

Text: Matthew 7:16 (ESV) – “You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?”

Understanding the Symbolism of Thistles and Brambles

In Matthew 7:16, Jesus uses the imagery of agriculture and nature to convey a spiritual truth. The question He poses—“Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?”—is rhetorical. The answer is obviously “no.” Grapes and figs are symbols of good and nourishing spiritual fruit, while thornbushes and thistles represent that which is wild, harmful, or cursed.

Thistles (also translated as brambles or briars in other passages) are wild plants often found in desolate or untended places. They are thorny, defensive, and inedible. Spiritually, they symbolize barrenness, pain, and the consequences of sin. This goes all the way back to Genesis 3:17-18 (ESV):

Cursed is the ground because of you... thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you.

Here, thorns and thistles are part of the curse that came after the fall of man. So when Jesus refers to false prophets as producing “fruit” like thistles, He’s saying they are a byproduct of the fallen world—unfruitful, deceptive, and ultimately harmful.

False Prophets and Their Fruit

Jesus warns us to “beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves” (Matthew 7:15). They may look gentle, trustworthy, or even “anointed,” but the real test is not appearance—it’s their fruit.

What is “fruit”? Biblically, fruit refers to the visible evidence of a person’s life and character:

Their teachings (doctrine)

Their moral behavior

Their impact on others

Their alignment with Scripture and the Gospel

Galatians 5:22–23 (ESV) gives us a model of good spiritual fruit:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

False prophets produce the opposite of this. Instead of promoting holiness, they stir up greed, pride, immorality, and self-centeredness. One of the most obvious signs is the love of money—something the Apostle Paul strongly warns against:

1 Timothy 6:10 (ESV) For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.

Rather than preaching repentance, sanctification, and the hope of eternal life, false teachers focus on temporary, earthly rewards—health, wealth, and success—without calling people to live righteously.

Spiritual Discernment and Judgment

Jesus emphasizes that every tree is known by its fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit:

Matthew 7:17-20 (ESV)

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. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

This is a sobering truth. False prophets are not just misguided—they are spiritually dangerous and subject to divine judgment. Their teachings can lead others away from Christ and toward destruction.

Biblical Cross-References on Thistles and Symbolism

2 Kings 14:9 & 2 Chronicles 25:18 – A parable where a thistle

speaks to a cedar, symbolizing pride and overconfidence.

Hosea 10:4 (ESV) - “They utter mere words; with empty oaths they make covenants; so judgment springs up like poisonous weeds in the furrows of the field.” This reflects how false teachings can corrupt entire communities.

Isaiah 5:6 (ESV) - “I will make it a waste... it shall grow up in briars and thorns.” Thorns are a judgment upon unfruitfulness.

Final Encouragement

In an age where many claim to speak for God, we must be discerning. Not every preacher, prophet, or spiritual leader is from the Lord. We are called to test every spirit (1 John 4:1) and measure all teachings against Scripture.

Let us seek the Holy Spirit, who empowers us to live in truth and bear genuine fruit that glorifies God. And let us avoid the dangerous path of false doctrine, which—even when it looks good—ends in spiritual ruin.

Hebrews 5:14 (ESV) But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

May the Lord help us to be fruitful, faithful, and spiritually discerning in these last days. Amen.

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