

***Life Improvements --- Mountaintop Makeover --- Charisma or Character***

***Deuteronomy 13:1-5 & Psalm 1 & Matthew 7:15-20***

***“You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?”***

***Matthew 7:16***

**Deuteronomy 13:1-5**

*If prophets or those who divine by dreams appear among you and promise you omens or portents, <sup>2</sup> and the omens or the portents declared by them take place, and they say, “Let us follow other gods” (whom you have not known) “and let us serve them,” <sup>3</sup> you must not heed the words of those prophets or those who divine by dreams; for the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you indeed love the LORD your God with all your heart and soul. <sup>4</sup> The LORD your God you shall follow, him alone you shall fear, his commandments you shall keep, his voice you shall obey, him you shall serve, and to him you shall hold fast. <sup>5</sup> But those prophets or those who divine by dreams shall be put to death for having spoken treason against the LORD your God—who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery—to turn you from the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.*

**Psalm 1**

*<sup>1</sup> Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; <sup>2</sup> but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night. <sup>3</sup> They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper. <sup>4</sup> The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. <sup>5</sup> Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; <sup>6</sup> for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.*

Last week, I mentioned that this last section of the Sermon on the Mount, found in verses 13 through 29, is really Jesus’ “so what” section. Jesus concludes His long teaching and comes to the application or the “so what do we with this?” Jesus told those that were listening they have choices to make. He contrasts the choices, saying you can choose the broad gate or the narrow gate, the wide and easy path or the narrow and hard path. These choices lead to two destinations: life or destruction. This week will we learn that there are two kinds of teachers: true teachers or false teachers and they are like bad trees with bad fruit or they are like good trees with good fruit. Next week we will arrive at the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus will finally conclude His teaching and we will look at two kinds of builders, the wise and the foolish, and two kinds of foundations, sinking sand or the solid rock. When Jesus arrived at the end of His message and came to the “so what” section, He ended using comparisons: two gates, two paths, two kinds of people, two destinations, two types of teachers, two kinds of trees, two kinds of fruit, two types of builders and two types of foundations.

Let us listen for three of those comparisons as we hear God’s Word for us today. We turn to our good friend, Matthew, chapter seven, verses 15 through 20. May God’s Word be alive and redemptive for us today!

**Matthew 7:15-20**

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

All throughout the Old Testament and the New Testament we are warned to watch out for false teachers --  
- false prophets.

In our Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy, we heard Moses’ warning to take heed the words of all the prophets. In Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, warns the person of the dangers of listening to false prophets --- *“an appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land,”* God told Jeremiah. *‘The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priest rule on their own authority; and my people love it.’* (Jeremiah 5:30-31) The prophet Ezekiel wrote of Israel’s unrighteous rulers, *“Her officials within her are like wolves tearing their prey; they shed blood and kill people to make unjust gain.”* (Ezekiel 22:27) Zephaniah wrote, *“Her officials are roaring lions, her rulers are evening wolves.”* (Zephaniah 3:3) Paul, the great apostle, missionary and disciple of Christ used similar language when he warned the church in Ephesus, *“I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.”* (Acts 20:29-30) The beloved disciple, John, teaches that we are to test the spirit that is being generated. *“Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because false prophets have gone out into the world.”* (I John 4:1) We could go on and on with references regarding the Bible’s teaching concerning false prophets. It’s a powerful theme of the Old and New Testaments and we should be aware.

As Jesus concludes His teaching, he begins to “bring it home” as they say! It’s the narrow gate or the wide gate. Choose life or destruction. Jesus is rounding third, and heading towards home plate. It’s life or death time for us. **Beware!** The prophet-of-all prophets has a major word for us—beware of false prophets! The Greek word that Jesus uses is **προσέχω** [*prosecho* /pros-ekh-o/] which means “to watch, take heed, consider carefully, bring near, bring to, devote thought or effort to.” We’ve just heard about the two gates, two paths, and the two destinations and now we are warned: Watch out! Take heed! Think about what I’m going to devote thought and effort to. There are false prophets in sheep’s clothing coming. They are really ravenous wolves.

