

ONE TRUE VOICE

SERIES: BLESSED ARE



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Matthew 7:15–23
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When I was little, I loved watermelons. I still do. My family had a little garden, and one year my mother suggested that I grow my own watermelons. I was really excited about the idea, so my mom and I went to the grocery store and bought a packet of watermelon seeds.

I planted these seeds, and I watered them and waited for them to grow. I couldn't wait to have my very own watermelons. Eventually, several green shoots started to appear. Not too long after that, some small green fruits showed up, and I knew my watermelons were close. But then something strange happened. Those small green fruits stayed small instead of growing larger. They were the weirdest looking watermelons I had ever seen.

Eventually, I asked my mom why my watermelons looked so strange. She took a look and said that those weren't watermelons; they were Brussels sprouts. I have only just very recently developed a liking for Brussel sprouts. At the time, Brussel sprouts were the worst possible things I could imagine.

I thought I had planted watermelons, but what I got instead were Brussels sprouts. My little heart was crushed.

How do you feel when you think you're getting one thing, but you get another instead? Have you ever been tricked? How do you protect yourself from that? And an even more dangerous question is: how do you know if you're fooling yourself?

For the last several months, we've been looking at the Sermon on the Mount. We've called this series "Blessed Are" because Jesus is describing life in the kingdom of the heavens. I've been enjoying looking at this message because it has had a huge impact on the way I relate to God. Jesus is talking about a new kind of life. I've been experiencing that in my own life.

Jesus isn't the only one who claims to offer a new kind of life. We live in a world with many voices offering different solutions to all the problems we face: Keto, Paleo, Meditation, Yoga, Acupuncture, Wellness,

Financial Freedom, "Your Best Life Now." You can find quotes from any number of people who say that a new way of life has completely transformed their daily experience.

The situation inside the church isn't much different: Baptist, Presbyterian, Catholic, Pentecostal, and of course: non-denominational. Egalitarian, Complementarian, Calvinist, Reformed, Charismatic, Evangelical, neo-Orthodox, Spiritual Formation, Spiritual Direction, Spiritual Disciplines, Spiritual Transformation, and of course, Spiritual but not religious.

So many options. So many voices. So much input. How do we know who to listen to? How do we know which voices really promise a new way of life? How do we find the one true voice?

This can be really tricky. It's hard to know where to turn. Our approach at PBC is to ground all of our thinking in the Scriptures. It's easy to reject teaching which contradicts the Bible, but everyone is reading the same Bible and many people come to different conclusions. How do we sort through all the competing ideas?

Jesus anticipated this type of situation. He knew there would be many voices. He knew that many of those options would be different traditions which emphasize different aspects of who God is. He also knew that some voices were dangerous and that some voices would lead people away from authentic faith in Christ.

As Jesus nears the end of this sermon, he gives his listeners some guidance. He helps them in advance to determine which voices to listen to and how to tell the good from the bad. On the one hand, it's a very simple instruction. But as with most of his words, it takes us to a much deeper place.

Jesus begins by warning us from people who would lead us astray. Then he gives us a simple test to identify those people. Finally, as he tends to do, he turns things around and challenges his listeners. In fact, his final statement contains some of the most piercing words in the Bible. It's a "stop-and-evaluate-your-life" kind

of moment. And once we do that, we find that there is actually only one voice we should listen to.

Let's read what Jesus has to say.

Misleading Voices

Jesus begins with a warning.

Matthew 7:15:

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”

Up until now, Jesus has been mostly positive in his sermon. He's been offering a path forward, even if the path seems difficult and hard to find. Now he warns us against other kinds of people.

These are not worldly voices. Jesus isn't talking about the influence of the culture. These are voices who claim to speak for God. The word in Greek is *“psuedoprophetes.”* These are pseudo prophets, and that makes them so much more dangerous. It's hard enough to avoid the voices from the culture that we live in. Now we realize there are also dangerous voices which sound like they are from God.

False prophets were a huge deal in the Old Testament. There were many sorts of people who claimed to speak for God. At some points in the Old Testament, there were hundreds of false prophets. Sometimes it was nearly impossible to find a real prophet—they were almost all false.

There is one common characteristic of all false prophets. They always make things sound better than they actually are. In the Old Testament, false prophets usually proclaimed peace and safety when that wasn't the case. Jeremiah complains about false prophets in Jeremiah 6:14, “They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace.”

