**Matthew 7:15-20:** Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

In our Catechism question 151 is, to me, a rather important question and answer. It is a question that is found right at the very beginning of the First Article where one is beginning the study of God and what God is all about. That question says, “*What does it mean when a Christian says, ‘I believe in God?’”* There is a two-fold answer given and that answer is well worth looking at very closely.

First part of the answer is: *“When a Christian says, ‘I believe in God,’ it means he has learned to know the true God and accepts the Bible as God’s Word.”* There it is. Something very important stated! There is a True God! He is the God who created, preserves, and protects. He is the God who sent His Son to be our Savior from sin and who with His Son sends to the world the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has given us God’s Word, the Bible, and it is in and through the pages of the Bible that the truth of the True God is made known. Do you see how the two things are linked? To know the true God is to know the truth of the Bible.

But if you do not accept that the Bible is...IS…God’s Word and you believe you can pick and choose what you want to believe and when you want to believe it is that true faith in God? If you have decided that parts of the Bible here and there are false, then why isn’t all of it false? Here is an absolute truth that is just hard to get around: “To know the True God is to accept the Bible as God’s Word.”

Let’s just put that into perspective. Let’s talk mechanics for a moment. You are training to be a mechanic, a car mechanic. As you study the training manual, you have decided that certain parts you will believe and certain parts you will not! Soooo, instead of tightening wheel lugs to 95 lbs per square inch, you have decided they only need 4 lbs. of torque! It is not big deal right? I mean lug nuts are such a small part of the car. Making this change won’t hurt anyone and since it is what you believe, it is what you will do! But I can guarantee that every car where you work on the wheels and only use your 4 psi torque, wheels are going to fall off! Or let’s say you decide that putting gas in the radiator is the best thing instead of antifreeze. Small thing, but boy, the disaster that is going to cause is a horror! And if you knew this about the car mechanic you were going to go to, would you let him work on your car? Small things add up. Even small things can be dangerous. Not believing that God’s Word is the truth and the full revelation of God is a dangerous thing.

Then the second part of our answer. *“When a Christian says, ‘I believe in God,’ it means he trusts in God and is certain that all of God’s promises will be fulfilled.”* Now, if you reject portions of God’s Word how will you know what to trust and what not to trust? I am always amazed because people I know who do this, they almost always decide it is okay to trust that God will take them to heaven because that is convenient in their lifestyle but how about the truth of God’s Word that says God is going to send unbelievers, those who reject Jesus, who reject His Word, to eternal Hell? Even our text teaches that: “**cut down and thrown into the fire!”** Do you think that because you don’t trust what God’s Word says in this or that teaching that therefore God has deleted or will now change that teaching? If you are going to pick and choose what to believe and not to believe, then what? How do you decide that? Are you going to base your faith in God on what scientist say? (Note, I did not say “science” because I do not believe there is a problem with Christianity and science but rather with Christianity and what scientists insist we believe despite no real proof of what they say!!) If you are not going to trust everything in God’s Word, then how can you say you believe in God, the true God? Oh, yes, I do believe question 151 and its answers to be of great importance!

It is important because it is a truth that many people in today’s world try to ignore. People think they can do whatever they want to, things clearly contrary to God’s Word and still proclaim that they are Christian! Well it just isn’t so! God’s Word tells us it isn’t so. But that’s what people keep ignoring.

You do realize that what I am telling you is the lesson of our text for today? Let’s consider our lesson under this theme: **THE FRUITS OF FAITH. 1st. Context. 2nd. Good Fruit. 3rd. Bad Fruit.**

Note what our text says. **“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them.”** What is clear in these words is that Jesus is giving us a warning concerning the false teachers and preachers of the world. These are the people in our would who are involved with God’s Word not because they care about the Lord and what He says but rather because they are out to feed their bellies and have their earthly lives taken care of. A quick scan of God’s Word will lead you to hundreds of verses that warn and expose the false prophets. None of them is perhaps as simple and clear as this passage of Jesus.

He describes the false prophets as **“wolves in sheep’s clothing.”** Those words tell you they are dangerous and destructive to the flock of God. Those words tell you that you need to be on your toes, pay attention to what’s going on and being taught or you will be one of the sheep victims of the wolf. What happens to the sheep when the wolf attacks? That’s right, the sheep loses its life! And it has been established that wolves will kill just for the pleasure of it! You are not safe with wolves. What is most interesting is that Jesus gives the simplest of measurements for spotting wolves. He says, **“By their fruit you will recognize them.”**

In other words, what they do and what they say is the measure of what they are. Isn’t that simple? If someone is standing before you teaching something that is not clearly found in God’s Word or is doing something that is not clearly in line with God’s Word that should be a clue. It really is that simple. When someone is bending, twisting, ignoring or adding to God’s Word to prove their point, then you had better pay attention. What kind of prophet you are dealing with is clearly seen by what they do and teach.

