

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## How to Identify a False Teacher, Part 2

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In our first [article](#), we discussed the first step in identifying false teachers. To develop the necessary discernment to unmask deceivers, we must recognize that false teachers often look like genuine followers of Christ. False teachers come as wolves dressed in sheep's clothing. They arise from within the church and disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their deceptive appearance aids them in carrying out their destructive desires. Therefore, we must be on the alert, knowing that not everyone who claims to follow Christ necessarily is a genuine disciple. But how can we discern who is true and who is false?

Jesus gives a second step to identify a false teacher in Matthew 7:16-20. He describes false teachers using the agricultural metaphor of an orchard. Trees in an orchard are planted to produce quality fruit the owner of the orchard can enjoy, share, and sell. However, not every bush or tree produces good fruit. Some bushes are thorn bushes, and others are thistles (Matthew 7:16). These kinds of bushes and trees produce what Jesus describes as "bad fruit" (Matthew 7:17). Furthermore, the only thing thorn bushes and thistles *can* produce is bad fruit. Bad trees never produce good fruit; conversely, good trees never produce bad fruit. A fig tree, for example, will not produce poisonous berries.

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Jesus applies this imagery to His warning against false teachers. He says, “So then, you will know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:20). We can identify false teachers by looking at what “fruit” they produce. What, then, does Jesus mean by fruit? What specifically are we to look for in the life of a church leader, pastor, or any other professing Christian seeking to influence us? Let me suggest three types of fruit we should examine to discern if someone is a false teacher.

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The first kind of fruit we should inspect is the product of a leader’s life. This meaning for fruit is found in Matthew 3:8, when John the Baptist told the Pharisees and Sadducees to “bear fruit in keeping with repentance.” John was warning them to turn away from their ungodly ways and to walk in genuine godliness. Israel’s religious leaders embodied the characteristics of false teachers, and their hypocritical and self-righteous behavior was a clear indictment that their character did not bear good fruit.

While everyone sins, including the most godly and sincere Christian leaders, the false teacher sins as a way of life. The fruit of his life is habitually contrary to the Word of God. In 2 Peter 2:15 such false teachers are described as “forsaking the right way, they have gone astray, having followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness.” Peter describes the greedy way of Balaam, the prophet for hire, whose entire ministry seems to be based on financial gain. False teachers are those whose lives are marked by a love for the world and the things in the world rather than a sincere love for God.

When we consider Jesus’ warning about bad fruit coming from bad trees, the first aspect of a leader’s fruit we should consider is his life. Do we see a genuine love for Christ and His people that issues in a servant’s attitude and a holy pattern of living? Those who are false disciples cannot sustain their show of holiness for an extended period of time, and who a person truly is on the inside eventually must come out. False teachers are exposed by their ungodly lives.

The second kind of fruit we should inspect is the product of a leader’s lips. There are two aspects to looking at what a leader says. The first involves his doctrine. When John warned his readers against false teachers in 1 John 4:5, he said, “They are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them.” Speaking as from the world refers to speaking in accordance with the world’s system of beliefs. In verse 3, speaking from the world means to deny that Jesus is the Christ who came from God. The lips of false teachers inevitably speak false doctrine. They twist and distort Scriptures to their own ends, to serve their nefarious purposes. Peter called such false teachers “the untaught and unstable,” and he said that they distort the Scriptures to their own destruction.

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Because people are so ignorant of the Word of God today, corrupting the Scriptures is not difficult to get away with. To identify false teachers requires that hearers be Bereans who study the Bible for themselves to ensure they have a proper understanding of the intent of God's Word. Only by becoming thoroughly familiar with the text and meaning of Scripture can believers recognize when someone is twisting the Scriptures from their divinely-intended interpretation.

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Not only should we consider the doctrine of someone teaching God's Word, but we also should consider their speech in the normal course of life. Tragically, it is common today for Christians, even those in positions of leadership, to use foul language or engage in coarse joking. Scripture is clear that such language is unworthy of any follower of Christ. Proverbs 17:20 says, "He who has a crooked mind finds no good, and he who is perverted in his language falls into evil." Ephesians 5:4 commands, "And there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks." Paul charged Titus to be an example to all believers by maintaining pure doctrine and being "sound in speech which is beyond reproach" (Titus 2:7-8). Godly leaders are diligent to ensure that whatever comes out of their mouths honors the Lord, whether they are speaking in an official capacity as a preacher or teacher of God's Word or having private conversations with friends and family. The fruit of a person's lips help identify whether that person is a false teacher.

Finally, we should inspect the fruit that is the product of a teacher's leadership. What kind of disciples does a leader produce? Jesus said, "Everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher" (Luke 6:40). When we follow someone's leadership, we put ourselves under that person's influence. Does a teacher's influence lead us to greater love for Christ and His Word, greater obedience to His commands, and greater love for His people? Or does a teacher's influence lead us away from Scripture, make us dependent upon the teacher rather than upon Christ and His Word, or influence us toward ungodly speech, attitudes, and behavior?

Because influence often takes time to shape us, we might not always be able to discern immediately if someone's influence on us is moving us toward or away from godliness. That is especially true of subtle false teachers who initially will want to appear as if they are servants of righteousness. We would be wise, therefore, to consider not only how a teacher's influence is shaping us but how their influence has shaped others. Do those who have listened to their teaching or who have followed their example for years manifest the fruit of the Spirit? Do they have a deep understanding of and love for Scripture? Do they live in such a way that it is evident they submit themselves to the commands of Christ? If people who have been listening to a certain preacher or teacher for awhile are self-willed, arrogant, doctrinally confused, worldly, immoral, legalistic, or fleshly, that is a

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flashing warning sign that the teacher is a false teacher. Genuine disciples of Christ who teach and preach Christ's Word produce humble, obedient, holy followers of Christ.

The second step to examining if someone is a false teacher is to look at their fruits. We can examine their fruits in three specific areas: their lives, their lips, and their leadership. If we see bad fruit in these areas, that is a sure sign that someone is a bad tree, a false teacher, a wolf who has come among God's flock in sheep's clothing. We do well to avoid such people as these.



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