

Lifeword.org

“Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them” (Matthew 7:20).

Wolves in Sheep’s Clothing

Lesson Subject: The Christian can discern the true from the false in religious teaching.

L103. Date: November 1983. **Text:** Matthew 7:13-23.

Topic: Jesus: Teachings of.

“Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them” (verse 20). With such words Jesus set the theme for this week's study. He indicates it will be the Christian's duty to exercise spiritual discernment in evaluating others. He suggests there will be sufficient basis for such a discernment for those who are spiritually minded. And He instructs Christians to exercise such discernment through their spiritual pilgrimage.

Why is it necessary for Christians to be on the alert in matters of discernment? (1) There are two different ways which people may follow (verses 13, 14). It is important to know one is on the right way. (2) There are two different types of teachers in the field of religion (verses 15-20). One must be sure he hears the true rather than the false. (3) There are two different types of ministry being exercised in the name of Jesus (verses 21-23). One must support the true, not the false. Therefore, spiritual discernment is imperative.

Paul prayed that the Christians in Ephesus may experience *“the eyes of (their) understanding being enlightened”* (Ephesians 1:18). He prayed that the Colossian Christians *“might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding”* (Colossians 1:9). He prayed that the Christians in Philippi *“may approve things that are excellent”* (Philippians 1:10).

The Christian is never to be a carping critic, but he is to exercise spiritual wisdom in discerning the truth from error in religious teachings.

I. THE WAY OF ERROR (Matthew 7:13, 14)

The teaching that there are two different ways set before people is very common in the Bible. Moses said to Israel, “*See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil; . . . therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live*” (Deuteronomy 30:15, 19). Joshua challenged the people of his generation, “*Choose you this day whom ye will serve*” (Joshua 24:15). God spoke through His prophet Jeremiah, “*Behold. I set before you the way of life, and the way of death*” (Jeremiah 21:8). Jesus followed that same theme in His teaching of the two ways (Matthew 7:13, 14).

A. The way of error is a way to be shunned. Jesus urged, “*Enter ye in at the strait gate*” (verse 13). Luke's version of His words is even more urgent: “*Strive to enter in at the strait gate*” (Luke 13:24). That term “*strive*” in Greek is *agonizomai* from which we get the English words agony, agonize. It pictures a war in which the soldiers storm the gates of a defended city. It is so important to enter the right way of Christian living (reference is not to salvation here) that any amount of effort and sacrifice is worth the price. Satan will try to keep the Christian from the dedicated and victorious life. But the child of God must always choose the way of holiness and shun the way of error. “*If ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body. ye shall live*” (Romans 8:13).

B. It is possible to identify the way of error. Jesus told of two ways. One is a “*narrow*” way entered by a “*strait*” gate, with “*few*” going on it. The other is a “*broad*” way entered through a “*wide*” gate and “*many there be which go in thereat.*” The ways are distinguished by their gate, their room, and their travelers.

A “*strait*” gate is a narrow gate. It is used figuratively in the text to describe entering the way of holiness because such a way runs counter to our natural inclinations. Both the gate of entrance and the way of travel are “*narrow.*” An immature Christian might ask, “Why am I not supposed to do what other people enjoy, even if it is questionable?” The answer is that he is on a “*narrow*” way of holiness.

Those on the broad way may seem to have much freedom. They seem to enjoy much that is forbidden a dedicated Christian. But the end of the broad way is destruction. Do not envy those living in sin. Pity them. You know what is ahead for them.

C. It is evident that the way of error is followed by many. What a tragic statement that is. The few follow the way of life, while the many

follow the way to destruction. That is a warning for Christians. That which is the most popular with the unregenerate society about us will be harmful to the Christian. The most popular novels, movies, songs, magazines, television programs, etc., are not conducive to spiritual health. Those things are sought by the “many” who are on the way “to destruction.” Jesus said it!

“We know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness” (1 John 5:19). The Christian is commanded, *“Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world”* (I John 2:15). Satan is the *“god of this world”* and spiritual benefits never follow his way (II Corinthians 4:4). *“Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world”* (1 John 4:4).

D. It can be distinguished from the way of holiness. There is an evident distinction between the “world” (those who follow that “broad way”) and the people of God (who follow the “narrow way”). The entrance, the course, and the crowd distinguish between them. The way of holiness is so distinct that the *“wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein”* (Isaiah 35:8).

