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All the scriptures today are from our daily readings from the Gospel of Matthew. We've heard Jesus encourage us not to worry about things that God knows we need and to seek first the kingdom of God (*Matthew 6:25-34*). Worry doesn't tend to help anything, but it's still easy to worry. I needed to remind myself of that on Wednesday morning when I woke up early with a couple situations weighing on my mind and spirit. I put on some good music and did all my daily Bible reading and that helped restore my perspective a bit to focus on what I can control and what I can't. There's more than a little worry in the world right now so it's good to try to follow Jesus' advice in *Matthew 6*.

In *Matthew 7:1-14* we heard Jesus' admonition not to judge people in a self-righteous or condemnatory manner and to focus instead on getting the beam out of our own eye before trying to address the speck in our neighbor's eye. This doesn't mean that we suspend our sense of discernment, but it's a reminder first and foremost to focus on ourselves and where we need to grow and improve. After stating the Golden Rule about loving our neighbors, in *Matthew 7:12*, Jesus describes the wide way that leads to destruction and the narrow gate that leads to life. These are the two ways that we choose between that we talked about last week. That brings us to *Matthew 7:15-23* where Jesus says: "**Beware of false prophets**, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are **ravenous wolves**. **You will know them by their fruits**. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears **good fruit**, but the bad tree bears **bad fruit**. A good tree cannot bear **bad fruit**, nor can a bad tree bear **good fruit**. Every tree that does not bear **good fruit** is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus **you will know them by their fruits**."

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 in heaven**. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not **prophecy in your name**, and did we not **cast out demons in your name**, and **do many deeds of power in your name**?' Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you, go away from me, you evil doers.'"

These are challenging words from Jesus. It's a warning about false prophets, but what's interesting is that the concern is not for what the false teachers say, but for what they do. Jesus doesn't say we'll know them by their words, but by their fruits. On Thursday morning, I was sitting in a waiting room at Cape Cod Hospital with Eileen Johnston while Wayne was entertaining the medical staff. Eileen and I were talking about different things as the time passed. She spoke about the plants she was taking care of for friends from BBC who are away and spoke about one large plant. Jill and I have been to that couple's home and I had seen the plant, which is amazing. Eileen spoke further rattling off the names of many different types of flowers and plants. I said we only have two plants in our home. Eileen asked me what kind. I said, "A green one and a Christmas cactus." Eileen asked me a couple more questions about the green plant and I tried to describe it. Eileen knows flowers and plants and she wanted to be able to identify the green one, so she wanted details.

Jesus says a similar thing about people. We're like plants and trees – people can be identified by the fruit of our lives just as you can tell a scrub pine from an apple tree. In talking about false prophets, Jesus is making the point that just because people say the right thing, doesn't mean they're living rightly. Someone can claim to be a Christian, they can say they believe in God. Jesus says, "Where's the fruit?" Is the fruit of love and the kind of living that Jesus describes in the Sermon on the Mount evident in one's life or not? Jesus makes no reference to the false prophets teaching, but only to their behavior, which is of special concern to Matthew because **he wants us to take as seriously as possible our responsibility to do what's right**. The conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount in *Matthew 7* is focused on the behavior of the members of the church and the behavior of the false prophets provides a bad model for Christians. They may come in "sheep's clothing" looking like one of the flock, but inwardly they're "ravenous wolves" leading members from the narrow way that leads to life to the broad way leading to destruction.

These verses come after Jesus warned us not to judge others and to do to others what we would like them to do to us. Jesus is in the position of being able to speak about false prophets, but who am I or any other person to do so? Don't we risk doing just what Jesus said not to do earlier in *Matthew 7*? I find these verses particularly hard. I know from experience that people judge me, evaluate me and talk about me and what I say and how I say it every single week, pointing out where I misspeak or err in a sermon and criticizing what they disagree with – it comes with the territory.

So how does one warn people about false prophets, without appearing to violate other parts of the Sermon on the Mount? For a message that seems so simple, "You will know them by their fruits," these verses bear the potential for great problems in the church. It would be all too easy to proceed to carry out "a fruit inspection," to go about examining other Christians, other churches, based on this text: judging and even possibly condemning them. I don't believe this is the Lord's intention. In view of Jesus' teaching against judgment, it's not right to use these verses as a hunting permit against other believers.

Yet until Jesus comes again, we need to understand there will always be false prophets who lead people astray from the true work of the Lord and life as Christ's follower. In *Matthew 7* and again in *Matthew 24*, Jesus speaks about false prophets and the end of the age. In *Matthew 24:11-12, 24* Jesus says as time goes by, "many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because of the increase of lawlessness **the love of many will grow cold**. False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce great signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, even the elect." In *Matthew 24* Jesus makes a couple things clear about his return: v. 36, "About that day and hour **no one knows**, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." God only knows when it will happen so we shouldn't squander our time trying to figure out when it will be. Secondly, Jesus says what we are to do is to **keep awake** (24:42) and to **be ready** (24:44), and that's done by **being about the master's work until he returns** (24:46). Our master's work is laid out in the Sermon on the Mount.

At the most basic level, **people know what you believe when they see what you do**. For those of you who are reading through the Gospels this month, one of the things I hope you'll notice is that each of the four Gospels has a different emphasis in their portrayal of Jesus. **Mark** emphasizes the necessity of accepting Jesus as the crucified Christ and following him (following is a hugely important word in Mark) on the path of self-denial. **Matthew's** focus is on demonstrating one's devotion to Jesus as Lord by obeying his ethical instructions – **by doing what He says**. To Matthew, it doesn't matter so much what a person says they believe, he doesn't care if you can quote scripture word for word (the devil does that in tempting Christ), **what matters is how well we live the ethical instructions of Christ in our daily living**.

