

A New Nature

“Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor figs from thistles, are they? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit; but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits.”

Matthew 7:15-20

According to these verses, regeneration is not only a *new birth*, but also the giving of a *new nature*. It is significant that the word “nature” is never used in this passage, though the concept is everywhere. This is because our “nature” is not something that we “have,” but a description of *who we are*. The proper concept of a “nature” is thus seen in our Lord’s words concerning the two *kinds* of trees—good trees and bad trees. These simple words are filled with glorious instruction concerning the realities of regeneration. Four major and far reaching truths are immediately evident here:

There are Only Two Kinds of Trees

According to the Lord Jesus Christ, a tree is either “good” or “bad.” Every man is either a “thorn bush” or a “grapevine,” a “fig” or a “thistle.” There is no “halfway” group—half fig and half thistle. Neither do we find in these verses any kind of “composite” tree. For a tree to have “two natures” at the same time is no more possible than for a tree to be *both* a thorn bush and a grapevine at the same time! Every man is either one or the other.

Trees Bear Fruit According to Their Nature

“Even so, every good tree bears good fruit; but the bad tree bears bad fruit.” (v.17) In other words, the kind of fruit *flows* from the kind (“nature”) of tree. Grapevines produce grapes; thistles produce thistles. Notice the absoluteness of our Lord’s statement:

“Every good tree produces good fruit.” Beloved reader, *let no one deceive you with empty words*¹ and *do not deceive yourself* into thinking that “some good trees bear *bad* fruit.” According to the Lord Jesus Christ it *never* happens! Though the Christian sins and stumbles in many ways,² his life is inevitably characterized by good fruit,³ not by “thorns and thistles.”⁴ Lest there should be any doubt about this, the Lord states it even more emphatically and specifically in v.18: “A good tree *cannot* produce bad fruit, nor *can* a bad tree produce good fruit.”

Just as a good tree cannot produce bad fruit, so we learn from the latter half of v.18 that it is not possible for an unregenerate man to produce *good* fruit. Apples can be tied on to a thorn bush externally, but they cannot be *produced* by the thorn bush. They cannot *flow out naturally* from what the thorn bush is in its essence. In v.19 we are told the fate of *every* tree that does not produce good fruit: “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

The Fruit of a Tree Reveals its Nature

The fruit of a tree does not *make* the tree what it is; it *reveals* what the tree is. The Lord Jesus sets forth this general principle in His warning about false prophets, “You will know *them* by their *fruits*.” (v.16) He then proceeds to teach about “good trees” and “bad trees” and concludes by repeating this great truth in v.20: “So then, you will know *them* by their *fruits*.”

The fruit of a tree does not *make* the tree what it is: No one becomes a grapevine by trying to produce grapes! Only a miracle from God can change us into what we are not! On the contrary, the fruit of a tree *reveals* what the tree is: The *production of grapes* is the *evidence* that this miracle from God has *already* taken place.

This principle is well illustrated by our Lord’s words to the Jews in John 8:47: “He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God.” Notice again that the fruit of a tree does not make it what it is, but instead reveals what it is. Many think that it is our response to “the words of God” that makes us to be “of God.” Jesus says the opposite. It is *because* we are “of God” that we respond properly to “the words

¹ Ephesians 5:5-6 ² James 3:2 ³ John 15:16 ⁴ Hebrews 6:8

of God.” The same truth is seen in John 10:26-27: “But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.” Once more our Lord makes it clear that men do not become sheep by believing, as many suppose, but they believe because they are sheep! Glorious miracle! Regeneration is the *giving* of a new nature!

Bad Trees Can Be Known

Contrary to much popular opinion, it *is* possible to distinguish between true and false believers. The Lord Jesus Christ gives us this assurance twice in the verses quoted above: “You *will* know them.” (v.16) “So then, you *will* know them.” (v.20) To the question, “*How* will we know them?” our Lord’s answer is simple and unequivocal: “By their fruits.”

This does not mean that we can walk into a Christian gathering and in five minutes know who all the true believers are. Many times those who appear for a while to be strong and genuine later fall away. Likewise, those whose conversions at first appear to be very weak and questionable are often found twenty years later sturdy and strong and still walking with God. Time must test the genuineness of every profession of faith. Nevertheless, the fact still stands that sooner or later—and many times sooner—the actual state of a false professor of Christ will become known: “But when the wheat sprang up and bore grain, then the tares became *evident* also.”¹

One of the first verses to be quoted in any discussion about true conversion is, “Do not judge lest you be judged.” (Matthew 7:1) Seldom does the person quoting this verse realize that it was spoken by the Lord only a few verses before His statements about knowing men by their fruits. (v.16) The commandment not to “judge” thus *cannot* be a commandment not to “discern.” In fact, our Lord warns us in v.6, “Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine.” How are we to know who these “dogs” and “swine” are, if we don’t “judge” in the sense of discerning? In fact, the Lord Jesus *commands* us to judge, though not “according to appearance,” but “with righteous judgment.”²

¹ Matthew 13:26 ² John 7:24

Good Trees are Representative of Good Men

“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. You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. The good man out of his good treasure brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth what is evil.”

Matthew 12:33-35

In these verses the four major truths of Matthew 7:15-20 are repeated by the Lord Jesus using slightly different terminology. In addition, a fifth major truth that is implicit in Matthew 7 finds its full expression here: According to the Lord Jesus Christ, it is theologically proper to speak of some men as “good” and some men as “evil.”

Christian, do you think of yourself as a “good man”? It is true, of course, that *apart from Christ* none of us has *any* goodness whatsoever. In that sense, “No one is good except God alone.”¹ But, beloved, *we are not apart from Christ!* The Bible describes Barnabas as “*a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.*”² And Paul speaks of the Roman Christians as “full of goodness.”³ If our theology allows no place for such language, it is not a Biblical theology. God has done a miracle in the heart of every Christian! *Regeneration is the giving of a new (good!) nature.*

¹ Mark 10:18 ² Acts 11:24 ³ Romans 15:14