Ezekiel makes a similar charge in Ezekiel 13:10 when he says, “Precisely because they have misled my people, saying, ‘Peace,’ when there is no peace, and because, when the people build a wall, these prophets smear it with whitewash.”

This makes sense, doesn't it? Why would we listen to a false prophet who makes things sound worse than

they are? The appealing thing about the false message is that it is superficially better; it's a band-aid instead of the surgery. It's a quick fix for something that requires a more complicated solution.

Jesus describes these false prophets as wolves who look like sheep. This comparison is really helpful, but we need to unpack it a bit. When was the last time you saw a wolf? When was the last time you saw a sheep?

So let's think about what each of these animals meant in a first-century context. Sheep offer you wool, meat, store of wealth, companionship, milk, and more. Sheep give benefits.

Wolves take things. They take livestock, safety, crops, sometimes even your children. They steal and destroy. There's nothing really positive from a first-century peasant perspective about a wolf. Wolves take what's yours.

If we put those two observations together, then perhaps we get at what Jesus is saying about false prophets: they seem like sheep. They seem like they are offering you something but they are actually wolves. In reality, they are taking something from you. False prophets seem to offer you something, but in reality, they take something from you.

Think about those pop-up ads that come up online sometimes. They say, “You may have won \$1,000,000!” or “Click here to find your perfect soul-mate!” They always offer you something great. They never tell you what they are really doing such as, “Click here to install a devastating virus on your computer” or “You may have already won the chance to slow down your computer forever!”

False voices start out by offering you something, but they are always after something for themselves. Jesus has been telling us how to find the life of blessing, but he knows that others will offer that same thing without really being able to deliver it. In fact, they'll make it seem easier than it actually is. So Jesus warns his listeners from people who make it seem easy. Beware easy answers.

We have encountered some profound truths in these words from Jesus. We have been told that even the least likely people can be blessed—“Blessed are the poor in spirit”. We have been given a vision for a new kind of humanity—“Your righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees.” We have been shown a powerful way to pray—“Our Father in heaven, hallowed

be your name.” Last week we were given a difficult road to follow, “The gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life.”

I’m amused a bit when people reject Christianity because they call it a crutch. As if believing in Jesus is simply a “get out of jail free” card that makes life easy and painless; as if taking up your cross to follow Jesus is the easy way out. The way of Jesus is a way of beauty and meaning and purpose and unspeakable joy, but it is not an easy path.

There are no easy answers. We’re planning a series to begin in February during the season of Lent through the book of Job. One of the main lessons of this book is that the way of Jesus is not easy. Everyone is looking for an easy explanation of what’s going on, and there isn’t one. Instead, we learn something powerful about who God is.

The Old Testament did not only warn about false prophets. There were tests to identify them. It makes sense that in this sermon, which we’ve described as Jesus’ grand introduction to the new covenant, he would give some tests as well.

How do you know if someone speaks for God? How do you know whether I’m a false prophet? We pastors stand up here week after week and we claim to interpret the word of God for you. It’s a terrible and great responsibility. How do you know whether we are speaking accurately for God?

The fruit of the tree

Once again, Jesus uses an illustration that first-century peasants would be familiar with.

Matthew 7:16-20:

“You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? 17 So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. 18 A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased 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 recognize them by their fruits.”

What you have just heard is the highest concentration of references to fruit in the entire Bible. This is the fruitiest passage in all of Scripture! Jesus mentions fruit

seven times in five verses. He couldn’t be more clear—it’s all about the fruit.

This section is also what commentators call a chiasmic structure. That means that the first statement is mirrored by the last statement, the second by the second-to-last and the middle statements mirror each other. The point of this structure is to draw attention to the middle—just like an “X” or “*Chi*” in Greek.

What’s at the center? Healthy trees bear good fruit. Diseased trees bear bad fruit.

This seems clear enough. The prophets are trees. Look at their fruit to determine whether they are false or true. But now we get to the really important question: what does Jesus mean by fruit? What aspect of the prophet’s life are we supposed to be looking at?

A relative of mine helped to plant a church a few years ago. The original church was in a different state but was expanding. That church had grown to be a thriving ministry. My relative was excited to be a part of something new. The preacher that flew in was powerful and compelling.

You might think that the fruit of that tree looked great. That church had grown tremendously. The preacher was well known. His sermons were clear and powerful. Many lives had been changed through his ministry.

