

“FRUIT NOT FLOWERS”
Matthew 7:15-23

In the corner of our garden, outside the dining room window, stands an apple tree. It was mature when we moved into the house, so it's been there for a fair few years. In the spring it is covered in beautiful pink blossom – great balls of it, like candyfloss, which burst from every branch and twig. It looks a real picture, especially when you look up and see it against a flawlessly blue sky. Then, of course, the flowers die away and get blown all over the lawn, and now it's thick with leaves, with the new apples forming up amongst the foliage.

In a few weeks' time, the tree will be full of apples. But, by and large, they will be fairly small, pretty sour and mainly covered in black spots, with every other one infested with grubs and maggots – all the result of some kind of disease within the tree. There will be a few to eat, but many of them will drop off prematurely and rot on the ground. The promise of good things suggested by the wonderful flowers will not be fulfilled by the fruit. The flowers, which are pretty and colourful, will die off and disappear – as happens with any fruit tree – and the fruit will appear, lasting longer, usually bringing some kind of nourishment, and bearing the seeds of future crops: except that, in our case, the fruit won't do what it's supposed to do.

Jesus uses that metaphor of fruit and flowers in the words we've just read. He uses the picture in a slightly different way – talking of grapes and figs, rather than apples – but the point he teaches is the same. It's not the appearance of the plant which is the real guide to its goodness, but the fruit that comes from it. There was a thorn bush in the part of the world where Jesus was that produced berries which looked, to start with, a bit like bunches of grapes. And some of the large thistles native to that area initially looked like young fig trees. But it's not the appearance of the plant that is the key thing – it's the fruit you get from it. The metaphor was intended to show that, as far as the followers of Jesus are concerned, it's their “fruit” that is proof of their authenticity. There should be something long-lasting, deep and worthwhile about those who claim to be his disciples: it's nothing to do with their appearance, but to do with their words, actions and attitudes.

How do you spot the authentic Christian? How do you discern which is the authentic church? What are the things to look out for in those who really are treading the path of Jesus Christ? Jesus is partly saying this as a warning to his followers to spot those who might turn out to be “*false prophets*”, but there is also a lesson here for us. What is it about our own lives that needs to be done and demonstrated if we are to be truly the people Jesus wants us to be? What are the marks of true discipleship? Let's start off by looking at what they are not.

1. SUPERFICIALITY

Of course, the flower metaphor breaks down if you look at it too closely, as do all metaphors, but what we're thinking about here is the short-lived nature of the flowers and the fact that they don't produce the same kind of nourishing and seed-bearing qualities that the fruit does. It looks great while it lasts – but it doesn't last very long. In many ways, it's just decoration.

And there are plenty of Christians like that – people for whom their apparent devotion to Jesus is simply a veneer. They look as if they are following the way of Jesus and certainly do much of the stuff that's expected of Christians, but underneath there is a whole mess of wrong attitudes and mixed-up thinking. You'll see them in church on Sunday. They'll have the regulation fish symbol on the back of the car. They may carry their Bible in a nice case and wear posh clothes to services. But underneath it all there is a morass of jealousy, resentment, hatred, lust and greed that runs completely counter to everything Jesus teaches. It's not a new problem and it's not an isolated problem. Jesus spoke of some of the religious leaders of his day – good, upstanding members of the community who probably started off with quite good intentions – as “*whitewashed tombs*”, pristine on the outside, but full of the rotting corpses of

selfishness and rebellion within. The writer of *Proverbs* puts it like this: “*Like a coating of glaze over earthenware are fervent lips with an evil heart*” (*Proverbs 26:23*). John, in his *First Letter*, writes: “*If anyone says ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar*” (*1 John 4:20*). When I was doing some study at Spurgeon’s College, one of my fellow-students, a Pentecostal minister, was writing his final thesis about the incidence of wife-beating, domestic abuse, amongst ordained ministers – which is statistically higher than in the population at large. Flowers in the pulpit, but rotten fruit at home.

