

## A tree is known by its fruit

"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves. By their fruits ye shall know them." (Mt 7:15)

Wolves want to eat you. False prophets, then and now, are distinguished by three things: they want your women, they want your money, and they want your adulation. Especially do they want your adulation. The false prophet is not necessarily the pastor who is incompetent, nor the pastor who "fell." Anyone can fall given the right amount of temptation and personal weakness. And some pastors may not be very competent, at least in their current position. They are not "false," just probably misplaced. No, the distinguishing characteristic of the false prophet is that he draws disciples after HIMSELF. The true prophet, the true pastor, is one who directs his people to the Lord Jesus Christ so they become His disciple!

Jesus taught His disciples to beware of false leaders, knowing that such wolves in sheep's clothing would arise from within their ranks to draw disciples after themselves. But He did not belabor their identification. He simply said, "By their fruits ye shall know them." A good tree produces good, edible, nourishing fruit. A bad tree produces bad fruit. Bad trees are hacked down and used for firewood. By the obvious results of their lives and ministry, Jesus was saying, His disciples would be able to recognize them. But because they are dressed up like "sheep," the identification may take a little while.

One of the reasons I am such a big fan of Dr. Dallas Willard is because I had the privilege of knowing him personally (those who read this column know I often quote him). For a few years when we lived in Southern California, Dallas was willing to act as a mentor to me. Not only did I have access to his wonderful writings, but I got to know the man personally. He is the real deal. I am happy to say that I am a disciple of Dallas Willard, to the extent that he has helped me become a disciple of Jesus Christ. One incident in particular impressed me about Dallas. He and I were meeting for lunch to talk about the relation between spirit, soul, mind, and emotions. His wife Jane, a professional counselor, also



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joined us at the restaurant to learn about the topic. Now think about that for a minute. Here is a man's wife, coming to join us so that she can learn from her husband! Granted, that says a lot about Jane. But it also says a lot about Dallas, that he is the kind of man his wife wants to learn from! By their fruit you shall know them.

There was a time when I believed that people should stick with their congregation, no matter what happened to them in terms of their pastor. Over the years I have come to realize how important the pastor is to the spiritual well-being of the congregation. Granted, some people leave congregations for the most ridiculous of reasons. Pastors are often removed from their pulpit for reasons that have nothing to do with the gospel. But I will say that if the pastor is not leading his people in the way of Jesus Christ, it is time to do something about that.

What type of "good fruit" will be evidenced by a true prophet, a true pastor? First and last, Jesus Christ is being lifted up and honored. And that happens in a way in which the people are lovingly encouraged to follow Him. All pastors mess up at times, but overall, the climate established by his leadership is one of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, GENTLENESS, and self-control. In other words, the fruit of the Holy Spirit as mentioned in Galatians 5:22-23.

I emphasize gentleness, because that is the distinguishing characteristic of Jesus' work with people. "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am GENTLE and humble of

heart, and you will find rest for your souls." (Mt 11:28) A pastor leading in the Spirit and way of Jesus Christ will not be harsh with his people. There will be a proper balance between the preaching of Law and Grace. Too much law and the people will despair as they anxiously try to improve their lives by self-effort. Too much "grace" and the people will forget that the gate is narrow and the way hard that leads to life. (Actually, I don't believe you can preach too much grace. Grace, properly understood, always honors the Law and equips God's people to rely on grace as they discipline themselves under the kingdom authority of Jesus.)

Let's leave behind the fruit borne by our leaders and consider now the fruit of our own lives. Jesus made the startling statement, "Men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word." (Mt 13:36) Why? Because our words reveal what is in our heart. From the heart comes all the issues of life. "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit." (Mt 13:33)

How then do we make our "tree" good? First by recognizing the bad and crying out to God "make my tree good!" Second, by giving full attention to the engrafted new life of Jesus Christ. We structure our lives, not around TV, internet, movies, novels, and periodicals, but around spiritual disciplines. Solitude and silence, prayer and fasting, service and celebration, study and memorization of Scripture, giving and frugality. As we do these things, God will make our tree good. And the good fruit will then take care of itself.

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