

We're in the final two weeks of the Sermon on the Mount series that hopefully has been a meaningful journey through this greatest sermon ever preached. We've been at this since the end of May, and we're about to wrap this up. Last week, we went through Jesus' familiar teaching on the golden rule and on wide and narrow roads and gates. Specifically, Jesus told his disciples:

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets. "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. Matthew 7:12-14

This week, we're grabbing the baton and taking it one step further, but keeping those words that we just read firmly in mind because they form the context of what Jesus is getting ready to say in the text today.

We live in the age of the internet, so I'm going to ask a question that, with reasonable certainty, I already know the answer to. By a show of hands, how many of you have ever had someone try to scam you? Pretty common, right? One source I read indicated that in the last 12 months alone, 34 percent of US adults have experienced a scam or some form of financial fraud. That doesn't mean they've been had. It doesn't mean they've been duped, but someone has tried.

The same source said a whopping 68 percent of US adults have experienced a scam of some kind. As you've probably experienced, these scams take lots of different forms, ranging from the old school petitions to forwarded emails to receiving that all too elusive check in the mail from Bill Gates. Did anybody ever get that check?

Sometimes they offer to hold onto large sums of money from international princes. You may have gotten those before or even simple requests in the form of emails from your boss or your CEO to help with some urgent matter, urgent expenses like this one that I got just this last Monday, that said,

Hi,

I hope this message finds you well. I'm writing regarding a family within our community who's currently facing a serious and unexpected challenge. Their young daughter has become critically ill, and they're encountering urgent expenses that are not being covered. We are hoping to rally some immediate support from those who feel moved to help.

I would be grateful if we could discuss ways that you might be able to assist. Please reply at your earliest convenience, and I can share more details privately. Thank you for your care and compassion

toward those in need. Blessings, Kevin Snead, Lead Pastor.

We laugh about this because to us it seems obvious. Kevin and I talk to one another as we share a common office wall. Sometimes I'm sitting there and he goes, "Josh," I say, "Yeah." He says, "Thank you for your care and compassion toward those in need." Now we may laugh, but here's the thing: obvious as some of these scams might be, and as wild as they might seem, for some people, they work. And they work because they seem believable, at least believable enough. You don't have to scam everybody or fool everybody as long as you can fool somebody.

The pastor at the church that I attended when I was growing up in high school often said that the worst kinds of lies are the ones that are mostly true. For the last 20-plus years, those words have just bounced around in my head and resonated with me deeply because I've used them to look at and assess the world around me. I've noticed that we live in a world, the information age, that is full of information. You could even argue it is mostly true information. But the devil is in the details, and it's often in what is left unsaid.

We sometimes might be inclined to think this lack of integrity is a relatively recent phenomenon, and back in the good old days, people were honest. They had more integrity. They always told the truth. That's just one more of those lies that we often like to believe and tell ourselves. Because the reality is that the earliest recorded scam took place 300 years before Christ ever walked the face of this earth.

A Greek merchant named Hegestratos took out an insurance policy on his boat so that in the event that it ever sank with cargo on it, he would get a payout. He proceeded to secure the policy. He then tried to sink his boat to collect the payout and arranged to sell the cargo, which was grain, to another buyer. By the way, his intent was to drown his entire crew on that boat when he sank it. So when he was caught in the act of trying to chop a hole in the hull of his boat, he jumped into the sea to try to escape and drowned.

Scams, dishonesty, and lies are a tale as old as time. There have always been opportunists who sought to capitalize on the innocence, gullibility, and integrity of others. There will always be those kinds of opportunists among us. And that's why, Jesus sat with his followers who were curious enough to listen to Jesus preach the greatest sermon ever preached—the Sermon on the Mount.

Let's remember that his aim, his purpose for this sermon, is to portray a better way of living. Because the Beatitudes, at the very beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, began with a series of the word blessed. In fact, eight times or even nine times, he said, blessed, which we unpacked to understand that Jesus was pointing listeners to a different way of life,

a flourishing life. That's where Jesus begins, and it culminates in those words that we read a few moments ago.