That’s the problem of superficiality – we are more concerned with what other people think of us, of how they see us, than we are with what God thinks of us. Which, when you stop and think about it, is totally stupid, as God can see right into our hearts and knows far better than anyone else what’s going on. There is no point making a show of being a Christina if your attitudes and your worldview are completely at odds with what you’re trying to portray. As God tells Samuel, when he’s out trying to find a king for Israel, “*Men look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart*” (*1 Samuel 16:7*).

Are you trying to put up a veneer, a facade, a mask (the Greek word for which gives us our word *hypocrisy*) to make others think that you are a follower of Christ – and it’s just like the flowers which look great for a while, but then get blown away when the wind starts up?

2. SUCCESS

So, we think, it’s not just the appearance – it’s the results that count. Well – maybe. As we shall see in a bit, that’s partly what we’re on about. But the problem is, we see success almost entirely in terms that are borrowed from the thinking and attitudes of the world around us. There are plenty of books you can read and conferences you can attend which will help church leaders and others achieve “success” in their Christian lives or in their churches. We talk of successful churches, and ministries which are having great success. But that is almost always judged by the criteria that the world uses – measurable, quantifiable, statistical information.

We read the word success against the background of a target-driven, goal-oriented culture, a culture in which you are constantly challenged to deliver more and more stuff that you can count. Your line manger sets you a target and you achieve it, so next month you have to do even better. Your school’s exam results are quite good so next year they have to be even better – no matter what the standard of the year group – or Ofsted will be on your back. Your productivity is going up, but the profits still aren’t high enough so you need to cut costs by sacking staff. Your manager, your Inspectors, your shareholders will look upon you as successful if you manage to do those things – but at what cost has that success come? How does it take into account the unquantifiable areas of job satisfaction, a broad education, customer satisfaction, quality products?

But that’s the stuff we think of as success, so we transfer that to the area of our Christian lives, our churches. What are the successful churches? Those that are growing in numbers, needing new buildings, extending their offering figures, multiplying their activities? None of those things is of itself wrong – in fact, they’re all pretty desirable in many ways – but they are just the superficial trappings of success. Are those growing numbers living as true disciples? Are the buildings being extended because God has made it clear that’s the way ahead? Are all those activities actually adding to the life of God’s Kingdom? And in our personal lives, are those who seem to be the most successful really the ones whom God is blessing? Are those who put in the most time in the Prayer Room or help out at the most weekly meetings really the ones who are following most closely the way of the cross? Is it the outward – and sometimes very fleeting – appearance of success that is the true guide? Or is it to do with attitudes and character?

3. SOUNDNESS

You know, Jesus says some very scary things in his teaching, doesn't he? Look at the first part of v21 here. Even saying the right words isn't necessarily going to cut the mustard when it comes down to it. It's not to do with what we might call "soundness", saying the right words, affirming the correct creedal statements, having read the right books and signed up to the correct set of dogmas. As we've already mentioned (the wife-beating ministers), there are plenty of people around who are sticklers for doctrine, but don't show much of what they say they believe in their behaviour. John writes of Jesus as coming from the Father "*full of grace and truth*" (*John 1:14*), but how many Christians have you come across who are real sticklers for the truth, but have completely forgotten the grace? I think I've mentioned to some of you before a conversation I had with another clergyman once when I mentioned Tom Wright – who is, in my humble opinion, one of the greatest Christian scholars, preachers and thinkers of the age, and who is a man of enormous faith, humility and grace. This other person tapped his nose and dismissed Tom Wright with, "Not very sound on the atonement, though."

You look at some organisations which are very keen on soundness, on crossing every theological T and dotting every doctrinal I, but which seem to fail to connect with anyone outside the church because they have no idea about grace or forbearance or humility. I used to go and listen to a preacher in London at his annual conferences and every year he would come up with something that no other person in two thousand years of Bible study had managed to spot in some well-known passage and he was right (and, by implication, everyone else was wrong). He had his little coterie of admirers who believed he was the greatest preacher and scholar the world had ever had the privilege to know – and clearly he believed it too! Sound, but – on the showing of that kind of thing – lacking in grace and depth. Of course we need to believe the right things and interpret the Bible correctly – but that's not the true marker of Christian discipleship.

