By Their Fruit: Spotting the Wolf in Wool

MATTHEW 7:15-20 (BSB) · SMALL-GROUP LESSON · DIGDEEPER.AI

The Big Idea

You can fake the costume, the vocabulary, and the friendly handshake at the door, but nobody can fake fruit over time, so watch what a teacher's life and message actually grow before you follow them.

Opening Lines

A wolf can put on wool. What it cannot do is grow figs.

Before You Teach

- Goal: Send everyone out able to run one test on any teacher they follow: not how confident he sounds, but what his life and message actually grow over time. Grapes don't come off thornbushes, and neither does the real thing come off a fake teacher.
- If you're short on time, cut: Cut the extended walk through all five cross-references. Keep Acts 20:29-30 or 2 Peter 2:1-3 if you keep any — the wolf coming from inside the flock is the point that stings.
- Where the moment lives: It lives in the moment a person names a specific voice they follow and asks out loud whether its fruit is love and repentance or just followers and outrage. Not in your explanation of thornbushes.
- Your prep: Know Deuteronomy 13 and Micaiah in 1 Kings 22 well enough to say in a sentence why Israel already needed this test. Have your own honest answer ready to the 'name a voice you follow' question.

Run It In Your Setting

The same lesson, sequenced three ways. Pick the one that fits your group and your clock.

CLASSROOM · ~20 PEOPLE · 45 MINUTES

Classroom opening (wolf in wool), 4 min. Read the passage aloud together, slowly, 3 min. Teach karpos with the open-palm image, 7 min. Questions 1-2 with answers gathered where all can see, 12 min. Question 3 (the gospel turn — nature, not effort), 8 min. Drill: question 5, name a voice and a checker out loud, 8 min. Commitments and close, 3 min. Transformation lives in questions 3 and 5. If short, cut question 4 and the cross-reference tour.

SMALL GROUP · ~8 PEOPLE · 60 MINUTES

Small-group opening (name a voice you stopped trusting) around the circle, 8 min. Read passage aloud, 3 min. Teach karpos, 7 min. Questions 1-3 with real silence, 20 min. Question 4 (weigh your own fruit) — you go first, 10 min. Drill: question 5 with names,

days, and checkers, 8 min. Prayer over actual commitments, 4 min. Transformation lives in question 4. If short, trim question 1.

COFFEE · 2-3 FRIENDS · 30 MINUTES

Coffee opening (what would a stranger conclude about your fruit?), 4 min. Read verses 15-20 aloud, 2 min. One line on karpos — fruit you can hold, can't fake, 3 min. Straight to question 4 (your own fruit) both ways, 10 min. Then question 5 — name one voice each and agree to text each other about it, 8 min. Pray briefly over what you named, 3 min. Transformation lives in the mutual naming and the promise to check in.

Commitments, Not Summary

This is a habit for every lesson you'll ever teach — this week we drill it deliberately. Don't let people walk out with a warm summary of what you said; make them walk out having said out loud what THEY will do. Remember week 9 and week 14, where you first asked the room to name a next step. Level 4 raises the bar: this week you will not accept a vague commitment. If someone says 'I want to be more discerning,' push back kindly and out loud — 'Good, so name the one video, podcast, or teacher you'll actually check against Scripture this week.' Make them attach a name, a day, and a person who will ask about it. A commitment nobody can check is a wish. Do not let the room settle for wishes.

Why This Passage Matters

This is the second-to-last thing Jesus says before the whole Sermon on the Mount lands on two builders. He has spent three chapters raising the bar impossibly high, and now, right at the exit, he warns you that people will come offering you a shortcut — a version of the message that costs less, flatters more, and sounds spiritual. They will not look dangerous. That is the whole trick. A wolf in wool doesn't announce itself. Your people are drowning in voices right now: influencers, podcasters, confident men with big platforms and bold claims, and most of your class has no working test for any of them. Jesus hands them one they can actually run. Not a seminary degree, not a doctrine quiz — fruit. What grows out of this life and this message over time? That test is old; Israel needed it against the prophets who cried 'Peace, peace' when there was no peace. It's also merciful, because it protects the flock without asking them to read hearts. You get to hand ordinary people a tool Jesus himself trusted them to use. Teach it well and they'll use it for the rest of their lives.

