

2. After addressing the two proposed ways into the kingdom of heaven, Jesus turned His attention to the heralds and promoters of those ways (7:15-20). His specific concern was with those who are *false prophets*, and, for this reason, His instruction took the form of a stern warning (7:15). At the same time, Jesus focused on false prophets in order to help His hearers to identify those who are true prophets. This is evident in His contrast between bad trees/fruit and their good counterparts. Several observations about this passage are important to its correct interpretation:

- a. First of all, it must be kept in mind that Jesus was addressing a pre-Christian Jewish audience. It is not uncommon for modern readers to read or hear the phrase, *false prophet*, and envision promoters of quasi-Christian cults such as the Jehovah's Witnesses or Latter Day Saints. Whatever Jesus meant by the false prophets, He was speaking in language and concepts familiar to His audience and their particular culture and experience.
- b. Second, Jesus' warning must be interpreted within its own context. This means that the false prophets He was warning about are those whose instruction and advice leads men away from the narrow gate; they are men who act to reinforce and encourage the natural inclination toward the wide gate and broad path.
- c. The previous two observations lead to a third, which is that Jesus was associating these false prophets with Israel's religious leadership. The sons of Israel weren't threatened by pagan religionists seeking to lead them away from Judaism; the context of the Sermon on the Mount – as well as Jesus' ongoing confrontation with His generation – shows that Israel's holy men were the threat to the people's spiritual well-being. They were the ones who “*shut off the kingdom of heaven from men*”; they refused to enter the kingdom themselves and they did everything in their power to stop those who were seeking to enter it (Matthew 23:13).

This is all the more evident from the fact that Jesus referred to these false prophets as “wolves in sheep's clothing.” This could never be said of non-Jewish religious influences. It was Israel's spiritual leaders who seemed to be faithful sons of Abraham devoutly committed to God, His Law and His covenant people. They appeared holy to their fellow Israelites, and some – such as Saul of Tarsus – were sincere in their convictions and devotion (Matthew 23:25-28; Galatians 1:13-14; Philippians 3:1-6), but these apparently godly men were in fact enemies of God who opposed Him and ravaged all who showed any inclination toward the true kingdom of heaven. Believing themselves to be sons of God and disciples of Moses, they were actually children of the devil – men whom Moses would condemn in the day of judgment (cf. John 5:39-47, 8:31-44).

- d. These ravenous wolves had the outward appearance of being a part of God's flock, but the truth would ultimately come to light; every tree eventually bears its fruit, and the fruit exposes the true nature and character of the tree. The way to discern a good tree from a bad one is to wait until its fruit appears and then examine that fruit (7:16-20). Here a couple of clarifications are in order:

- 1) First, Jesus' assertions in vv. 16-20 constitute general maxims and not an absolute rule. In that sense they are proverbial. For instance, everyone knows that, under certain environmental conditions, a fundamentally sound tree can bear bad fruit. It is also true that an unhealthy or weak tree can sometimes produce palatable fruit. However, these facts don't argue against Jesus' point, which is that a tree produces fruit that conforms to and expresses its nature and soundness. Apples come from apple trees, but it is also true that robust, healthy apples are an indication of a healthy, mature and well-nourished apple tree that is still in its fruit-bearing years.
- 2) So it is with men: By insisting that a good tree can't bear bad fruit and vice versa (v. 18), Jesus wasn't saying that the false prophet is incapable of discerning or promoting any truth. Neither was He saying that a true prophet is free of all flaws and incapable of error or misjudgment. Rather, He was expressing the demonstrable and irrefutable truth that people's lives will ultimately manifest who they really are.

The reason is that a man is *in truth* what he is on the inside (Proverbs 23:7), and his true nature inevitably drives the orientation and direction of his life. In turn, a given orientation and direction secure certain outcomes. Thus a good tree bears good fruit; it cannot, as a characteristic outcome, produce bad fruit. What a person is on the inside will not remain hidden forever; even if he carefully preserves a façade throughout his days, everyone's life bears fruit, and that fruit will reveal him for who he is.