But enough of this negativity! As with everything you talk about, it can be much easier to spot the negatives and criticise the people who seem to exemplify them than it is to express the positives and look at the right way to do things. So after reflecting on how superficiality, success and soundness can easily mask the true nature of a disciple, let's have a look at what we do need to demonstrate as those who claim to follow Jesus. After three S's, three F's.

4. FAITHFULNESS

Strangely, Jesus only issues a warning here – he doesn't actually say what we *should* be looking out for, only what we shouldn't. But if we look at his teaching in its entirety and at the teaching of the rest of the New Testament, we'll see that there's plenty there to help us. And the first thing that characterises the authentic disciples of Jesus and the communities (churches) in which they gather to worship, work and witness together is faithfulness. Our calling is to be faithful to Jesus himself – not to the world around us. As we've already remarked, we can easily be sucked into assuming that the emphasis the world puts on, for example, success, can draw us away from those things that are really at the heart of our Christian lives, so the best way to manifest the marks of a real disciple is to remain faithful to Jesus' teaching and to his example.

Faithfulness means taking seriously the things which Jesus said and obeying those things that God has given for our good. Often the way that Jesus trod – and in which he calls us to follow – is not a path of worldly success. You have only to look at the events surrounding his trial and execution to see that and to hear his teaching about who are the truly great people in his Kingdom. It means allowing our hearts and minds, our attitudes and character to be moulded by the way he looked at the world. I know I'm always referring to it – that's because it's such a crucial text for the Christian – but let's just remind ourselves again of what Paul wrote in *Romans 12:1,2*. We are called to view the world in a completely different way from the way in which those around us view it. When we begin to see the way in which this present world fits into the context of God's Kingdom, then we begin to approach it differently.

And our calling is to stick to that. That's what faithfulness is all about – it's to do with staying the course, sticking to the path, getting everything else into perspective. That's the way Jesus lived and that's the way we are to live. Look at *Hebrews 12:1,2* – once again there's this note of perseverance, of faithfully treading where Jesus has trod. And if we're going to do that, we need to ensure that we have good ...

5. FOUNDATIONS

As I'm sure you're aware, this passage we're looking at this morning is part of Jesus' magnificent *Sermon On The Mount* and the next little section is, in fact, the last, so it's a good bet that that is what Jesus wanted to remain in his listeners' minds long after he had finished speaking. It's the bit that drives home the rest of the sermon. If you don't have your Bibles open, let me remind you that it's the little parable so beloved of Sunday School and Infant assemblies, The Two Builders. One man built his house on the sand and the other on the rock. The crucial difference between their two house became apparent only when the storm blew up and threatened to destroy both houses – the foundations.

Jesus says that the difference is the foundation, and for those who want to follow him, the foundation that is really effective is listening to his words “*and putting them into practice*”. It's not just the earnest grunts of affirmation from those listening on a Sunday morning, the sagely nodding heads and the odd taker of notes. It's those who get on and live out what he says to them. But you can't get on and live out those words if you don't hear them, read them, study them in the first place. Those who are authentic Christians, true disciples of Jesus Christ are those who have taken the trouble to read what he says and then determined to live out that teaching. Apologies for mentioning Tom Wright again, but in a recent book (*Virtue Reborn*) he uses the analogy of the pilot who landed his plane on the Hudson River when the engines failed. To cut a long story short, the pilot had clearly never had to do such a thing before, but his general experience, his training and the way he had coped with other crises meant that when this most dangerous of situations occurred it was almost second nature to him to bring the plane down safely. The foundations laid by his training and experience ensured that he was able to do what he needed to do without any fuss and panic. So we, as disciples of Jesus Christ, should be so immersed in his teachings, so full of God's word, so aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit that we act as he wants us to, even when we're under stress and in difficult situations. Get your foundations right so that your life moves along as God wants it to – “*Keeping in step with the Spirit*”, as Paul call it in *Galatians 5:25* – and the rest will begin to flow from it.

