

Matthew 7:15-23 • Deception

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Introduction

How do you feel when deception is uncovered? I mean, really uncovered. Not just suspected, but revealed. Think about that moment when you realize someone was lying to you, and to make matters worse, you know that they know you know. It's painful, unsettling, and makes you angry. A breach of trust, a wound to the heart. We feel violated, perhaps even foolish for having been so easily taken in.

But as unpleasant as that experience is, there's a worse feeling. Have you ever uncovered self-deception? Can you recall a time when you peeled back the layers of your own carefully constructed narrative and realized you were lying to yourself? It's a profoundly strange and disturbing experience to be simultaneously the victim and the villain at the same time. On the one hand, there might be a sense of liberation, a small victory in uncovering the truth, of finally facing reality. Yet, this is quickly overshadowed by a deep, sinking feeling of foolishness, of bewilderment that you could have believed the lie for so long. How could I have been so blind? So naive? So willing to embrace a comforting falsehood over a challenging truth?

In the closing verses of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus, with his trademark clarity and honesty, confronts us with both of these situations. He shines a light on the deceivers who seek to lead us astray and, more importantly, on the self-deceivers who unknowingly lead themselves down a destructive path. And within this passage, He gives us a powerful tool, a spiritual test, to uncover deception, whether it's from the world around us or the hidden corners of our own hearts.

Big Idea: The heart can't hide. That's the central truth Jesus wants us to understand today. People can cover up their true nature for a time. They can construct elaborate facades, carefully crafted personas designed to impress, to manipulate, to deceive. We, too, can hide behind a false sense of self, clinging to comforting illusions, burying uncomfortable truths, and convincing ourselves that we are somehow better, wiser, or more righteous than we actually are. But this hiding, this charade, cannot last forever. Sooner or later, the truth will emerge, the mask will slip, and the reality of the heart will be revealed. The question is, will it happen before it's too late to change?

Passage

Matthew 7:15-23, ¹⁵ Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. ²¹ Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² On that day many will say to me, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name? ²³ And then will I declare to them, I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness. ”

Deception v.15: Others Hiding Their Hearts from Us

Jesus begins with a stark warning: “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.” This isn’t some abstract, theoretical concern. The issue of false prophets and teachers, those who distort the truth for their own gain, is a recurring theme throughout the Old and New Testaments. We know that this was a very real and present danger in the early church, a significant problem at the time Matthew was writing his Gospel. People whose words sounded good but whose hearts held a wicked motive.

Jesus clarifies the danger these prophets pose by using a vivid and unsettling image: a wolf among sheep. Think about that for a moment. A wolf, by its very nature, is a predator, driven by instinct to hunt and devour. Sheep, on the other hand, are vulnerable, defenseless creatures, utterly dependent on their shepherd for protection. A wolf disguised in sheep’s clothing is a particularly insidious threat because it exploits trust, lulling the sheep into a false sense of security before striking.

The contrast between inward and outward righteousness is once again highlighted here. This theme runs like a thread through the entire Sermon on the Mount and, indeed, through much of Jesus’ teachings. It’s a direct challenge to the prevailing religious climate of his day, particularly the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. It’s fair to see the Pharisees as a type of “false prophet” that Jesus is talking about. They had convinced others with their external righteousness, their meticulous adherence to religious laws, their outward displays of piety that they were faithful and righteous, but Jesus knew their hearts were far from God. He understood that their rigid legalism and self-righteousness were often a mask for greed, ambition, and a desire for power. They wanted to harm God’s people for their own gain.

The question then becomes, how can we protect ourselves from these wolves in sheep’s clothing? How can we discern the true nature of those who seek to lead us, to teach us, to influence us? Jesus gives us a clear and practical answer: Judge them by their fruit.

The Heart Can’t Hide v. 16-20

“You will recognize them by their fruits,” Jesus says. “Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?” The analogy is simple, yet profound. Just as a plant is known by the fruit it produces, so too is a person known by their actions, their character, their behavior. The terms “good” and “bad” here indicate that Jesus is speaking about moral behavior. He isn’t talking about someone’s intelligence, their charisma, or their ability to perform impressive feats. He’s talking about the fundamental goodness or wickedness of their heart as it manifests in their daily lives; how they pray, give, fast, etc, all behaviors that Jesus had criticized in chapter 6.

