

A Sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Trinity, July 26, 2026

The Epistle, Romans 8:12-17 - The Gospel, St. Matthew 7:15-21

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In the gospel, Jesus said, "Beware of false prophets which come to you in sheep's clothing." . . . "You shall know them by their fruits." The word fruits (or fruit) is a common Bible word. In the Old Testament it is mostly agricultural. Fruit is what a planted seed produces when it grows to maturity. Fruit refers not only to sugary things like apples and oranges. Vegetables and grain are also fruit. Fruit can also be human. Psalm 123 calls children "the fruit of the womb."

The organic and biological fruit of the Old Testament becomes the central metaphor for the spiritual life in the New Testament. The seed of new life in Christ is planted in our hearts through the gift of the Holy Spirit in baptism. This seed of life grows as we persevere in faith and practice horticultural disciplines. We remove weeds by confession and by saying no to our disordered desires. New life in the Spirit is fed by the Bread of Life, by prayer, and by God's word.

Jesus told the parable of the Sower and Seed in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke to explain his ministry. The good seed of God's word takes root in faithful hearts and produces "fruit with patience" (Lk. 8:15). Jesus made the same point in John's Gospel when he said, "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5).

Thus, both false prophets and genuine disciples are revealed by what their lives produce. This leads to a question. What distinguishes the good fruit of the Spirit from the bad fruit of the false prophet? We can say that the Spirit produces good things and the false prophet bad things, but this distinction is not always clearly evident in the short term. Things that look good can be done with evil motives. For example, someone might do something good for you because that person wants you to buy something from them. Some people do good things mainly to get their name on a donor's plaque and enhance their reputation.

Good deeds can also be motivated by fear and guilt. The preacher can motivate us to give by warning us that a failure to minister to the least of Christ's brethren will place us on the left hand with the goats in judgment (see Matt 25:40). Or, he could shame us to good works by highlighting how privileged we are in comparison with 90 plus percent of the world. But fear and guilt cannot produce the fruit of the Spirit.

In a culture that values everything economically, there is a temptation to reduce the fruit of the gospel to the monetary value of giving or the hours of labor expended. But Jesus said that the widow who gave two coins gave more than those who made larger donations. She gave all that she had, while the lavish gifts of the rich did not put a dent in their wealth (21:1-4). And, in the kingdom, the labor of prayer has unquantifiable value.

Now, clarification is needed here. Real good is experienced by recipients, even when gifts are given with faulty motives. As the head of a charitable organization once said, "If we waited for pure motives, we'd never get any work done"! None of us has completely pure motives—yet. Spiritual growth is marked by a growing purification of our motives. The

point is simply that money given or labor expended is not, in and of itself, the genuine fruit of the Spirit. As 1 Corinthians 13 says, "If I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing" (1 Cor. 13:3).

There is also the opposite defect. We express feelings of love and concern but not provide what a person actually needs. St. James aims at this when he writes, "If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled, without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?" (Jas. 2:15-16).

Jesus said that our fruit reflects our interior health. As the ESV translation of a verse in the gospel says, "Every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit" (Matt. 7:17). Thus, if we live in the grace of God; if we experience forgiveness and healing through our life of prayer, we will naturally share our experience with others through good works motivated by love.

Conversely, if we do not live in the grace of God; if we neglect prayer, sacrament, and community, our inward "dis-ease" will be manifested in our outward behavior. We will care too much about what others think. Fear, anxiety, and concern for appearances will tempt us to do things that protect us or look good but do not reflect love from a pure heart.

The fruit of the Spirit can only be produced by lives that are connected to the Father in Jesus through the Spirit in a life of prayer. This highlights the most important fruit of the Spirit: A growing interior experience of conversion of the heart. As we live a life of prayer, the Holy Spirit makes us aware of our faulty motives in order to purify them. The Spirit leads us into confession and renews our experience of grace and forgiveness. Then the Spirit moves us outward to love others with a purer heart.

Purity of heart is revealed by our motives. God loves us because he is love. He can't do anything but love because that is who he is. Genuine love does good because the heart that loves is good. As we grow in our experience of love in Christ, we grow in the fruit of doing what is good without regard to the results, recognition, or reward we get for it. Love is the fruit of our new and true identity as children of God in Christ.

In contrast, the false prophet gives because he wants something. What he gives to you will always serve the end of what he wants from you. He is not connected to the source of love; therefore, he cannot love. The false prophet is characterized by a lack of self-reflection and humility. He will be unable to stay connected to the community in the give and take of love. He will be a source of division not unity. He will never be wrong—but he will know how to pretend to be sorry to get what he wants! He will often be offended and have many complaints. These are some of his fruits.

This is why the first work of the Christian life is prayer and not simply a rush to do good things. As we stay connected to God, both in our prayer and in our connection to each other in the Body of Christ, God does his work of interior change in our hearts. This produces the outward fruit of good works motivated by love. This is what distinguishes the genuine disciple from the false prophet. As Jesus said, "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn. 13:35).