

# Discernment in the Kingdom

Kingdom Living #15 - Pastor Gary Combs - July 6, 2025 - Matthew 7:15-20

**INTRO:** Good morning church! Today, we're continuing our sermon series today entitled, KINGDOM LIVING. It's an expositional study of Christ's Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 5-7. Many have described it as the greatest sermon ever preached by the greatest preacher who ever lived.

Throughout the Sermon on the Mount Jesus has been teaching us what it looks like to live as citizens of the Kingdom of God, but as He brings the sermon to a close, He shifts His focus. He ends His sermon with a call and a warning: a call to choose His kingdom and life and a warning to avoid the world's kingdom and death.

Last week, we saw how He speaks of two different gates or paths and how one leads to life, but the other leads to destruction (7:13-14). Now today, Jesus moves the discussion from warning about the path of destruction to warning against the prophets of destruction. He calls them wolves in sheep's clothing. As Dr. Akin writes:

"Just as it matters which spiritual and moral road we travel, it also matters which spiritual teachers we listen to and which moral guides we follow." (Daniel L. Akin, *Exalting Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount*, p.154).

Looks can be deceiving, so we must pay close attention. In order to discern whom to follow, Jesus tells us to watch how teachers act toward God's people and to examine the fruit of their teaching. In the end false prophets will be exposed as those who walked on the wide road that leads to destruction. (7:15-20).

**Need:** Why do we need this warning? Because not everyone who claims to speak for God is from God. Some are deceivers in disguise. And not only are they deceptive, they are dangerous. For claiming to be guides to the narrow gate, they actually lead people to the wide gate and destruction.

Indeed, there are more false teachers and teachings and cults available today, found on so-called places of worship, TV, YouTube, and other social media, than any other time in history. Yet, we shouldn't be surprised. For Jesus and all the apostles warned of this, and especially of its increase in the last days. "Jesus warns of its increase in Matthew 24:23-26. Paul will do it in Acts 20:28-30; 2 Corinthians 11:3-4,12-15; and 2 Timothy 3:1-9. Peter will do it in 2 Peter 2:1-22. John will do it in 1 John 2:18-23; 4:1-6; and 2 John 7-11. Jude will dedicate his short, twenty-five-verse book to the subject." (Akin, p.154).

**Trans:** What we need is spiritual discernment. If we don't exercise spiritual discernment, we risk being led astray. Without discernment, we could follow someone who ultimately leads us away from Christ and into destruction.

**BODY:** In Matthew 7:15-20, Jesus warned His Kingdom citizens to beware false prophets by being spiritually discerning of their fruit. As kingdom citizens, we can exercise spiritual discernment to recognize false prophets. How can we exercise spiritual discernment to recognize false prophets? Jesus gives three ways we can exercise spiritual discernment to recognize false prophets.

**Read text:** Matthew 7:15-20 (ESV) <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 recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? <sup>17</sup> So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. <sup>18</sup> A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased 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 recognize them by their fruits."

## IN CHRIST WE CAN EXERCISE SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT BY:

### 1. Knowing the truth to spot the deception.

**EXP:** (15) Jesus begins with a strong warning: "Beware." False prophets come in disguise—dressed like sheep but inwardly wolves. They look like members of the flock but they are pretenders with predatory hearts.

**"Beware"** (15) (προσέχω, *prosechō*) (PAM) - be attentive to, take heed, be on guard. Watch out! How? It requires spiritual discernment. What's the difference? Discernment is a Spirit-filled, Spirit-led, evaluation rooted in truth and love; judgment is self-righteous, hypocritical condemnation, lacking mercy and humility.

**"False prophets"** (15) (ψευδοπροφήτης, *pseudoprophētēs*) - one who, acting the part of a divinely inspired prophet, utters falsehoods under the name of divine prophecies; a false prophet.

**"Sheep's clothing"** (15) (ἐνδύμασιν προβάτων, *endumasin probatōn*) - dresses as a sheep. Sheep represent believers. False teachers pretend to be part of the flock. They are pretenders and deceivers.

# Discernment in the Kingdom

Kingdom Living #15 - Pastor Gary Combs - July 6, 2025 - Matthew 7:15-20

**“Ravenous wolves” (15)** (λύκοι ἄρπαγες, *lukoi harpages*) - aggressively greedy or grasping, like ravenous wolves. They are both deceptive and extremely dangerous to the flock’s spiritual health.