Verses 17 and 18 state clearly the irrefutable rule of our spiritual nature: “So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit.” The fruit doesn’t *make* the tree; the tree makes the fruit. A pure, healthy heart will inevitably produce good behavior, acts of love, kindness, compassion, and justice. A corrupt, diseased heart will, with equal certainty, produce bad behavior: selfishness, greed, cruelty, and deceit.

It’s important to remember, as Matthew 12:33 indicates, that this is not a forced determinism. We are not simply puppets of our own nature, powerless to change. Jesus says later in Matthew’s gospel, *“Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit.”* How do we “make the tree good?” We can

ask for a new heart. We can confess our sins, turn away from our old ways, and invite God to transform us from the inside out. It is only through the power of the Holy Spirit that we can truly become the kind of people who consistently bear good fruit.

But here's a crucial point: Fruit takes time to mature, to develop, to fully manifest itself. This contrasts sharply with the "mighty works" described in verse 22, which could happen in a moment, a flash of spiritual power or insight. It may take months, even years, before we truly realize a person's true nature. We are looking for a marathon in morality, not a sprint; a consistent pattern of behavior, not isolated acts of spiritual power. Are they consistently kind, generous, and honest over a long period of time?

This tool, this principle of judging by the fruit, is effective on others, and on ourselves, but admittedly, it is far easier to use on others. We are often quick to spot the flaws in others, to scrutinize their motives, and to judge their actions. But when it comes to ourselves, we are often remarkably blind.

Self-Deception v. 21-23: Hiding Our Hearts from Ourselves

This brings us to the most sobering and challenging part of this passage: the reality of self-deception. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord, 'will enter the kingdom of heaven,'" Jesus declares, "but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."

The double confession, "Lord, Lord," is significant. It implies divinity! Every time we see "Lord, Lord" in the Greek Old Testament, it references God. Jesus has a very high view of himself here. He accepts being addressed as Lord and presents himself as the judge on the final day. These are not casual acquaintances or distant observers who are talking with Jesus. These are people who profess to be following Jesus and performing powerful works on his behalf. But their words are empty. Their profession of faith is not matched by their actions. They may *say* they love Jesus, but they don't *do* what He commands. They may *claim* to be His followers, but they are not truly submitting to His will.

These self-deceived individuals have done great works, even miraculous ones. "On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?'" The way their questions are constructed in the Greek implies a "yes" answer. Also, we see that Jesus does not refute their claims, denying the truthfulness of what they are saying. We must remember that there are other sources for supernatural abilities than God; we live in a spiritually charged world. The works listed are the very things Jesus's closest followers would be empowered to do in Matthew 10. Judas, the betrayer, could make similar claims to Jesus on the day of judgment. Judas performed miracles in the name of Jesus, but his heart was far from God.

Jesus doesn't "know" them. This is not a statement about ignorance, but intimacy. God used this language in the prophet Amos (3:2) to describe His special relationship with His people. He was "knowledgeable" of the other nations, but chose to have a special, covenantal relationship with Israel. In the same way, Jesus is saying that these people may have performed great feats in His name, but they never truly had a relationship with Him. They were never truly His.

Their self-deception leads to a destructive and terrifying surprise. “And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’” What a frightening image. To stand before the King of Kings, the Judge of all the earth, and hear those words: “I never knew you. Depart from me.” There are two surprises that can happen on the day of judgment. Some will be surprised that there is one. Others will be surprised at the outcome. Some will be surprised that heaven exists, while others will be surprised they are not going there. You don’t want to be in either of those groups.

Conclusion: Don’t Let Your Heart Hide

Don’t let your heart hide. Don’t be part of the second group Jesus talks about. Yes, being deceived by a false prophet is dangerous, but being self-deceived is much more dangerous. It’s easier to find the lie in others. It is tough to find it in yourself. What, then, are we to do? How do we avoid the trap of self-deception and ensure that our hearts are truly aligned with God’s will? Jesus gives us the answer: Look for the fruit. Examine your lives, your actions, your motives, and ask yourselves honestly: What kind of fruit am I producing? Am I consistently demonstrating love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22)? Or am I characterized by selfishness, pride, anger, bitterness, and a lack of compassion? Certainty is not found in words or works, but in fruit. In the consistent, unmistakable evidence of a transformed life.