The followers of Jesus would have understood this illustration. In those days a prophet was recognized by what they wore. Like Elijah, prophets often wore rough, hairy, uncomfortable clothing as a symbol of their foregoing of the normal comforts of life for the cause of God. John the Baptist wore a camel hair coat and ate locusts and honey—giving up the comfort of soft wool and instead of eating lamb chops, he ate bugs and disturbed drippings from the bees. God’s prophets were set apart. There was no mistaking these guys. The shepherds of Jesus’ day wore woolen clothing made from the wool of the sheep they tended. This is the contrast Jesus is teaching about. A prophet in Jesus’ day was not just a person who foretold the future; a prophet was one who told forth the word of God. They were the teachers of Jesus’ day. Jesus is trying to warn the people that there are people who are going to come to them dressed as shepherds. They are going to look like shepherds, act like shepherds. But, beware! They are not dyed in the wool...they are ravenous wolves instead. Jesus has some pretty strong words to describe this kind of false prophet. The word that he uses for ravenous is translated: extortioner, or robber.

These false prophets do not deceive the sheep by impersonating the sheep; these false prophets deceive the sheep by impersonating the shepherd. Jesus is saying, “hey, beware—watch out...be on the lookout for wolves who are dressed in sheepskin. Wolves and sheep don’t go together.”

### ***CHARISMA OR CHARACTER***

How do we discern the spirits of false teachers? How do we know a true prophet from a false prophet? Jesus tells us not once, but twice that **“you will know them by their fruits.”** Jesus is saying, “don’t look at their charisma; look at their character.” Charisma literally means “personal magnetism” and is the ability to inspire enthusiasm, interest or the affection of others by means of personal charm or influence. Jesus is warning us not to be deceived by charm.

One of the most frightening discoveries about the People’s Temple Christian Church was that a large majority of its members had been raised in Christian homes of one sort or another. Most of the people who joined the People’s Temple Christian Church did so in the belief that it offered a higher and more genuine experience of Christian fellowship and service. Yet the church dissolved overnight when its leader, Jim Jones, and nearly a thousand of his most loyal followers committed mass suicide in Jonestown, in the jungles of Guyana, South America.<sup>ii</sup>

Jim Jones used his charm, his appeal, and his influence to gain more and more support. He slowly replaced Jesus Christ as the authority and moved himself to the place of prominence. Before his death he had managed to gain the admiration and praises of countless church leaders, governors, senators, congressmen, and even the President of the United States. Charm can be deceitful.

Character is what Jesus is saying we should look for. A person’s character --- his or her inner motives, standards, loyalties, attitudes and ambitions --- these character traits will eventually show through.

George Steinbrenner recently passed away and I was reminded of this story.

In the book *The Baseball Codes*, authors Jason Turbow and Michael Duca share a story from the world of baseball that shows how widely-accepted cheating has become in America's favorite pastime.

[One day in 1987], New York Yankees owner George Steinbrenner was watching his team play the California Angels on television, and was shocked when the camera zoomed in to show close-ups of what appeared to be a small bandage on the palm of the left hand of Angels pitcher Don Sutton. The Yankees television broadcasters brought it up whenever the pitcher appeared to grind the ball into his palm between pitches. It was, they said, probably why Sutton's pitches possessed such extraordinary movement that day. He was in all likelihood scuffing the baseball.

Outraged, Steinbrenner called the visitors' dugout at Anaheim Stadium and lit into [the Yankees' manager at the time], Lou Piniella. Was he aware that Sutton was cheating? "Our television announcers are aware of it," yelled Steinbrenner. "I'm sure the Angels are aware of it. You're probably the only guy there who doesn't know it. Now, I want you to go out there and make the umpires check Don Sutton!" This wasn't exactly breaking news about Sutton. He had been thrown out of a game in 1978 for scuffing. By 1987, he was among the most discussed ball-doctors in the game.