Last week we shared that in everything Jesus has said about marriage, divorce, and loving our enemies, all the stuff that's been covered in this series, Jesus said comes down to do to others, what you would have them do to you. Jesus says this sums up all the law and the prophets.

Now, there are two words here that I want to pay particular attention to this morning. The first is the word "do," which is the Greek word *poieo*. Now, you're not going to notice this or realize this if you're only reading this in English, but Jesus is getting ready to use this word *poieo* nine times in this block of teaching. If the Bible ever starts repeating words, pay really careful attention.

He's going to use it nine times, but in English, it's going to get translated into numerous different ways. The second is the word prophet. Prophet is one of those words that we hear frequently, and we may often feel as though we have a good understanding of what that word is and means.

But in our culture, what do people typically mean when we speak about a prophet? Oftentimes, we tend to equate a prophet with someone who has these deep and unique insights about the future, who might foretell coming events. So it's important to differentiate that understanding with the way that Jesus is going to use that word specifically when he says that this sums up the law and the prophets.

What Jesus is alluding to here is not a crop of soothsayers. The law references the writings of the Torah—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—the first five books of the Bible. Prophets refers to the writings of the prophets, which are those books in your Bible that start with Isaiah and continue all the way through to Malachi. In other words, in Jesus' day, when someone wanted to reference the Old Testament, it wasn't called the Old Testament. It was called the Law and the prophets.

So the prophets were those people who were called and tasked specifically with speaking on behalf of God. They were the mouthpieces of God on earth. As you skim those books and writings, there are phrases like "The Word of the Lord came to me" that are repeated over and over and over again. These people are sharing words of rebuke, or words of lament, even words of comfort.

For God's people and to the enemies of God's people, to those who are living, and to those who are far off, who are still twinkles in their great-great-great-grandmother's eyes, Jesus said the sum of all that they talked about boiled down to this, "Do to others what you would have them do to you."

So with that context in mind, it may make more sense that Jesus would begin his words in verse 15 with, "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves." False prophets, meaning literally pseudo-prophets

Because you could imagine that being the person who speaks words on behalf of God is one of those hyper, unique, extraordinary kinds of gifts or realities that, in the wrong hands and with the wrong motives, could be advantageous to a bad apple, it could be manipulative.

What may be less obvious is that I believe Jesus is hyperlinking these words to the writings of two other Old Testament prophets. The first and most important is Jeremiah 23, which is a very critical text for Christians overall because it was written nearly 700 years before Jesus ever walked on the face of this earth. It begins by rebuking some "shepherds," who we are told are destroying and scattering the sheep of Israel, the sheep of God's pasture.

In verse 4, God begins to reveal something hopeful. One day, he will place shepherds over the sheep who will tend to them, care for them, and make sure they are no longer afraid. In verse 5, it culminates with this:

"The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteous Savior. Jeremiah 23:5-6

Let me demystify that text a little bit for you, because I know some of these prophetic words can get a bit confusing. Jeremiah foretells of a coming king who will come from the family line or the family tree of King David, a branch, if you will, who will reign justly and wisely. He will be called Yahweh, our Righteous Savior. Any guesses as to who Jeremiah might be referring to? Yeah, that's usually the safe answer in any church associated Trivial Pursuit—Jesus!

Isn't it interesting that immediately following that declaration in verse 23, he turns his attention in that same chapter to false and lying prophets. For the sake of time, we can't read it all together this morning, but definitely read this chapter when you have time. Jeremiah begins to say things like this in verse 14:

And among the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen something horrible: They commit adultery and live a lie. They strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that not one of them turns from their wickedness. They are all like Sodom to me; the people of Jerusalem are like Gomorrah." Therefore this is what the Lord Almighty says concerning the prophets: "I will make them eat bitter food and drink poisoned water, because from the prophets of Jerusalem ungodliness has spread throughout the land." This is what the Lord Almighty says: "Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; they fill you with false hopes. Jeremiah 23:14-16