Catch the Fire First

Before you teach a word of this, run the test on yourself. Sit down this week and ask: if someone weighed MY life by its fruit over the last year, what would they find growing — love, honesty, repentance, or defensiveness and hurry? Then pick one teacher or voice you personally follow and actually run the drill you're about to give the room: open your Bible to something they recently claimed, read the whole passage, and see whether it holds. If you haven't done this yourself, the room will smell it. You're not asking them to

be suspicious of everyone; you're asking them to do what you already did this week.

Bring Your Own Story

- Prompt: a time you followed a confident teacher or voice for a while, then watched the fruit go bad — and what finally tipped you off.
- Prompt: a teacher whose steady, humble, unglamorous life pointed you to Christ without ever being flashy about it.
- Prompt: a moment you almost shared or believed a bold spiritual claim, then checked the actual passage and found it didn't say that.
- Polished-vs-real SAMPLE — Polished: 'God has always given his people discernment.' Real: 'I forwarded that guy's clips for two years before I noticed I felt angrier every time, not more like Jesus.'
- Guardrail: keep it one honest incident, not a rehearsed testimony — full storytelling coaching was back in week 1.

Three Ways to Open

CLASSROOM: "Picture a wolf that has learned to wear wool. It walks among the sheep, moves like them, sounds like them — right up until the killing starts. Jesus says that's what a false teacher looks like. So how would you ever catch one? Today he gives us the one test that works."

Start with a concrete image everyone can picture before any abstraction — anchor the idea in the senses.

SMALL GROUP: "Quick honest question around the circle: name one teacher, podcaster, or Christian voice you've followed and later stopped trusting. You don't have to say why yet. Just the name or the type. Jesus is about to tell us how he'd have spotted them."

Open with a shared, low-risk confession that surfaces the room's real experience before teaching.

COFFEE: "If a stranger judged you not by what you say you believe but by what actually grows out of your life over a year — your words, your habits, your relationships — what would they conclude? That's the test Jesus puts on teachers in these six verses, and it's worth turning on ourselves too."

Lead with a single provocative question that makes the passage personal in one move.

Teaching the Word

Teach the word for 'fruit' — Greek karpos. It doesn't mean words, claims, or vibes. It means the actual produce, what the tree hands you at harvest, the thing you can hold and taste. Here's the physical image: hold out your open hand, palm up, as if someone just placed a piece of fruit in it. You can't argue with what's in your hand. You can argue about what a tree SAYS it is, but karpos is the tree's testimony you can weigh in your

palm. And notice Jesus' quiet mercy in choosing this word — fruit takes time. A disguise works for an afternoon; it can't survive a harvest. That's why Jesus says it twice, top and bottom, framing the whole thing: 'By their fruit you will recognize them.' [Let that line sit. Say nothing for a slow count of five.]

Discussion Questions

1. Jesus says a wolf can wear sheep's clothing. What does that 'wool' actually look like today — what makes a false teacher look safe?

Coaching note: Let them list freely; write answers where all can see. Don't correct, just gather. You're building the picture that danger rarely looks dangerous.

If it stalls: Think of a Christian influencer you've seen. What are the things about them that make you trust them almost automatically — the tone, the confidence, the Bible on the shelf behind them?

2. Jesus tests teachers by fruit, not by credentials or confidence. Why do you think he chose fruit as the test instead of something faster?

Coaching note: Aim them toward: fruit takes time, and time exposes what disguise hides. If someone says 'because you can't fake it forever,' you've got the whole point.

If it stalls: How long does it usually take you to figure out whether someone is actually trustworthy — a day, or a lot longer? Why?

3. Jesus says a corrupt tree CAN'T produce good fruit — it's about nature, not effort. What does that tell us about where good fruit actually comes from?

Coaching note: This is the gospel turn. Steer gently toward: you can't sew a costume of righteousness, it has to be grafted in — 'I am the vine and you are the branches.' Don't rush past it.

If it stalls: Have you ever tried hard to be a better person and found the effort didn't change what came out of you under pressure? What was missing?

