

Prayer

Raise us up O Jesus, to walk tall as Your people, according to our calling. Grant us the courage to engage with others in conversation about You, about our Faith and about the Church of God. Make us not ashamed of our heritage, but glad to be servants of the only great God of all Creation. Thank You, Lord Jesus. AMEN.

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Thanks for Life

Give thanks to God for all your memories of the past which have blessed you. Offer difficult memories to God, confident that in His hands, all problems may be overcome.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for those who influence the price of oil, especially governments*
- *Give thanks for close friends*
- *Pray for those who are employed to work in extreme conditions*

Meditation

Brothers and Sisters in Christ; the Lord is here,
He longs to hear Your prayers; He longs to:

Listen to your troubles and set you free;
Unlock your beliefs and dismiss the enemy;
Forgive your sins and restore your spirits;
Touch your wounds and heal your bodies;
Give you gifts and help you to fruitfulness;
Speak to your hearts and free your minds;
Open up your world and call you higher;
Brighten your life and inspire your relationships;
Ignite your joy and fire up your happiness!

So let Him do His work in you; and liberate your soul!

Bible Study - Matthew 7:15-23

¹⁵ Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will know them by their fruits.

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. ²² On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?" ²³ Then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers."

Review

In our passage today, Jesus describes both good and bad within the Kingdom, and how to tell the difference between the two. Firstly he warns us to beware of false prophets (7:15), and then explains the difference between good and bad teaching (7:16-20). Secondly, He says that human perceptions of who may enter Kingdom of God at the End Times can be dramatically wrong (7:21-23)! This is helpful, though challenging teaching.

A prophet is someone who tells us God's Word, no more, no less; and sometimes that Word will tell us the future consequences of our present actions. True prophecy is often like Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, which is a clear exposition of God's Word and its consequences. False prophets are therefore those who give teaching about God and His Kingdom which is different from that given by Jesus or found in the Bible, and Jesus says that we will know the false prophets because under their influence, the church will not grow and the 'tree' which is the church of God will bear bad fruit (7:17,18).

This is plain but tough teaching. Jesus describes false prophets initially with a simple illustration: they are 'wolves in sheep's clothing'. Here, Jesus picks up the well known picture of God's people as sheep, as used by Ezekiel in a famous prophecy (Ez. 34:1-31). In his vision, Ezekiel describes sheep who are led astray by their own false leaders (Ez 34:2,3) and that they become prey to wild animals (Ez 34:5). So God promises that He will rescue His people (Ez 34:10), and using words which remind us of Psalm 23 ('The Lord is my Shepherd ...') God says that He alone will be the 'shepherd of the sheep' (Ez 34:15). This whole chapter illuminates our passage. The 'ravenous wolves' are the false prophets who have the outward appearance of being godly, but act for themselves rather than from any concerned about the eternal destiny of God's people and the Kingdom.

Jesus then taught about how to tell the difference between good and bad prophecy, using the imagery of a tree bearing fruit. The ideas however, come from the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy 18, Moses spoke to the people of Israel about how to do just this (Deut 18:15-22). He spoke prophetically himself of the day when God would raise up a prophet and put His own words within that prophet's mouth (Deut 18:15-18). Clearly, we now see this fulfilled in Jesus; but Moses went on to say that those who spoke in the name of other gods were not true prophets, and neither were those whose words did not come true. There is a clear message here, which is that whatever the merits or humanity of various religious teachings (whether they are found inside or outside the church), Christians cannot accept any teaching unless it comes to us from God through Jesus Christ. The measure of any 'religious teaching' is not how good or bad it is on any moral or social scale, but whether it bears fruit in the Kingdom of God.

The last part of this text deals with the more challenging question of whether everyone in the church, and every teaching in the church is acceptable to God and His Kingdom when He comes in power. When Jesus says 'On that day ...' (7:22) He is clearly referring to the End Times when He will return in glory; Jesus says that on the great day, some will call on His name in complete belief that they are part of the Kingdom, and yet they will find out that they are rejected as unknown (7:23)! Indeed, even those who have cast out demons (7:22) will be in this category! This is a plain warning by Jesus that in the time between His ministry and His final coming on glory (which is now), many will claim to be prophets and teachers, and even miracle workers who cast out demons, but entry into the Kingdom is not by means of deeds (casting out demons) or claims (calling out "Lord, Lord"). At the very end, Jesus is looking for people who know Him, not those who make claims about Him.

There is a simple yet crucial difference between knowing the Lord and claiming to know Him because of what one has said and done, and the difference is what Jesus thinks, not what we think. Those who base their claims to entry into the Kingdom upon their deeds and reputation have misunderstood their faith and have based everything on themselves

alone. Those who both know Jesus and are known by Jesus will have lived by doing what God requires of them, and will not perceive that any deed might entitles one to a place in eternity, and neither will they have to tell Jesus they know Him, for Jesus will know already. I leave you to apply these profoundly important teachings to what you know of the church in your own country, time and place. What I do know is that in my own ministry I have seen too much by way of claim and counter-claim about the things of God and the things of faith; and too many people transport into the church the worldly attitudes of hierarchy and importance based on personal charisma and spiritual deeds. It is my experience that people of real faith have no need to promote themselves or their ministries. That is God's business.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Do you think you can identify those who are or who have been 'wolves in sheep's clothing' within the church?
2. Can you identify from this passage what the good fruit is other than that it is good?
3. What do you feel about the final verses 21-23? What hope is there for us to enter the Kingdom if good people fail to get in?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

This passage is personally very challenging for one who is a leader within the church, and one who has indeed cast on demons in Jesus' name. Yet this passage is important to me because it reminds me that I am saved not so much because of my own deeds and ministry, but because I know the Lord, and He knows me. In that I have hope.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Can you see from the evidence of people's lives what kind of faith they have, or is that presumptuous? What do you think people make of you and how you 'bear fruit' in your own church. Make sure you match your discipleship to your words!*
- *In a general church discussion, open out the subject of false teaching and how a church exercises discernment about what is right and what is wrong.*

Final Prayer

Thank You, Jesus, for peace.
May I be a person of peace.
May I be an agent of peace.
May I bear the fruit of peace.
Through You who are my Peace. AMEN