Steps

I want to challenge you to take the “1 John Test.” John wrote his letter to assure his readers that their faith was genuine. Take some time this week and ask yourself some tough questions. John’s tests are quite simple. We can summarize his letter in two questions:

1. What do you believe (5:1-12)? Do you truly believe that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah, the Savior of the world? Is your faith rooted in the truth of the Gospel, or is it based on emotions, traditions, or cultural expectations?
2. Who do you love and obey (2:3 and 4:7-8)? Do you truly love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength? And do you love your neighbor as yourself? Are you actively seeking to obey God’s commandments and to live a life that is pleasing to Him?

Let us be a people who are committed to truth, both in our dealings with others and in our own hearts. Let us be willing to confront our own flaws, to repent of our sins, and to allow God to transform us into the people He created us to be. Let us not be deceived by false prophets, nor by our own self-deceptions. Instead, let us strive to bear good fruit, fruit that will last for eternity, fruit that will give evidence of a heart that is truly known by God.

Life Level Application

Head: Read Deuteronomy 13:1-6. What guidance is provided regarding false prophets, and how does this relate to the theme of identifying deceptive influences in our lives based on Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount?

Heart: Read Jeremiah 23:9-15. Reflect on the emotions God felt upon uncovering the deception of the prophets. How does this compare to your emotions when you recognize deception in others and yourself?

Hand: Read Psalm 139:23-24. Have you ever asked the Lord to search your heart and show you the sins that are deeply rooted there? When can you set aside time this week to do that? Who would you want to pray with you in that way?

Habit: How can you develop a habit of self-examination to avoid self-deception?

ANNOUNCEMENTS

First Steps Gathering | Sun. June 1 | After 9AM & 11AM Service | Fireside

Whether you are new to the area and looking for a church or exploring what it means to follow Jesus, this is a great place to start. Our First Steps Gathering happens on the 1st Sunday of each month. In 20 minutes, we would like to give you an overview of what it looks like to make Sonrise your church.

Father's Day Family Golf Tournament | Sat. June 14 | 6:30-11AM | Killarney West Golf Course

Come join us for golf and fun at Killarney West Golf Course, June 14th from 6:30 am to 11 am. Everyone Welcome! Lunch and prizes to follow the end of the round. Address: Killarney West Golf Course, 1275 NW 334th Ave, Hillsboro, OR 97124. Register on Church Center.

YA: Summer Bowling Night | Thurs., June 19 | 6:30 PM | SuperPlay in Beaverton

Young Adults (18-30): This Thursday, instead of the normal group, we will meet at the Church and van over to SuperPlay Bowling and Arcade! Sign up and bring a friend! For more information about this event or Young Adults, please contact Pastor Jacob at jacobh@isonrise.com.

Senior Ministry: Summer Evening BBQ | Fri., June 20 | 4-6PM | Dining Hall

Join us for our Summer BBQ in the Dining Hall! Games, and music! \$6 entry cost. Register through the Church Center App. or come see us in the lobby on June 1st and 8th!

Youth Summer Camp! | June 23-27 | Washington Family Ranch

Join us as we head back to Washington Family Ranch again with 5 other Portland area churches for an amazing week of fun, worship, and connection. Camp is June 23-27 so sign up right away as registration closes June 2nd!

Women's Min: Axe Throwing | Wed., June 25 | 6-8PM | Blue Ox in Hillsboro

Join us at Blue Ox Axe Throwing on Wednesday, June 25th, from 6-8 PM for a fun evening! Whether you've thrown before or it's your first time, come ready to learn a new skill, share some laughs, and build meaningful connections. Bring your friends and enjoy delicious drinks and appetizers available for purchase, supporting a fantastic local business while you mingle and make new acquaintances. Register through Church Center.

Songs from this morning:

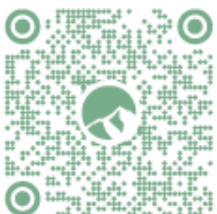
10,000 Reasons (Bless the Lord) - Matt Redman

Bless God - Brooke Ligertwood

I Give You My Heart - Reuben Morgan

The Stand - Hillsong United (Joel Houston)

In Christ Alone - The Worship Initiative



**For more info or to
register, visit isonrise.com
or explore events/groups
on the Church Center App.**

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