

What To Watch For: Character

"You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they?" Matthew 7:16

Because false teachers and prophets are by nature deceptive, it is at times difficult to judge their fruit. But when we use Scripture as our test we will find that there are really three tests of character that we can use in order to discern whether or not a teacher is false or true.

The first test is the test of a man's character. A person's character – their inner motivations, standards, loyalties, attitudes and ambitions eventually show through in what he or she does and how he or she acts. This is why John the Baptist challenged the scribes and Pharisees in Luke 3:8 to **"bring forth fruits in keeping with repentance."** The way they lived was in open denial of their claim that they loved and served God. When the crowd asked John what good fruit was, he said in verse 11, **"The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise."** In verse 13 John said to the tax-gatherers, **"Collect no more than what you have been ordered to."** What John was saying is that if a person is really saved, if they are genuinely repentant and they truly trust and love God then they will also love and help their fellow man.

It is essential to understand that no one is saved by good works, but every person who has been saved is saved *for* good works. Ephesians 2:10 says, **"For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them."** In Colossians 1:10 it says that we are to **"walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God."** In John 15:8 Jesus said, **"My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples."** Verse 10 says, **"If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love."**

As with everything that is godly and righteous, fruit-bearing begins in the heart. In Philippians 1:11 it says, **"Having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God."** In Galatians 5:22-23 we see what the result of a transformed heart is, **"the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."**

A man or woman who really belongs to Jesus Christ and who is called by God and given God's message will give evidence of **"good fruit"** both in their actions and in their attitudes. A person who does not belong to God, especially a false teacher who claims to be God's messenger, will sooner or later manifest the **"bad fruit"** that the **"bad tree"** of their sensual life inevitably produces.

A false teacher can hide their **"bad fruit"** for a time with all the trappings of church culture, Biblical knowledge, and evangelical lingo. They can cover it by belonging to reputable Christian organizations, associating with Christian leaders, and by talking about godly topics. But how they talk, act, and react when no one from the Christian community is around will eventually expose their true loyalty and convictions. What is in their heart will eventually come forth and corrupt theology will produce a corrupt life. You see false teaching and perverted living are inseparable, and it eventually comes out.

In 2 Peter 1:5-8 Peter tells us that the true and mature believer will be growing in faith, moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love.

"Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."

2 Peter 1:5-

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On the other hand those who are false teachers and deceivers are going to reveal themselves as well. 2 Peter 2:18-19 says, **"For speaking out arrogant words of vanity they entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality, those who barely escape from the ones who live in error, promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved."** Verses 20-22 shows us what the result of this is for those who follow these false teachers: **"For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them."**

Unless a person who claims to be God's spokesmen gives evidence that their deepest motivations and their pattern of life is to honor, glorify, and magnify God, and to grow in humility, holiness, and obedience, we can be sure that God has indeed called them. If however, they are motivated by money, prestige, recognition, popularity, power, sexual promiscuity, and selfishness, they do not belong to Jesus Christ. If they are proud, arrogant, resentful, egotistical, and self-indulgent, they clearly are false teachers. The true test is best given in the words of Jesus in John 7:18, **"He who speaks from himself seeks his own glory; but He who is seeking the glory of the One who sent Him, He is true, and there is no unrighteousness in Him."**

Martin Lloyd-Jones wrote: *"A Christian can generally be known by his very appearance. The man who really believes in the holiness of God, and who knows his own sinfulness and the blackness of his own heart, the man who believes in the judgment of God and the possibility of hell and torment, the man who really believes that he himself is so vile and helpless that nothing but the coming of the Son of God from heaven to earth and His going to the bitter shame and agony and cruelty of the cross could ever save him, and reconcile him to God – this man is going to show all that in his personality. He is a man who is bound to give the impression of meekness; he is bound to be humble. Our Lord reminds us here that if a man is not humble, we are to be very wary of him. He can put on a kind of sheep's clothing, but that is not true humility, that is not true meekness. And if a man's doctrine is wrong, it will generally show itself at this point. He will be affable and pleasant, he will appeal to the natural man and to the things that are physical and carnal; but he will not give the impression of being a man who has seen himself as a hell-bound sinner, and who has been saved by the grace of God alone."*

It is almost always true that false teachers attract unbelievers as well as nominal and carnal Christians. The false teacher and the false gospel they proselytize appeals to the natural man and the natural man carefully avoids anything that is offensive to man's fallen nature. The false prophet makes a point of being attractive, likeable, pleasant, and to giving no offense to anyone.

No person, no matter how clever and deceitful, can forever hide a character that is rotten and does not match up to God's standards. John Calvin said, *"Nothing is more difficult to counterfeit than virtue."* Virtue demands too much. It demands more than any person has the ability to accomplish within themselves. So when God's divine provision and power is not present in a person's life they cannot fake it indefinitely.