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus drives the point home that merely saying "Lord, Lord" without doing and living out the will of God is ultimately fruitless. "Lord, did we not **prophecy in your name**, and did we not **cast out demons in your name**, and **do many deeds of power in your name?**" Notice all three things are associated with what are known as more charismatic spiritual work, they did all these things in the name of Jesus, but they didn't follow the narrow way and produce the moral and ethical fruit of love that reflects a true commitment to Jesus. This sounds like what we hear in *1 Corinthians 13:2* where Paul states: "And if I have all prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing."

Have you ever had an anxiety dream related to the type of work you do or did? Pastors have many of the same anxiety dreams. Two common ones involve not being able to get to church on time or finding yourself in the pulpit and you can't find your notes or think of anything to say or you can't even speak. I wonder if painters, plumbers, electricians, or chefs have anxiety dreams related to their fields. You'll have to tell me. Sometimes these dreams carry a strong sense of warning, like you better make sure you get to church in plenty of time and are prepared to speak. All these verses in *Matthew 7* are a warning, with words like, "beware, ravenous wolves bad fruit, being thrown into the fire," and a stark, jarring statement that on Judgment Day there will be surprises and some people who thought they had guaranteed reservations will be shocked and upset to find they're not welcome. *Matthew 7:21-23* isn't an anxiety dream, it's an anxiety nightmare. Finding ourselves standing before Christ proudly saying, "I did this, that, and the other thing in your name," and seeing Christ looking at us with burning intensity mixed with heartbroken disappointment as he says with aching finality, "I never knew you, go away from me, you evil doers." Just typing those words made me break out in a sweat. Jesus' words of warning are unsettling. If Christians who prophesied, cast out demons, and did many deeds of power can't hide behind all their religious accomplishments; how much more vulnerable are the rest of us?

When you go to the grocery store and walk through the produce section, how do you decide which individual apples or bananas you're going to buy? You look at it, probably pick it up, look for any signs of bruising or if it may already be too ripe or show any signs that an insect beat you to it. How does it make you feel to know that Matthew says, Jesus looks at us in a similar way? He knows us by our

fruit. If Jesus took a good look at your life this past week, what kind of fruit would he find? What bad fruit might he have seen? What good fruit would have delighted him? What bad fruit might Jesus want to get rid of in your life? What good fruit does Jesus want to see more of in your life? How can you be more intentional about living the kind of fruitful life the Lord wants to see from those who claim his name?

What can you do to avoid hearing the words no one wants to hear? Before I close I want to say there are always people whose faith has been shaped by other passages in the New Testament who seek to dilute the power of what Jesus says in Matthew by saying, "We're all saved by grace, not by works. All I have to do is believe in my heart and confess Jesus as Lord and I'm good." I'd humbly ask you to simply dwell with Jesus' words in *Matthew 7* because that's not what it says there. Jesus said that there would be people who claim faith in him as Lord **but who are not doing the will of his Father in heaven**. They use the language of Christianity but do not show its fruit in their lives. They may even be active in ministry and mission causes or be the pastors of very large churches, but what they're doing has nothing truly to do with Jesus or the kingdom of heaven. Their motivation is suspect.

The church includes people who know the language of Christianity, who may have been brought up in it, but they don't realize that their own lives need to be worked on. Instead of trying to transform others, or change the world, they need to work on themselves. They need to be transformed. They need to do some soul-work. The fruit that God is looking for in our lives involves our character; more growth in faith, which leads to good works. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. If we want to recognize true from false we need to ask: does it help me and others to grow in love, grow in joy, grow in peace, grow in patience, grow in kindness, grow in goodness, grow in gentleness, grow in faithfulness, and grow in self-control? Isn't this what we all need to do? Have any of us reached the point where we have enough of those fruit?

In his paraphrase of the New Testament called, *The Message*, Eugene Peterson renders *Matthew 7:21-23* this way: "Knowing the correct password – saying 'Master, Master,' for instance – isn't going to get you anywhere with me. What is required is serious obedience – doing what my Father wills. I can see it now – at the Final Judgment thousands strutting up to me and saying, 'Master, we preached the Message, we bashed demons, our God-sponsored projects had everyone talking.' And do you know what I am going to say? 'You missed the boat. All you did was use me to make yourselves important. You don't impress me one bit. You're out of here.'"

May we be the kind of people who humbly trust Christ for forgiveness and new life, who seek to live as much as possible in obedience and faithfulness to Christ's teaching as given in the Sermon on the Mount, and who make every effort to grow in the fruit of the Spirit so that rather than hearing the awful words no one wants to hear, we hear instead, what the Master said to his faithful servant in *Matthew*

25:23, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

Jesus said, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit...Abide in me, and I will abide in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you abide in me." (*John 15:1-4*) If you want to bear good fruit: the good fruit of the Spirit, the good fruit of the kingdom of heaven, you must remain in Jesus, trusting in his life, death and resurrection; trusting in his atoning sacrifice for you on the Cross; trusting in his rising to new life to share with you the new life of heaven, trusting in his sending the Holy Spirit to live in and through you.

Blessing: *1 Corinthians 15:58* Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. Are there still false prophets today? How does Jesus say we can spot them?
2. The words "fruit" and "fruits" appear seven times in just a few verses in *Matthew 7:16-20*. What are some examples you can identify of what Jesus would call good fruit? What are some examples of bad fruit?
3. What bad fruit might Jesus want to get rid of in your life?
4. What good fruit does Jesus want to see more of in your life?
5. Why do you think Jesus says (*Matthew 7:21*), "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 in heaven." What does this mean for us?
6. How can we avoid being in the terrible place of hearing Jesus say to us, "I never knew you, go away from me, you evil doers."