And this goes on and on throughout the whole chapter. *"I did not send these prophets, yet they have run with their message; I did not speak to them, yet they have prophesied" (V. 21).*

"I have heard what the prophets say who prophesy lies in my name. They say, 'I had a dream! I had a dream!' How long will this continue in the hearts of these lying prophets, who prophesy the delusions of their own minds? vv. 25-26

Isn't it interesting that as Jesus gathers the crowd on the mount and preaches this sermon to them, he might be making allusions to a text like Jeremiah 23? Here he reminds them to be on guard, to be discerning about the false prophets who roam among them, who come dressed like sheep, but inwardly are like wolves, which hearkens back, believe it or not, to the writings of a second Old Testament prophet and his rebuke of Jerusalem's sin. So turn with me to Ezekiel 22.

Here you'll see Ezekiel the prophet refer to the city of Jerusalem. He's going to speak of the city in the feminine. He's going to call the city of Jerusalem, things like she and her, but it's metaphoric for an entire religious culture of predatory behavior. I want you to notice and look for that ferocious wolf language from Matthew 7:15, because this is the beast-like language that Jesus is referring to.

There is a conspiracy of her princes within her like a roaring lion tearing its prey; they devour people, take treasures and precious things and make many widows within her. Her priests do violence to my law and profane my holy things; they do not distinguish between the holy and the common; they teach that there is no difference between the unclean and the clean; and they shut their eyes to the keeping of my Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them. Her officials within her are like wolves tearing their prey; they shed blood and kill people to make unjust gain. Her prophets whitewash these deeds for them by false visions and lying divinations. They say, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says'—when the Lord has not spoken. The people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery; they oppress the poor and needy and mistreat the foreigner, denying them justice. Ezekiel 22:25-29

Who could have imagined that Jesus might be saying so much and so few words, but I absolutely believe Jesus is hyperlinking to Jeremiah 23 and Ezekiel 22, as he looks at his listeners in the eyes and tells them to watch out for the false prophets among them.

But it does invite the natural question of how to guard against it because nobody wants to be scammed. Nobody wants to be the one who believes liars. How do you ensure that you are listening to truth tellers and not self-seekers? How do you know if you're pursuing what is holy versus what is profane?

Well, Jesus begins to answer that very question back in Matthew 7:16, "*By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?*" Now, we might be inclined to read that sentence and think, "Oh, I know how to evaluate people. I know how to read people. I can look at what they say, and I can make a snap judgment decision about their trustworthiness."

Some of us might be convinced about that, but there's some word play in what Jesus is saying here because the word recognize in Greek is actually the word *epiginosethe*, which doesn't exactly roll off the tongue. It means to know. This is a verb in the future tense, the middle voice, the second person, and it's plural, which is a fancy way of saying that it's a

word that more literally translates to something like this: by their fruit, y'all will come to fully know them.

While I wouldn't ordinarily geek out quite this much in the original text, I bring it up because it's a word that indicates a long-term process of discernment. You will not just immediately recognize them because some people are cunning and crafty. Some people will trick you even for a long period of time. Jesus says you have to watch out for the fruit that they produce, and over time, you will come to fully know them. You will come to fully understand their motives and deceitfulness. So to reinforce the point that he's making, Jesus goes to a familiar metaphor. He asks:

Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. Luke 7:16b-20

And this makes sense to us. We can see what Jesus is saying. We don't eat from bad trees that produce inedible fruit, nor do we eat from trees that don't produce fruit at all.

I grew up in Modesto, almond country. Every once in a while, you'd be driving down the road, and there was this orchard that you were used to seeing for 10 or 15 years, and all of a sudden, every tree was uprooted and lying on its side. They had ripped up the entire orchard, and in just a few weeks, they were going to plant thousands of new trees because they were no longer yielding the crop or the fruit that they were expected to.