4. Turn the test on yourself for a minute. If someone weighed your life by its fruit over the past year, what would they find growing?

Coaching note: Go first — you already did this in prep. Give real silence. Do not fill it. This is where the room gets quiet and honest; protect that.

If it stalls: Pick just one relationship — a spouse, a coworker, a kid. What's one fruit they'd say has been growing in you lately, good or bad?

5. Name one specific voice you follow — a teacher, podcast, or account. What's one concrete way you could check its fruit this week instead of just nodding along?

Coaching note: This is the drill. Push for a NAME, a DAY, and a PERSON who'll ask. Refuse vague answers like 'I'll be more careful.' Make it checkable.

If it stalls: Just name one account or teacher you watched this week. Now — could you open your Bible to one thing they claimed and read the whole passage before Sunday? Yes or no?

Questions You May Hear

"Isn't this just telling us to be suspicious and judgmental of every teacher?"

No — Jesus isn't asking us to read hearts or hunt heretics. He's giving a patient test:

watch what a life and a message actually grow over time. That protects the flock without making us paranoid.

"Didn't the Old Testament already have a way to spot false prophets? Why does Jesus repeat it?"

Yes — Deuteronomy 13 said a prophet could even work a real sign, but if he led people after other gods, he was false. Israel's whole history proved the credentials and eloquence lie; where it leads is the test. Jesus is handing them the same tool.

"If a good tree 'can't' produce bad fruit, does that mean Christians never sin?"

It's talking about the settled direction and nature of a life, not perfection. The point is that righteousness that saves can't be worn like a costume — it flows from a nature made new by Christ, the vine we're grafted into.

"Where do these false prophets even come from — outside the church or inside?"

Both, and inside is the scarier one. Peter (2 Peter 2) and Paul (Acts 20:29-30) both warn that wolves rise up from within the flock, speaking twisted things — which is exactly why the wool disguise works so well.

For Experienced Leaders

- When you ask them to weigh their own fruit (question 4), you must go first and go honest, or the silence will feel like a trap and they'll deflect. Model the vulnerability you want.
- Don't let this turn into a session of naming false teachers by name and dunking on them. The energy of contempt feels spiritual but produces its own bad fruit. Keep pulling it back to the test and to their own lives.
- The word 'can't' in verse 18 is the hinge — a corrupt tree CAN'T make good fruit. If someone hears only 'try harder to be a good tree,' you've missed the gospel. Slow down there.

Landing the Lesson

Commitments: Go around and have each person say out loud the one voice they'll check this week and the one person who'll ask them about it. Out loud, with a name attached — a commitment nobody can check is just a wish.

Close by praying out loud over the actual voices and commitments people just named — the specific teacher someone said they'd check, the relationship someone admitted needs better fruit. Don't reach for a written prayer; naming their real words back to God is the whole point.

If you run out of time: If the room only gets to question 3 — the gospel turn about nature, not effort — stop there. That's the heart of the passage; better to land it than to sprint to the drill.

Midweek follow-up: Midweek, text each person one line: 'Did you get to check that voice against Scripture yet? What did you find?' Their answer tells you whether the commitment was real.

Free at digdeeper.ai/devotionals/matthew/7-15-20/lesson

Handout

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During the lesson:

- What does 'wool' look like today? Name one thing that makes a teacher look safe and trustworthy at first glance:
- Jesus tests by fruit, not confidence — because fruit takes _____ and _____ can't be faked.
- If someone weighed your life by its fruit this past year, one thing they'd honestly find growing:
- One voice I follow (teacher, podcast, account) that I could check against Scripture this week:
- The person who'll ask me about it, and the day I'll do it:
- A teacher whose steady, humble life pointed me toward Christ — and whether I've ever told them:

Take-home actions:

- Next time a friend forwards a teacher who thrills them, don't argue — ask one real question: does this teacher's own life show love, honesty, and repentance, or just followers and outrage?
- Before you share the next bold spiritual claim you scroll past, open your Bible to what they cited and read the whole thing. One passage, one check, before you share it.
- Thank God this week for a teacher whose humble life pointed you to Christ — then actually tell that person so.

> By their fruit you will recognize them. — Matthew 7:16