

Text: [Matthew 7:12-20 \(CEB\)](#)

Date: May 4, 2025

Title: "Fruitful Life"

Theme: The life of faith is known by good fruit, the product of reflection on the Golden Rule.

1

I want you to think of the best leader you've ever known
A boss, a family member, or a friend
Someone you've admired at work, in the community, or in the church
Do you have someone in mind?

Ok, now I want you to reflect a little bit further
On *why* you thought of them
What is it that you appreciate about them?
About how they serve?
About how they make you and others feel?
I want you to hold an image of them in your mind as we think together
about this scripture

Today's scripture has implications for leaders
But also those who have the equally difficult task of deciding WHOM to
follow
I don't have time to talk about that piece as fully as I would like
I hope, though, that the implications will be clear

2

When you first read them, these verses feel disconnected, embedded in a
thick layer of metaphor
You have wide and narrow roads,
Wolves dressed in sheep's clothing,
Fruit and trees and thorns and thistles
"You will know them by their fruit"

And as the metaphors develop, they layer and then they morph
So the wolves in sheep's clothing suddenly become rotten trees producing
a rotten crop

Now, you would think that good fruit would be a clear test of the Christian
life

But you and I both know good fruit isn't as easy to pick as you'd hope
A lot of times fruit looks great and tastes terrible
How many times have you brought berries home from the supermarket and
thrown them out because they have mold you didn't initially see?

We aren't good at spotting the bad fruit
Why?

Because in this culture, where we value results most of all, we tend to ask
only one question of our leaders: "Did they get the job done?"
THAT'S our tool for evaluating success and failure
Not how they got there, not how we felt after

So we don't look any further into the fruit
We hear this a lot when people say things about leaders like,
"Well, I don't care for him personally, but I like what he's doing"
A leader – whether in the church or in the world – is called to more

3

A while back, I remember volunteering with a ministry that was feeding
people
And it was August, so it was blazing hot
I was surprised that when we went to serve a mid-day meal, we didn't open
up the large space inside the building for people to sit and get out of
the heat
I immediately started to get uncomfortable because I couldn't help thinking:
"What's going on here?"
Instead, what we did was serve people through windows on the side of the
building, and folks would gather in a little fenced-in courtyard
Now, the place where people were supposed to eat had little to no shade
But there were a few people who knew the tricks: when they got their food,
instead of sitting at the picnic tables, they stood in the very narrow
noontime shadow of the building

Folks claimed these spots right away, because there was only enough shade for a tiny portion of all those that came through

Now that day, I was a follower and not a leader
I did what I was asked
Because I was just there to help produce the fruit, right?
To help people get fed

But I had a lot of mixed emotions about the state of the fruit we produced that August day
It may have looked good, but was it?
I mean, people ate outside in full sun in 90 degree weather

Is it better to feed people than to let them go hungry? Yes.
Would it be a lot better to treat them with some respect while we do it?
100%

4

So just the binary question of fruit/no fruit is not enough
We're called to more
To *better* fruit

“Treat others the way you want people to treat you; this is the Law and the Prophets”
The Golden Rule wasn't totally original to Jesus, but he did trademark it
It became synonymous with his teaching

To be fair, when others stated it, they tended to phrase it in the negative:
“If you don't like it being done to you, don't do it to others”¹

When Jesus calls us to the positive way – DO unto others
There's a reason
Because he knows “if you don't like it, don't do it to others” could lead us in a different direction

A direction of disengagement with the world
Because you're not going to HURT anyone if you never do anything, right?
The problem is that you won't HELP anyone, either

I mean, one way to solve the problem of people suffering in the sun to eat
their meal is just not to serve the meal at all
Then you've got zero apples – no fruit at all

5

So clearly it matters not just WHAT we do, but HOW we do it
And that's the real challenge of this passage

Because it becomes the true test not only of leadership, but of followership
Because that's what discipleship is, isn't it?
Our followership of Jesus?
And followership means asking questions that we're often afraid to ask

"The road is wide that leads to destruction, and many follow it
But the gate that leads to life is narrow and the road difficult, so few find it"

We hear this as condemnation
A prediction about who goes to heaven, and who doesn't
I hear it more just as a reflection of what's real

It's the rare person who actually leads others in a way that's life giving
I mean, when I asked you to remember a leader in your own life, did any of
you have more than one or two who actually stood out?

It's a rare person who has the capacity to lead others
Because it's a rare person who actually has the willingness to be led
themselves

These teachings of Jesus call us to self-reflection
On our own motivations, first

You know, we're studying the Sermon on the Mount in a couple bible
studies here at church
And I might say the whole of the Sermon is a call to accountability
Are our beliefs are aligned with our actions?
Are we living with integrity and purity of intention?

But there's something else here beyond self-reflection
I bet if we'd asked the folks we were serving that August day
How our efforts were landing in their lives
If what we offered was good fruit or bad fruit
We would have gotten some feedback

It's easy to just avoid asking the hard questions
Whether of ourselves or others

You know what happens though, when we don't?
We follow along with the crowd
Now all of us probably have had the experience of being in an unfamiliar
place, and following along with the crowd,
only to end up where we didn't want to be, right?

Jesus calls us to a different path
A path of righteousness

But there is no righteousness without reflection
There's no reflection without questions
Not a lot of people are willing to go there –
that's why one path is wide and the other narrow

We have to take seriously Jesus' demand that we treat others the way we
want to be treated
I know we are always looking for the fruit – the results
But the truth is, the fruit can be rotten

This week, I want you to be willing to ask God and the people around you:
How mindful is my leadership?
How faithful is my followership?
Does it reflect the lessons the best leaders in my life taught me?

The kind of fruitfulness Jesus calls us to isn't just about the binary:
Fruit or no fruit?
You've got to be willing to ask: is the fruit any good?
Does it genuinely reflect Christ's call to love others as we would want to be
loved?
That's the narrow way Jesus calls us to walk if we want to be true disciples.
Amen.

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¹ Hillel, for example, famously put it this way: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor: this is the whole Torah; the rest is the commentary."