But things soon got weird. The pastor flew in Saturday night, spoke to no one, preached his sermon and flew home. He insisted that he be picked up from the airport in a black Mercedes. The people at the new church started to have ideas about how to more effectively reach people in their local culture. But those ideas were always rejected.

So what is the fruit we’re supposed to look at?

The fruit of the tree is not its accomplishments. It’s not its reputation or achievements. The revelation of God is clear. He is not looking for productive people. He’s looking for fruitful followers. On a tree, the fruit is what happens slowly over time, naturally and organically.

Our fruit is what grows out of our lives naturally over time. It’s how our life spills out into the world. Paul describes it this way in Galatians 5:22-23a, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.”

There's no mention of how large your church grows or the skill of your preaching. There's nothing about how well you lead a Bible study or how much theology you know. The fruit is not about church attendance or how many people you tell about Christ or how much money you give away.

The fruit of your life has to do with your relational character. All of those words in Galatians have to do with how you treat people. Not just how nice you are to your acquaintances. How do you treat the people who know you best—parents, children, spouses, long-time friends?

How do you handle conflict? Are you gentle when wronged? Are you patient with other's weaknesses? Are you faithful in tedious relationships? Are you willing to work hard for peace?

For the black Mercedes pastor, no one even had a chance to know the fruit. He wasn't ever around long enough. That behavior should have been a huge red flag. But you can't hide rotten fruit forever, and soon enough, that church plant which had grown to thousands grew disillusioned and fell apart.

False prophets look good when you first meet them. They might seem to have all the answers. At first, things are going well enough that you ignore the little concerns you have about how they treat people. But rotten fruit begins to smell, and easy answers eventually disappoint.

So how do you distinguish false prophets? Look at their relational character.

Relational character takes time to evaluate. When I planted my seeds as a kid, I thought the seeds were watermelon seeds. I've since looked up Brussels sprout seeds, and I'm not sure how I could have gotten confused. Even the green shoots which came up looked like watermelon plants to me. Again, if I had known better, I could have figured it out. But it was when the fruit finally grew that I could tell something was wrong.

So how do you know whether I speak for God?

Get to know me. Now, to be honest, that's a terrifying invitation. I'd much rather point you to my resume—my educational background, maybe some of my meager accomplishments. Or, to how many people I know or for how long I've been at the church. I'd feel so much better if you evaluated me by those things.

But it's the life of the prophet where the fruit appears, and fruit takes a while to recognize. That's a huge part of our philosophy of ministry here at PBC. We are not flashy. We are not professionals who base our authority on our degrees or our accomplishments. We are all members, one of another, trying our best to serve the church—this imperfect collection of people following Jesus in Silicon Valley.

You have hundreds of voices available to listen to: books you can read, sermons you can stream, podcasts you can listen to. I'm not saying that any one of those voices is a false prophet, but it's hard to tell when you don't know the people.

Jesus gave us a test for false prophets that requires relationship and time. That's where the deepest ministry happens: in an everyday relationship over a period of time. We minister one to another as we walk with God and follow Jesus. We have to know each other to really speak truth into our lives. Only someone you don't know can deceive you for any length of time. Eventually, you see their fruit.

Jesus starts by warning us against people who would deceive us. Then he moves to a different kind of deception—not people who deceive others, but people who deceive themselves. This is where his words get the most challenging for us.

Knowing Jesus

In last week's passage, Jesus spoke about what it looks like to enter the kingdom of heaven. He described the entrance to the kingdom of heaven as a narrow gate and a difficult way. Now he picks up on a similar theme.

Matthew 7:21-23:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 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 mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”

Wow, these are strong words—some of the strongest recorded words of Jesus. He describes a category of person with two qualifications: their words and their actions. These people refer to Jesus as “Lord” with their

words. Their activities are described with three phrases: prophesying, casting out demons, and doing mighty works—all in the name of Jesus.

If we were simply to look at these two things, they sound pretty good. The early church rallied around the simple declaration, “Jesus is Lord.” When Jesus sent out his disciples, he gave them a list of what to do which pretty closely mirrors these activities.

But Jesus tells these people to depart from him and calls them “workers of lawlessness.” What are they missing?

Jesus points to two things. First, he says that the one who “does the will of my Father who is in heaven” will enter the kingdom of heaven. And at the end, he says “I never knew you.” So we’re left with these two critical things. This is what it means to live in the kingdom of heaven.

