirits and heal the sick and nourish others with the sweet fruit of the love and grace that continually produce from our lives. Lets us love one another and pray with one another and bring forth the sort of fruit that nourishes and sustains others.

Phil Rogers.
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