Now at this point you might say, “That’s how to spot a false prophet!” Yes, it is, but what is also clear is that Jesus is going to apply this to all of us. He says, **“Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.”** What we find in these words is a shift in focus. We go from speaking of the false prophets to the people around those false prophets. If you are looking for grapes and your prophet keeps taking you to thornbushes or if you are looking for figs and your prophet keeps taking you to thistles, what does that say about you if you hang around? You aren’t finding any grapes / figs. You are getting cut up and scratched horribly. Why are you hanging around? Yep, I know you found a grape / fig on the ground of that thistle, and your shepherd told you to keep looking for more, but you mean you can’t tell, you can’t see that there are no grapes / figs! That’s why the “likewise” is found here. In other words the same measurement for false prophets can be applied to all followers of God. **“By their fruits you will know them.”**

Do note that this is in keeping with what God’s Word reveals in other places. In 2 John, verse 11 we hear this same truth. In speaking of false prophets there we are told, **“Anyone who welcomes him, shares in his wicked work.”** If we keep supporting and backing the false prophets, that is, if we keep going to the thornbush and thistle for our fruit, especially when you don’t find any, then recognize that you are responsible and filled with the same lies as the false prophet. You share in his wickedness or bad fruit.

How do you measure good fruit and bad? That really is easy too, but we as humans like to make everything more complicated than it really is. In Christian theology it would boil down to this: If you believe in Jesus, through Jesus all your sins are forgiven and you are counted as righteous, filled with good fruit before the Lord. But if you don’t believe in Jesus, then everything and anything you do is bad fruit and not acceptable to the Lord. What we need to do is make sure we understand what it means to believe and not believe.

Good fruit is what a believer has. Another phrase for good fruit is “good works.” A believer has good works. What is a good work? Our catechism defines it this way, ***“Whatever a believer does according to God’s Word out of love and thanks for all of God’s goodness.”*** In other words, in order to have good works one must first see the goodness and grace of God.

Go back to the question of the Catechism we spoke of at the beginning. The Believer is one who has had his soul awakened by the Holy Spirit, his blind eyes opened and his God hating heart soothed with God’s love. A believer grasps the wonder of Jesus dying and rising from the dead because in that he knows there is forgiveness, life and salvation. A believer is one who hears and trusts what God says even though the world says God is wrong. A believer doesn’t just confess all of this with his lips, a believer also lives all of this!

Here is the point Jesus is making in our text. A believer lives his faith. Again our Catechism, ***What change does the Holy Spirit work in me when he sanctifies me by the gospel?*** *Answer:* ***He leads me to hate sin and be eager to live a holy life.***Or consider this question of the Catechism, ***How do we keep God’s name holy?*** *Answer:* ***By teaching his Word in its truth and purity*** *and* ***when we as the children of God lead holy lives according to His Word.*** And again, ***What is God’s good and gracious will?*** *Answer:* ***That His Word be taught in its truth and purity to all people…that all people believe in Jesus and be saved…that we should live a holy life.***

I think the lesson is clear. You cannot persistently and brazenly do what is contrary to God’s Word and declare yourself a Christian. Or as Jesus so clearly says, **“By their fruit you will know them.”** Christians strive to do what is God pleasing. Christians strive to bring honor and glory to God, not because they have to, but because the Holy Spirit compels and motivates them to this good fruit.

What then should we say of the bad fruit? First, bad fruit is not just general sin. Bad fruit is a persistent action contrary to God’s Word. 2 Peter 2: **“There will be false teachers among you…Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute.”** Our Catechism summarizes for us this way, ***How is God’s name dishonored among us?*** Answer: ***When anyone teaches contrary to God’s Word…when anyone lives contrary to God’s Word.***

Again, don’t get confused. Let’s imagine that we are all apples. Now because of our sinful foolishness we can get bruised. But the good apple turns to God in repentance, stops that which causes the bruising, and realizes that for Jesus’ sake his sin is forgiven. The good apple is motivated to hear, follow and obey Christ because of the goodness and grace of God.

The bad apple because of sinful foolishness also gets bruised. But the bad apple likes it. The bad apple says this is fun and God’s Word is so old fashioned. The bad apple, though called upon to repent, has the attitude either verbally or in action, that there is nothing wrong with what I’m doing and I will continue to do what I want in life. The bad apple could care less about God and what God says.

Now if you want to see the impact of all of this, then let’s do an experiment. Go out and buy two apples. Put both on your counter. Leave the one just sit but take the other everyday just bang it on the counter and bruise it up. Which apple will last longer? Which apple is good and pleasing to the eye? Which apple will quickly begin to brown and rot? Now you understand the importance of living the Christian life, of keeping God’s Holy Spirit in your life, of being a hearer and follower of Jesus.

Jesus was quite clear in what He said, **“By their fruit you will know them.”** May we be a people filled with good fruit! A people motivated by the love of our Lord who gave his life that we might have eternal life. May the good he has begun in us continue until we reach His eternal Kingdom. Amen.