**ARG:** Jesus warns us about the increase in false prophets in the last days:

Matthew 24:11 (ESV) And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray.

**Beware of man’s disguises as Satan himself disguises himself:**

2 Corinthians 11:13-15 (ESV) <sup>13</sup> For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. <sup>14</sup> And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. <sup>15</sup> So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.

**The Bereans compared Paul’s teaching to the Word to check his truthfulness:**

Acts 17:11 (NLT) And the people of Berea were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and they listened eagerly to Paul’s message. They searched the Scriptures day after day to see if Paul and Silas were teaching the truth.

**ILL:** Bank tellers aren’t trained to spot counterfeit bills—they’re trained to know the real thing so well that a fake is obvious. The more we know the voice of the Good Shepherd, the easier it is to detect a false one:

John 10:27 (ESV) My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.

**APP:** Are you immersing yourself in Scripture? Are you comparing what you hear to the Word of God? Don’t let someone’s charisma deceive you, measure everything by truth. Are you listening for Christ’s voice? **In Christ, we can exercise spiritual discernment by knowing the truth to spot the deception.**

## 2. Inspecting the fruit to expose the disease.

**EXP:** (16-18) Jesus says, “You will recognize them by their fruits” (16). Not their words, not their clothing, not their crowds, but their fruit. Agricultural illustration: Good trees bear good fruit. Bad trees bear bad fruit.

**“Recognize” (16)** (ἐπιγινώσκω, *epiginōskō*) - to know thoroughly; to know accurately, know well.

**“Fruit(s)” (16, 7x)** (καρπός, *karpos*) - fruit of plants. Metaph., product of, result, outcome. Fruit here means both character and influence. Over time, the teaching and lifestyle of a false prophet will show signs of spiritual disease—pride, greed, division, or moral compromise.

**“Grapes from thornbushes” (16)** (ἄκανθα, *akantha*) - thorn, bramble; bush, brier, a thorny plant.

**“Figs from thistles” (16)** (τρίβολος, *tribolos*) - a thistle, a prickly wild plant, hurtful to other plants.

**“Healthy tree” (17)** (ἄγαθός, *agathos*) - of good constitution or nature. Internal goodness. Good inside.

**“Bears” (17, 5x)** (ποιέω, *poieō*) - to produce, bear. That which it produces.

**“Good fruit” (17)** (καλός, *kalos*) - beautiful, excellent, good. External goodness. Appears good.

**“Diseased tree” (17)** (σαπρός, *sapros*) - rotten, putrefied; corrupted and no longer fit for use, worthless.

**“Bad fruit” (17)** (πονηρός, *ponēros*) - bad, of a bad nature: in a physical sense: diseased or blind; in an ethical sense: evil, wicked, bad.

**“Cannot bear” (18)** - Jesus restates His previous statement in the negative.

**ARG:** Paul gives some examples of bad fruit from false teachers in his instruction to Timothy:

1 Timothy 6:4-5 (NLT) <sup>4</sup> Anyone who teaches something different is arrogant and lacks understanding. Such a person has an unhealthy desire to quibble over the meaning of words. This stirs up arguments ending in jealousy, division, slander, and evil suspicions. <sup>5</sup> These people always cause trouble. Their minds are corrupt, and they have turned their backs on the truth. To them, a show of godliness is just a way to become wealthy.

# Discernment in the Kingdom

Kingdom Living #15 - Pastor Gary Combs - July 6, 2025 - Matthew 7:15-20

**We might also look at Paul's list of the "works of the flesh" as examples of bad fruit:**

Galatians 5:19-21 (ESV) <sup>19</sup> Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, <sup>20</sup> idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, <sup>21</sup> envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

**ILL:** Did you know that both thorns and thistles are symbols of the curse?

Genesis 3:17-18 (ESV) And to Adam he said, ...cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you...

Not only do thorns not yield grapes, they inflict pain. Not only do thistles not yield figs, they have spiky, sticky leaves and burrs that stick to you and get spread abroad to others.

**APP:** **Thorns and Thistles (False Teachings) of Our Day:**

**1. Prosperity Gospel / Word of Faith Movement** "God guarantees wealth, health, and success if you have enough faith or sow enough seed." False prophets exploit people's desire for comfort and blessing by offering promises God never made. Jesus promises trials (John 16:33), and Paul calls suffering a pathway to maturity (Romans 5:3-5).