The false prophets of Jesus' day appeared to be devoted to God and the Law of Moses, and their day-to-day activities in instructing and directing the sons of Israel seemed to affirm this commitment and orientation. In many instances and in certain regards, their "fruit" appeared good. But, in truth, it was rotten: For all their piety and scholarship, they were estranged from the God they professed to know – self-enslaved, self-deceived and driven by a darkened understanding.

- Their perception of themselves and the strictness of their lives gave them full confidence that they were sons of the kingdom, and that confidence left them no choice but to reject with righteous conviction the new and heretical "way" being promoted by this man, Jesus of Nazareth.
- Like their forefathers and countrymen, Israel's religious leaders saw and embraced the wide gate into the kingdom while being unable to perceive the narrow gate this Nazarene was promoting. These learned and respected men who believed themselves to be Israel's "eyes" were actually "*blind guides of the blind*" – self-deluded men who couldn't keep themselves from falling into a pit and would plunge into the same pit those whom they led (Matthew 15:1-14). All who listened to them and followed their teaching and example would find themselves missing the kingdom of heaven right along with them.

- e. Finally, while Jesus was specifically warning about the religious leaders of His generation, these men were simply contemporary counterparts of the false prophets in every age who oppose Him and the kingdom of heaven.
- 1) Though the religious sects of Jesus' day were relatively recent in Israel's history, they (and many of the priestly class) had the same effect among the sons of Israel as had the false prophets of the old theocracy. Whatever their distinctions, those prophets were unified in that they acted to undermine Israel's faith. In the early years of the covenant nation, such men were the naysayers who disbelieved and grumbled against God and sought to win over the people to their own unbelief (Exodus 15:22-17:7; Numbers 11:1-14:10). Later, prophets like Balaam influenced the sons of Israel to disbelieve God by embracing the false gods of Canaan (cf. Numbers 25:1-18 with 31:1-16; cf. also Deuteronomy 13:1-5). So also, in the period of division and decline following David's unfaithfulness, false prophets arose in Israel who seduced the people with smooth and reassuring words. While God's prophets were proclaiming impending judgment and desolation, these seducers opposed and undermined that message with assurances of divine favor and continued well-being (cf., for example, 1 Kings 22:1-35 with Jeremiah 6:9-14, 23:9-40, 27:1-28:17).
  - 2) And as the false prophets of Jesus' day found counterparts among the Old Covenant nation, so it would be from the inception of the Church as the New Covenant community (2 Peter 2:1; cf. also Acts 20:28-30; Jude 1-19 with Matthew 24:1-25). Though Christ had inaugurated His everlasting kingdom and the renewal that is the new creation, that accomplishment had not put an end to deceivers among God's people.

For all their differences, what binds the Old Covenant and New Covenant false prophets together is their common opposition to a kingdom of *faith*.

- The Old Covenant false prophets encouraged the sons of Israel to disbelieve God and turn to and rely upon earthly, human resources – the *gods of the nations*, which idolatry was spotlighted in Elijah's confrontation on Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18); the *kings of the nations* (cf. Isaiah 7-8, 36:1-9; Ezekiel 23:1ff); and even *themselves*, as they sought to establish their own righteousness before God.
- The latter was the particular devastating deception of the false prophets of Jesus' generation; they shut men out of the kingdom of heaven by insisting that they find their confidence, not in this imposter Jesus of Nazareth, but in their Abrahamic heritage and conformity to the Law, as exemplified in and promoted by the false prophets themselves (John 8:12-10:39; cf. Luke 3:1-9).
- So it would be (and now is) with the false prophets in the Church. These undermine faith by their promotion of the idolatry of self-righteousness (Galatians 1:1-5:12; Colossians 2:1-23) as much as that of licentiousness (2 Peter 2; Jude).