You know Jesus and you do the will of the Father.

At face value, this passage can be discouraging, even unsettling. Am I really a Christian? How do we know if we are in the kingdom of heaven? Jesus seems to be talking about people who are self-deceived. They think they are in, but they have it wrong. Does this describe me? I call Jesus Lord, and I try to do things in his name. Am I missing something?

In reality, Jesus is describing something that is at the same time far easier and far more difficult than we often realize. The apostle John quotes Jesus in John 6:29 as saying, “This is the work of God: that you believe in him whom he has sent.” So these two things can really be summarized by the first thing.

It’s all about knowing Jesus.

Once again, we get back to relationship. We can tell when others are deceiving us through relationships with them over time. And we can tell if we’re deceiving ourselves if we don’t actually have a relationship with Jesus.

For some of you, Jesus’ words should cause you to look a little more closely at your life. Maybe you are deceiving yourself. Maybe you’re satisfied with outward displays of obedience. Maybe you say the right words and try to do some good things, but your heart is far from dependent upon God. These words should challenge you. Do you really know Jesus?

For others, these same words should be immensely comforting. I know that many of you feel like you aren’t doing enough. You want to do more. You want your lives to look differently. You aren’t satisfied with your faithfulness. You feel like God isn’t happy with you.

For you, these words can affirm you and give you peace. Knowing Jesus is a lot easier than working hard to live up to some standard that you think you need to meet in order to be okay. It’s not about doing more or adding another commitment to your schedule. It’s simply about knowing Jesus and believing in his work on your behalf.

It’s like breathing. Never have I looked at my schedule and thought, “When am I going to find the time to inhale oxygen during my crazy day?” I’m going to breathe all day. Now, my breath might be different depending on what’s going on. I’ll breathe differently when I’m busy than when I’m relaxed. But I’m always breathing.

It’s the same with knowing Jesus. We know Jesus in the midst of everything we do in our lives. He’s always there. We experience his presence differently during different seasons, but Jesus is always there with us.

Here’s how the apostle Paul states it in Philippians 3:8, “Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”

It really is this simple. It’s not about how much you do. It’s not about how spiritual you sound. Knowing Jesus is not a super-spiritual elevated state. You can know Jesus with any education level. You can know Jesus at any age. You can know Jesus in suffering and in failure. You can know Jesus in success and prosperity.

How do you know Jesus? The same way you know anyone. You talk to him. You read his words. You invite him into your life. This Sermon on the Mount has given us rich ways to know Jesus deeper. As you get to know Jesus in your life, you will call him Lord and you will do powerful things in his name. Knowing Jesus comes from the depth of your heart relationship with him.

As a fellow traveler along this narrow path, I can echo the words of the apostle Paul. Nothing is as valuable as knowing Jesus. I’ve been richly blessed in community, in marriage, in family, in stability. But nothing compares to knowing Jesus.

Do you know Jesus? Do you want to know him more? Then take the next step.

Conclusion

As a child, I was so excited to grow my own watermelons. I couldn't wait for that delicious fruit. But I did not get what I expected. Instead, I got what seemed to me the worst possible substitute: Brussels sprouts instead of watermelon.

This morning Jesus has warned us against two kinds of deception. The first is to beware of people who would deceive us. These are people who claim to speak for God. They make it look easy. They seem to offer you something, but instead, they take.

Jesus gives us a test which requires us to look at their lives and see how they relate to people over time. Do they look like Jesus?

Jesus also warns us against deceiving ourselves. We are masters at self-deception. Just as false prophets proclaim peace in the midst of conflict, we can tell ourselves that everything is fine, when it is not. Do you know Jesus? This should be a challenge to some and comfort to others.

As Jesus gets to the end of the Sermon on the Mount, his words get more and more focused. He makes it clear that hearing this sermon is useless if you don't put his words into practice. As we wrap up the Sermon on the Mount in the next few weeks, we'll hear about houses built on sand and words not put into practice.

The power of the Sermon on the Mount does not lie in hearing it. The power is found when you put it into practice. The goal is not only to walk away inspired on a Sunday morning, but to change your life in the in-between—the hidden places of your soul and in your daily experience with Jesus.

There are many voices in the world, but there is really only one you can be sure to listen to. Jesus is the one true voice. His life bears perfect fruit. Listen to him. Trust him. Know him. Live the incredible journey of life in the kingdom of the heavens!