6. FRUITFULNESS

If your character is grounded on the foundation of God's word, on Jesus' teaching and an awareness of the Holy Spirit, then your true character will start to show through. To return to the original metaphor, you will not just look pretty, have the outward appearance of a follower of Jesus, but there will be a sense in which you are fruitful, a depth to your life and things flowing from it which are truly Kingdom characteristics. Now, that's not to say that the authenticity of your discipleship will be measured by people you have converted or hours you have spent in prayer or pounds you have put in the offering bag or articles you have written for the church magazine. In fact, it might be difficult to measure your fruit at all – but that doesn't invalidate it in the life of the Kingdom of God.

Your fruitfulness will be evident in your attitudes, in your response to others. It will be evident not just in the words you say, but in the way you say them. It will be evident not just in the actions you take but in the grace with which you season them. It will be evident not just in the way you respond to other people, but in the humility with which you make that response. I've said before and I'll say it again – you don't meet many people whom you could call real saints of God, people whose holiness is obvious in all that they do. They are the truly fruitful people. I was up at the Cathedral some time last year for a special service and all the visiting clergy were standing around in the Consistory Court (where the silverware is

now kept) waiting for the procession to get under way. I was talking with a couple of Anglican clergy (probably bishops, I don't recall) who were resplendent in their gold-embroidered copes and albs and all – obviously great men of God, if you were to go by the ecclesiastical finery. But I was aware of another man in a plain cassock on the edge of the conversation, hovering in the shadows. Eventually this man was drawn into the conversation and he spoke with real depth and great humility (as well as a foreign accent). I would say he exuded holiness. It turned out that this was the exiled Bishop of Iran, a man whose experience of crisis and persecution was still fresh and vivid in his mind. As he spoke, it was clear that he had this unmistakable but almost indefinable quality of fruitfulness.

Let me ask you this morning – what do people know your life for? What does God see in your life? Flowers? Or fruit? We'd better get it right or, when the flowers blow away in the storms of life, Jesus won't recognise the person underneath – *"I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers'."* Will we demonstrate the marks of superficiality and success that are the twin characteristics of our contemporary culture and worldview? The "over my dead body" soundness that puts truth above grace rather than alongside it? Or will we live a faithful life on the firm foundation of God's word, following Jesus' teaching, enlivened and invigorated by the presence of the Holy Spirit? A life that is fruitful and obviously authentic? May we all ask God's Holy Spirit to help us move in the right direction.

Discussion notes on next page

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There are plenty of Christians who look as if they are following the way of Jesus and certainly do much of the stuff that's expected of Christians, but underneath there is a whole mess of wrong attitudes and mixed-up thinking. Look at *Proverbs 26:23* or *1 John 4:20*. We are more concerned with what other people think of us, of how they see us, than we are with what God thinks of us (*1 Samuel 16:7*).

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We see success almost entirely in terms that are borrowed from the thinking and attitudes of the world around us: it is almost always judged by the criteria that the world uses – measurable, quantifiable, statistical information. Is it the outward – and sometimes very fleeting – appearance of success that is the true guide? Or is it to do with attitudes and character?

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Our calling is to be faithful to Jesus himself – not to the world around us. Faithfulness means taking seriously the things which Jesus said and obeying those things that God has given for our good. Look at *Romans 12:1,2* and *Hebrews 12:1,2*.

5. FOUNDATIONS

Jesus says that the foundation that is really effective is listening to his words "***and putting them into practice***" (*Matthew 7:24*).

6. FRUITFULNESS

Your fruitfulness will be evident in your attitudes, your character, in your response to others.

Questions for discussion

1. Why was Jesus so insistent that his followers should beware of false prophets? How can we recognise them today?
2. What do you understand by the term "success"? How is it measured in your situation (at work, school, etc.)? What pressures come with that?
3. Surely it's good to have sound doctrine? In what ways can it become a difficulty?
4. Why is it so important not simply to listen to Jesus' teaching? (Look at *James 1:22ff; 2:14ff*)
5. How do you understand *Matthew 7:21*? Do you find Jesus' words scary? How will he decide whom to welcome?