Well, there's something subtle here that you might miss in this text if you only read it in English. This is where that word *poieo* starts to reappear for us, only this time, it's the word bears. The word bears that you see in this verse is what is known as a functional translation. It is more thought for thought; it's not a literal word-for-word translation.

The literal word that Jesus used in that golden rule text that we read just a few minutes ago when he said, "Do to others, what you would have them do to you." So what Jesus is literally saying is that a good tree does good fruit and a bad tree does bad fruit. Good trees cannot do bad fruit, and bad trees cannot do good fruit.

The insinuation or distinction that Jesus is making here is that the fruitfulness of a person is evident by their actions or by what they do. In other words, it's not enough to believe right things, but do bad fruit. That's not a good tree. Good trees, you'll come to know fully, not because they say good things, but because they do good things.

So what a person does in their faith matters. It matters so much that Jesus said it encapsulates the entirety of the law and the prophets, the entirety of the Old Testament. What we do, Church, is a big deal. So he reiterates that. Just like those almond orchards that I grew up around, every tree that does not do good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire, and thus by their fruit, you will recognize or you will come to fully know them.

Ironically enough, if you remain unconvinced about the hyperlink of Jesus' words with Jeremiah 23, then you might have some fun looking at what comes immediately after, in Jeremiah 24. God shows Jeremiah two baskets of figs, and he asks him what he sees, and Jeremiah says, "I see figs, the good ones are very good, but the bad ones are so bad they cannot be eaten."

So it continues that metaphor of people producing good and bad fruit because what we do, Jesus says, has incredible implications for our being with him. He hearkens back to that wide and narrow gate and path language.

"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 who is in heaven" (v.21). The flourishing life is not only about calling him Lord. Jesus is saying that because if your life looks and produces nothing that looks like him, you're just making noise. And worse yet, many are actually using his name for dishonest gain and dishonest reasons. So he continues.

Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!' vv. 22-23

Jesus says there are going to be a lot of surprised people who are going to make their case.

Look at all the fruit we did. We prophesied (although falsely), we drove out demons. We did many powerful things, Jesus. Look at everything we did, and we did it all for you. Aren't you impressed? We even mentioned your name while we did it. We created memes about you, and we shared them all over social media. We put bumper stickers on our cars.

But Jesus says, "I will look at them and I will tell them I did not know you," which is that hyperlink. "I did not have any relationship with you whatsoever." There's a reason that the scam email that purported to be from Kevin Snead didn't work. It tried so hard to say all the right kinds of things in all the right kinds of ways from all the right kinds of people. It even said blessings, which is how you know it was close. So why didn't it work? Because I know Kevin and Kevin knows me, and it doesn't sound like him. Also, the giant red banner in Gmail that said this was a phishing scam helped a little bit.

What's the takeaway here? How do Jesus' words intersect in our lives and our faith here in 2025? Does this imply then that salvation and heaven are a direct result of what we do and how much we do? Is this just some lifelong achievement project for all the ambitious people who go out and do everything that is possible for the kingdom of heaven? Is it something you earn

The Apostle Paul addressed this years after Christ when he wrote to the church in Ephesus. *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no*

one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). If it were about earning salvation, Paul said our egos would get in the way. We would boast about it.

But he does continue in verse 10, *"For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."* The good that we do is not what saves us. But make no mistake that God did create us to do good works in the same way that he called Israel of the Old Testament to be a blessing to all nations.

Jesus very brother, James, reinforced what Jesus and Paul were saying. He said,

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. James 2:14-17

So now, while all of that needed to be said. I don't want to miss the fullness of what Jesus is actually saying in today's text. That the call, the warning to all of those who were listening then and all of us reading today, is to watch out for the pseudo-prophets, the false prophets among us, to watch out for the wolves in sheep's clothing. Because what was true 700 years before Christ in the days of Jeremiah and what was true 2000 years ago in the days of Jesus is still 100 percent true today.