"George," Piniella responded, "do you know who taught him how to cheat?" Steinbrenner confessed that he did not. "The guy who taught Don Sutton everything he knows about cheating is the guy pitching for us tonight," Piniella said. "Do you want me to go out there and get Tommy John thrown out, too?"

What do we do when it seems like everyone is cheating? Do we give up and give in, join the ranks in doing whatever it takes to get ahead? Or do we trust God, take a stand for honesty, and do what's right even if it costs us? <sup>iii</sup>

Character is really integrity. Integrity is a person's principles or moral standards. Integrity is not the sort of thing you work on every now and then. You don't set aside one day a month to work on your integrity like you pay your bills. It's something we have to address 24/7 because of the insidious nature of dishonesty, which always presents us with small, seemingly insignificant openings. Few people actually decide to outright lie or cheat; rather, they find themselves taking shortcuts out of convenience. According to a company that conducted 3.8 million background checks on people applying for jobs, more than half lied on their resumes—1.9 million lied. These aren't horrible people or chronic liars but ordinary citizens like you and me who think little white lies are okay. Unfortunately, even if the white lies are never caught they erode our character, our integrity.

In 1912, Leon Leonwood Bean started a mail-order business in Greenwood, Maine, by selling a hunting boot with a money-back guarantee. Defects in the design led to 90 percent of them being returned. Making good on the guarantee could have ruined his fledgling business, but Leon kept his word, corrected the design, and continued selling the boots. L.L. Bean is now one of the largest mail-order companies in the United States because it continued the tradition of treating its customers with integrity.<sup>iv</sup>

At the close of His sermon, Jesus warns us to look for a person's character and integrity. We are to know them by their fruits. He then compares false prophets with real prophets by using the image of fruit trees. False prophets disguise or hide their bad fruit for a while with ecclesiastical trappings, biblical knowledge and evangelical vocabulary. They can cover it by belonging to Christian organizations, associating with Christian leaders and talking about God and Godly things. Jesus is saying don't be fooled by what people say, watch how they live their lives. A person who is called by God and belongs to Jesus Christ will produce good fruit-- in their attitudes, in their actions and in their teachings.

So What?

Do we want to join the ranks of those that will do anything to get ahead like Don Sutton or Tommy John, or any of the 1.9 million people who lied on their resumes? Do we want to use our charisma to influence people with our charm and appearance like Jim Jones? Are we wolves in sheepskins? Or are we willing to put our name on the line like L.L. Bean? Are we willing to live out our integrity-- even if it costs us everything? A good tree bears good fruit and a bad tree bears bad fruit.

Listen to these words from our brother, Paul, ***“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”***

The “so what” for us today? Jesus is asking us to make some choices:

Two gates: narrow and wide

Two paths: hard and easy

Two destinations: life and destruction

Two teachers: true and false

Two trees: good and bad

Two fruits: good and bad

Charisma or character? Influence or integrity? The “so what” for us today is a warning from Jesus to beware of what we let into our lives. Guard who and what you allow into your life. With just one wrong choice—you could allow a ravenous wolf—a robber or extortionist—into your mind, your heart, your

home, your family, and your life. That one bad choice could be the start down a very slippery slope. Bad choice after bad choice will bring death and destruction. Jesus says, “Beware!” The good tree produces good fruit. The good person produces good fruit.

Our grandson, Jace, has a life-threatening allergy to peanuts. His parents have to beware of what Jace eats and where Jace is at every moment. Peanuts are a pesky allergy as peanut dust gets into the air, and onto things—it’s easily transferred. This is what Jesus is trying to tell us! Beware! Beware of what we allow into our life. A good tree produces good fruit. Are we bearing the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control in our lives? Oh, dear sheep, choose wisely.

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<sup>ii</sup> *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

<sup>ii</sup> John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary Matthew*, 1985, Chicago, Moody Bible Institute

<sup>iii</sup> Jason Turbow and Michael Duca's *The Baseball Codes* (Pantheon Books, 2010); excerpted in *The Week* (3-26-10)

<sup>iv</sup> Louis Upkins Jr., *Treat Me Like a Customer* (Zondervan, 2009)