



Defining the Believer's Biblical Call to Judge Part 2

By Bob DeWaay

This is part two in a three part series of articles which examine various passages from the New Testament concerning believers making judgments. The purpose of these articles is to help believers use discernment while avoiding making judgments about things they cannot know. We will begin part 2 by explaining the often misunderstood passage in Matthew about judging by fruit.

YOU WILL KNOW THEM BY THEIR FRUITS – MATTHEW 7

Jesus' teaching that, "You will know them by their fruits," is well known and often repeated. What is amazing, however, is that most of the time people come to conclusions about what this means that have nothing to do with the issues Jesus raises in Matthew 7. They often think of "fruits" as being character qualities, popularity, or the ability to do supernatural signs. I will discuss each of these ideas and then show what Jesus did mean.

Let us examine the passage. In Matthew 7 Jesus warned about false prophets:

Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor figs from thistles, are they? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit; but the bad tree bears bad fruit. (Matthew 7:15-17)

First, **personality traits are not fruits**. On the outside, false prophets look like sheep. They are often very nice people who are kind, endearing, disarming, affable, winsome, and possess many other wonderful qualities. The false idea that these qualities are what Jesus means by "fruits" causes many people to be misled by false prophets. What they fail to realize is that the Dalai Lama has such qualities and he is hardly a Christian. Having a charming exterior is often the "sheep's clothing."

The number of one's followers is not fruit. Many assume that popularity is a sign of good fruit. But the context shows something entirely different: "*Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it*" (Matthew 7:13, 14). The false religious leaders of Israel had more followers than Jesus did. This can hardly be what Jesus meant by "fruit."

And signs and wonders are not fruits. Again we must consult the context:

So then, you will know them by their fruits. Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. 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.' (Matthew 7:20-23)

People who call Jesus “Lord,” come in His name, and do works of power are false prophets if they refused to abide within God-given boundaries. This is an important concept. This is lawlessness.

The boundaries are those that God’s ordained spokespersons set. For us, they are the teachings of Christ and His apostles (See **Hebrews 1:1, 2; 2:3, 4**). Jesus was the prophet that Moses predicted and to whom we must listen (**Deuteronomy 18:15; Mark 9:2-7; John 5:46, 47**; et. al.). The book of Hebrews contains this warning: “*Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?*” (**Hebrews 10:18, 19**). Lawlessness disregards the terms of the covenant. Jesus has revealed the terms and boundaries of legal belief and practice under the new covenant, like Moses did under the old. John warned about this in his second epistle: “*Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son*” (**2John 1:9**).

Understood in this way, false prophets are those who teach and practice lawlessness. They do not abide within the once-for-all determined boundaries of New Testament teaching. We can see this as we continue in our Matthew 7 passage:

Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine, and acts upon them, may be compared to a wise man, who built his house upon the rock. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded upon the rock. And everyone who hears these words of Mine, and does not act upon them, will be like a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and it fell, and great was its fall. (**Matthew 7:24-27**)

The lawless ones do not abide by the teachings of Christ. They are the false prophets. The fruits by which they are known are their teachings, not their personalities, the number of their followers, or their miracles.

To underscore how important judging teaching is, we will examine Paul’s address to the elders in Jerusalem. We will see that guarding the flock is a key duty of pastors and elders.

CHURCH LEADERS AND WOLVES

Paul’s address to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20 instructs about the duty of Christian leaders to proclaim the truth and to guard the flock against wolves. First Paul recalled his previous practice in Ephesus:

How I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. (**Acts 20:20, 21**)

Preaching that people should repent and believe is an important theme in Luke/Acts (**Luke 24:47; Acts 2:38; Acts 17:30, 31; Acts 26:17-20**; et al). Paul's preaching resulted in the formation of a church in Ephesus. Elders were appointed, and these were addressed by Paul as he headed to Jerusalem. What he said to them reveals what is truly important for all churches.

And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will see my face no more. Therefore I testify to you this day, that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God. (Acts 20:27)

Notice, first of all, that the phrase "preaching the kingdom" is synonymously parallel with his description of his preaching in verse 21, "repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ." The message of the kingdom was not some message like the social gospel as some claim today, but the gospel of the kingdom is repentance and faith (see **Mark 1:14, 15**). These are the terms of entrance into the kingdom.

Secondly, notice that Paul claimed innocence from bloodguiltiness. This means that had he not proclaimed both the terms of entrance into the kingdom, and the whole of what God has revealed of His purposes, Paul would have imperiled their souls, failed his sacred mission, and brought guilt upon himself for failing to warn them of coming judgment (see **Ezekiel 33:6**). These same responsibilities apply to pastors and other church leaders today. This is so very important because the flock must be equipped to withstand the onslaught of the inevitable wolves who will arise.

These wolves are the subject of Paul's warning to the church leaders:

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. (Acts 20:28-30)

It is important to see that the wolves come from two sources: outside and inside the church. Wolves are always inimical to the well-being of sheep. It is the responsibility of shepherds to make sure the sheep are safe from the wolves. To do this, the wolves must be identified. The way they are identified is through their teachings. Paul described the practice of the wolves: "*speaking perverse things*." The word "perverse" means "twisted" or "distorted." Their teachings are a distortion of the authoritative teachings of Christ and His apostles. Anyone is a wolf who purposely gives distorted teaching and refuses to repent when shown his error from the Scriptures. The elders must guard the flock against such people.

Notice what happens through the teachings of the wolves: they "*draw away the disciples after them*." False teachers and prophets have a message that comes from themselves, not from the whole counsel of God. The reason these wolves draw disciples away after themselves is that they are the only source of this teaching. If the church is proclaiming the true terms of the covenant and the whole counsel of God, whatever

“perverse” doctrine is being promoted by wolves will not be heard from the faithful pastors and elders. Perverse doctrine cannot be found through valid implications from authoritative Scripture. Therefore, if the wolves succeed in giving some of the sheep an appetite for what they are offering, the sheep will have to follow the wolves to get that appetite fed. Since this is not from God, they are being drawn away from the true sheepfold and into spiritual peril and perhaps damnation.

This is a very serious situation. In John 10 Jesus uses a sheepfold analogy to show that robbers do not go through the true door: *“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter by the door into the fold of the sheep, but climbs up some other way, he is a thief and a robber”* (**John 10:1**). Jesus is the door of the sheep (**John 10:7**). Jesus has ascended bodily into heaven. His teachings as given in the New Testament delineate the boundaries of the sheepfold. The elders of the church are responsible to uphold the true words of Christ and His apostles. They are responsible to identify those robbers who will not abide in the teachings of Christ. False teachers refuse to do this job: *“He who is a hireling, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, beholds the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep, and flees, and the wolf snatches them, and scatters them. He flees because he is a hireling, and is not concerned about the sheep”* (**John 10:12, 13**). Jesus is the true Shepherd, and the under-shepherds (the term “pastor” is from the word “shepherd”) are to feed the sheep the pure words of God and guard them from perverted words. Those who refuse to do so are hirelings.

In the final article in this series, part 3, we will see that it is often necessary to publicly correct false teachers by name. We will give Biblical examples of this and explain why publicly disseminated false teaching must be corrected publicly.

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