**2. Hyper-Grace / Antinomianism** "Because of grace—repentance, obedience, or holy living aren't really necessary." True grace doesn't excuse sin—it empowers holiness. Titus 2:11-12 says grace teaches us to say "no" to ungodliness.

**3. Progressive Christianity** "The Bible is outdated in certain areas—especially about sin, sexuality, and judgment." False teachers may sound compassionate, but they compromise truth for cultural acceptance. God's Word is eternal, not evolving (Isaiah 40:8; Matthew 24:35).

**4. Self-Help Christianity / Moralistic Therapeutic Deism** "God exists to help you feel better, be nice, and live your best life now." A false gospel comforts the flesh. The true gospel crucifies it. Christianity is about dying to self (Luke 9:23), not self-improvement.

**5. Legalism / Performance-Based Religion** "God's love must be earned by strict obedience, rituals, or human effort." False religion builds ladders to God. The gospel says Jesus came down the ladder. Salvation is by grace through faith, not works (Ephesians 2:8-9).

**6. False Prophets Who Claim Special Revelation** "God told me..." followed by unverifiable or contradictory prophecies. True prophets exalt Christ and align with Scripture. False ones often exalt themselves. Deuteronomy 18:22 and 1 John 4:1 instruct us to test every spirit and prophecy. (Ex: LDS, JW)

**7. Denial of Christ's Exclusivity** "All paths lead to God; Jesus is a way, not the way." False prophets make the narrow road wide. Jesus says it's still narrow (Matthew 7:13-14). John 14:6—Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Him. (Ex: LDS, JW, Islam).

Don't just listen to what someone says—look at what they produce. What does their life reveal? What are their followers like? Are they and the people who follow them becoming more like Christ under their influence? **In Christ, we can exercise spiritual discernment by inspecting the fruit to expose the disease.**

## **3. Recognizing the end to avoid the destruction.**

**EXP:** (19-20) Jesus gives a sobering warning: "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (19). Being "cut down" might refer to their works being exposed and brought to nothing. And the "fire" refers to God's judgment.

"Cut down" (19) (ἐκκόπτω, *ekkoptō*) - to cut out, cut off: of a tree.

## Discernment in the Kingdom

Kingdom Living #15 - Pastor Gary Combs - July 6, 2025 - Matthew 7:15-20

“**Thrown into the fire**” (19) (πῦρ βάλλεται, *pur balletai*) - to scatter, to throw, cast into fire. This mirrors Christ’s warning of how the “wide gate” leads to “destruction” (13), which speaks of “eschatological ruin—final rejection by God and exclusion from His presence.” (D. A. Carson)

“**Thus**” (20) (ἄρα, *ara*) - therefore, thus, in conclusion, truly. Ultimately, “you will know them by their fruits.”

**ARG:** John the Baptist made the same statement. It has both a historical (*Israel fell in 70 AD*) and spiritual meaning (*the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Jewish leaders rejected Christ*).

Matthew 3:10 (ESV) Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

**Peter says that false teachers will face judgment and their heresies will lead others to destruction:**

2 Peter 2:1-3 (NLT) <sup>1</sup> But there were also false prophets in Israel, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will cleverly teach destructive heresies and even deny the Master who bought them. In this way, they will bring sudden destruction on themselves. <sup>2</sup> Many will follow their evil teaching and shameful immorality. And because of these teachers, the way of truth will be slandered. <sup>3</sup> In their greed they will make up clever lies to get hold of your money. But God condemned them long ago, and their destruction will not be delayed.

**ILL:** Willow tree at Papaw’s that was struck by lightning and found to be rotten inside ...

**APP:** Don’t be indifferent about who you follow. There’s too much at stake. Eternity is on the line. Stay rooted in Christ. Follow faithful shepherds who bear gospel fruit. **In Christ, we can exercise spiritual discernment by recognizing the end to avoid the destruction.**

**CONCLUSION:** Jesus ends this portion of the Sermon on the Mount with a serious word of warning. Not all who sound spiritual are safe. Wolves wear wool. Thornbushes don’t bear grapes. Thistles don’t grow figs. And diseased trees get cut down and burned.

So let me ask:

Are you spiritually discerning?

Do you measure what you hear by the truth of God’s Word?

Are you watching the fruit—not just the words—of those you follow?

Don’t be a passive follower—be a discerning citizen of the Kingdom.

Stay close to the Shepherd. Know His voice. Trust His Word. And when in doubt, inspect the fruit.

Let’s pray.