There are countless scores of people walking among us in our neighborhoods, sitting among us in our gatherings, writing books that we read, and making YouTube videos that we watch. Making decisions that impact us and trying to shape the way that we live and act every single day. They will tell us often that God told them this and that, that God showed them X, Y, and Z, that God doesn't want you to do this thing because he wants you to do that thing. There are words that can seem compelling. There are words that can seem faithful. There are words that can seem godly, and yet they're often words that do not come from God at all.

To borrow from the words of Jeremiah, they speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord. Remember, the worst kinds of lies are the ones that are mostly true, and so the people that we listen to and the voices that we let into our lives are always shaping us. They're always forming us. John Mark Comer says this.

For those of us who desire to follow Jesus, here is the reality we must turn and face: If we're not being intentionally formed by Jesus himself, then it's highly likely we are being unintentionally formed by someone or something else. Comer, Practicing The Way

Who we let into our lives, particularly those who speak to us about God, matters because we are formed by what we participate in and are formed by what we consume. So the friendships that we maintain form us. The TV and the movies that we watch also form us. The music that we listen to forms us. The books that we read form us. The media and

social media that we ingest from us. Whether we realize it or not, we are being formed.

It reminds me of a book that came out in 2013 by a guy named Ryan Holiday entitled, *Trust Me, I'm Lying, Confessions of a Media Manipulator*. In it, he had a poignant quote.

You cannot have your news instantly and have it done well. You cannot have your news reduced to 140 characters or fewer without losing large parts of it. You cannot manipulate the news but not expect it to be manipulated against you. You cannot have your news for free; you can only obscure the costs. If, as a culture, we can learn this lesson, and if we can learn to love the hard work, we will save ourselves much trouble and collateral damage. We must remember: There is no easy way. Holiday

In a nutshell, Church, he's saying that discerning truth and knowing fully takes time. So pay attention to the fruit. Pay attention to what comes downstream from it. Does love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and gentleness come from it? Or does it stoke our anger, fear, and anxiety? Do we pay attention simply because someone quoted scripture, or do we do the hard work to dig in and actually understand the scripture that was being quoted to see if we are being manipulated by it?

I believe Jesus' point is that what you know about God shapes what you do. What you do serves the God you truly know. I'm going to say that again. What you "know" about God shapes what you do, and what you do serves the God you truly know. What I mean is that if we listen to all the voices that claim to speak with God and on behalf of God, with Jesus and on behalf of Jesus, we will be shaped by it. It's a byproduct of simply listening and entertaining it.

What we do will flow out of how we are shaped, but it's what we do that is the fruit that we produce. It's what we do that reveals who or what we serve. We've all seen people flock to follow significant pastors and religious leaders who helped shape how they think and how they believe, only to fall victim to the moral decline of their actions. We've all seen people flock to political leaders on both sides of the aisle who use and abuse scripture to further their agenda, only to see the fruits of their labor run counter to many of Jesus' core teachings.

In all of those instances, what we do says more about the god that we serve than words could ever say. What you know about God shapes what you do. What you do serves the God you truly know. So Jesus' warning for those of us with ears to hear and eyes to see is that pleading ignorance to what malforms us won't work. The end goal is clear. Jesus calls on his people to know and do the will of God. Listening to the wrong voices, even those that claim to speak for God, will inhibit that.

So what are the voices that we can have the most confidence in? Well, there's no substitute, frankly, for reading, knowing, and understanding the scripture. It is sometimes said that everything that is true belongs to God, and I believe that. But I also know that discerning truth and having the courage to be introspective, having the courage to be accountable, is a skill that is quickly atrophying in our world today.

Nevertheless, Jesus' words hold true. He says, "Watch out." Those are his words, not mine. What you know about God shapes what you do, and what you do serves the God you truly know.

If someone collected and analyzed all the data about what makes you who you are, with the thoughts that you think, the actions that you take, the voices that you allow to shape you and make you the person that you are, would they conclude that Jesus is the Lord and king of your life? Is that what your inner life most clearly reflects right now? If not, who or what is? That is a question for you to think about.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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