II. THE SPIRIT OF ERROR (Matthew 7:15-20)

A. Error is to be guarded against. *“Beware of false prophets,”* Jesus warned (verse 15). The term *“beware”* means to turn one's mind or attention to a thing by being on one's guard against it. It is an appropriate warning in view of the words of Jesus. *“Many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. . . . For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect. Behold, I have told you before”* (Matthew 24:11, 24. 25). Let the Christian stand on his guard as the Bible commands: *“Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong”* (I Corinthians 16:13).

B. Error might appear as truth. False prophets do not come parading their false teachings. They come *“in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves”* (verse 15). *“Such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light”* (II Corinthians 11:13, 14). In the last days the messengers of Satan will perform miracles duplicating those performed by great men of God in ancient times (Revelation 13:11-18). Here is the protection for the Christian: Stay with the Word of God (Isaiah 8:20).

C. Error is identified by its fruits (verses 16-18, 20). A bush called

the buckthorn grows in Palestine. It bears small black berries that resemble grapes. And there grows a thistle with a look that, from a distance, resembles a fig. Jesus uses those two illustrations: “*Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?*” (verse 16). He might be saying that a superficial likeness between the false and the truth is not enough. The test is, Does a person's teachings agree with the revealed Word of God recorded in Holy Scripture?

Christians today are challenged to identify the true from the false in the field of religion. Many today pretend to follow Christ, and call their movement “a church,” but their purposes are not His purposes. Jesus said, “*Ye shall know them by their fruits*” (verse 16). What they produce by their teachings will reveal whether they are from God.

“*Good fruit*” should be recognized as bringing people to Christ and building them up in Christ. It is the teaching that promotes spiritual health and happiness.

“*Evil fruit*” is not identified. It is the absence of good. Jesus refers to the teaching which does not bring people to Christ in true repentance and faith, and does not build people up as productive citizens of the kingdom of heaven.

“*By their fruits ye shall know them*” (verse 20).

III. THE END OF ERROR (Matthew 7:21-23)

“*The LORD knoweth the way of the righteous: but the way of the ungodly shall perish*” (Psalm 1:6). A day will come when the Lord Jesus “*shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet*” (I Corinthians 15:24, 25).

A. Error will be judged in spite of its good profession. “*Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven*” (verse 21). Sometimes the hypocrite can make a better (more pleasant to the ears) profession than does the true believer. But more than words are involved. God examines the heart to know the truth about a person (Proverbs 21:2). Some wit has suggested concerning religious profession, “It is not a matter of how high one jumps when it hits him, but how straight he walks after he hits the ground.” Christian service is more than words.

B. Error will be judged in spite of religious activity. “*Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?*” (verse 22). The Lord does not say that He will deny their claim. They will have engaged in religious activity, and many people may have responded to them. But that is not the important thing.

C. Error will be judged because it lacks a true relationship with God. Jesus said He would reply to those whose hope was in religious service, *“I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity”* (verse 23).

To *“know”* means to recognize, to acknowledge as being personally related. He would profess, *“I NEVER knew you. At no time, in no relationship, did I ever know you.”* It is not a matter of falling from grace; it is a condition of having never entered into grace. Jesus said, *“No man cometh unto the Father, but by me”* (John 14:6). The apostles preached, *“Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved”* (Acts 4:12).

D. Error will be judged and rejected of God. What pitiful words express the condemnation of those who are not truly saved. *“Depart from me, ye that work iniquity”* (verse 23).

How can prophesying in the name of the Lord, casting out demons in His name, and doing many wonderful works in His name be called *“iniquity”*? It is iniquity because it was a farce — supposedly done in the power of God but actually accomplished in the power of Satan. It is iniquity because it claimed to be to the glory of God when it served the benefit of deceptive people. All that is done apart from the enabling of the Lord can be called *“iniquity”* when compared with the holiness of His work.

Where will you be in that day when the Lord commands the *“good”* and *“religious”* people who were not truly saved to *“depart”* — *“go away from my presence; depart out of my sight”*? How will it fare with you in that day?

Be sure you are in the truth by trusting Jesus Christ as personal Savior and yielding to Him as Lord. *“Acquaint now thyself with him, and be at peace: thereby good shall come unto thee”* (Job 22:21).

QUESTIONS

1. How is verse 20 a key to this study?
2. Why must Christians be alert to distinguish true and false?
3. How does a Christian get spiritual discernment?
4. How is the Christian life a *“strait gate”* and a *“narrow way”*?
5. How is the non-Christian way *“broad”*?
6. How would you recognize a false prophet today?
7. What warning is there in II Corinthians 11:13, 14?
8. Contrast the *“fruit”* of the Christian to that of the non-Christian.
9. Why is religious service not enough to satisfy God?
10. How can you make sure you have a right relationship with God?

