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January 11, 2026

AUTHORITY ACKNOWLEDGED: MATT 7:15-29

Introductory Activity

TEACHER'S NOTE: TODAY WE ARE GOING TO TRY AND DRAW THE GROUP IN BY BEING INTERACTIVE DURING OUR GROUP TIME. IT'S NOT TOO CRAZY. I AM GOING TO INSTRUCT YOU TO INSTRUCT THE GROUP TO LOOK UP SOME THINGS ON THEIR PHONE. I THINK EVERY GROUP, REGARDLESS OF AGE OR DEMOGRAPHIC, WILL HAVE SOMEONE WHO WOULD JUMP ON THIS. JUST TRY IT.

Introduce: Ask the group to take out their phones and search for the definition of the word “authority.” (If you do not want to lead the group in the interactive introduction, you can present the information below.) While they are doing that, explain that the title of our lesson today is “Authority Acknowledged.” Authority has two basic meanings.

Ask someone to read the first definition they found online. (If group members found the definitions in a different order, be prepared to pull an audible and ask for the second or third definition, and simply wait until you have at least the two listed before and then relay the information.)

1: “the power or right to give orders, make decisions and enforce obedience.”

Explain: “People in Jesus’s day lived in an atmosphere of totalitarian authority. Politically, Rome and its governors dominated regions like Israel. Spiritually, Jewish religious leaders exerted their own coercive authority. The common folks knew both were inherently false.” (ETB LG, 73)

The second definition I found was very similar to the first one (“a person or organization having power or control in a particular, typically political or administrative sphere”). Ask the group if someone found a different definition and to read it aloud.

2: “the power to influence others, especially because of one’s commanding manner or one’s recognized knowledge about something.”

Explain: This is what we mean when we say that someone is an authority on a subject or in a field. We often see a person presented as an authority on the news. This is also the type of person we prefer to repair our cars. We want an authority, not a “shade tree mechanic.” In Jesus’ day, the rabbis and scribes were seen as authorities on the law. However, they often appealed to a higher authority when they taught. That higher authority was often another Rabbi or scholar.

Summarize Transition: In today’s lesson, Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount. In this conclusion, He is going to caution us to carefully choose the “authorities” we listen to. He will also demonstrate that He is the ultimate authority. He will show that He has “the power or right to give orders, make decisions and enforce obedience.” We will also see that He has “the power to influence others, especially because of [His] commanding manner [and His] recognized knowledge about something.”

1. FRUIT (MATT. 7:15-20)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew 7:15-20.

Explain: In this passage, we see that **Jesus has the authority to declare who is right or correct, and He gives us the tools to do the same.** He begins by giving a warning. He tells His disciples to “be on guard.” This is a command to exert ongoing diligence: be constantly on the lookout for false prophets. You might say: keep your

Notes:

This Lesson was created using:

- *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (ETB LG)
- *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* (ETB PSG)
- *Explore the Bible Commentary* (ETBC)
- *Preaching the Word: Matthew* (Preaching)
- *New American Commentary: Matthew* (NAC)
- *Exalting Christ in Matthew* (Exalting)
- *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Matthew 1-13* (ACCS)
- *The King Has Come* (Spurgeon)

head on a swivel or keep your eyes open. This diligence is necessary because false prophets are hard to spot. Jesus gives us an analogy to show us why they are to spot. They are hard to spot because they are in disguise. In the analogy, He pictures His disciples as sheep and the false prophet as a wolf. However, if a wolf showed up in a sheep pen looking like a wolf, all the sheep would panic and try and get away. However, if the wolf showed up in a sheep costume, he would be welcomed in, and in due time, he could devour the sheep. Jesus' words had clear application for His followers at that time.

Ask the group to think back to our lessons on the Sermon on the Mount. Where is one place where we saw the religious leaders acting like disguised wolves? (If you need to provide guidance, guide the group to Matthew 5.)

Explain: Jesus had already shown them in chapter 5 how the religious leaders of their day had misinterpreted and misrepresented Scripture. His words are also applicable to us. Not only should we be alert to the dangers of false prophets in the local body, but we should also be aware of false prophets in the wider world. To help us understand the dangers of the false prophet, we should understand the role of the prophet.

Ask: What is a prophet? (Allow time for answers)

Explain: The role of the prophet is two-pronged. We are probably aware of prophets in the OT like Daniel and Isaiah. We might remember that they **foretold the future**. But prophets also had a second role. They were not only foretellers of the future, they were/are also “forth tellers.” In other words, prophets of old held forth the truth of God’s Word and declared it to the people. Today, we do not have a lot of prophets who foretell the future, but we do have many who hold forth the truth of God’s Word and declared it to the people. We call these people pastors and teachers, and they can have a lot of influence in our lives. Therefore, we should be on guard for false teachers. But false prophets are often hard to spot because they come to us disguised as good and righteous people. “In outward appearance, true prophets and false prophets look the same (like sheep).” (ETBC, 64) Believers might easily be able to spot the “new atheists who attack Christianity” or the “bizarre cult leaders.” “They are obvious...Rather, we are to beware of men and women who look like Christians (who come to you in sheep’s clothing), who talk like Christians (“Lord, Lord”), and who act like super-Christians (preaching and casting out demons and doing mighty miracles).” (Preaching, 198) One great preacher declared, “They affect the look, language, and spirit of God’s people, while really they long to devour souls, even as wolves thirst for the blood of sheep.” (Spurgeon, 81)

Ask: How does Jesus tell His disciples to spot false prophets? (Allow time for answers. Draw group members' attention to verse 16 if necessary.)

Explain: Jesus tells us that we will spot the wolf by careful observation. He gives another word picture from their everyday lives to help them understand. First, he says to **be aware of their genus**.

Direct (Let’s continue the theme of looking up words on the ever-trustworthy internet.) Ask someone in the group to search “Define Genus” and then read the definition. (I found: a principal taxonomic category that ranks above species and below family.)

Explain: In other words, Jesus told them to be aware of the **Kind of Person Leading Them**.

“The function of a prophet was to declare God’s will and word into a situation the people were facing.”
(ETBC, 63)

Reread verse 16. (See Notes Box)

Explain: If I am walking in the woods and I see a plant, I might not immediately know what kind it is. However, if I see grapes on the vine, I will know it is a grape vine. If I visit someone and notice a tree in their front yard, I might know what kind it is, but if figs are hanging from the branches, I will know it is a fig tree. The way a person acts, their fruit, will reveal what kind of person they are. You might not know when you first meet them, but over time, they will reveal their true nature. Not only does Jesus tell us to be aware of their genus. He also tells us **to be aware of their genuineness.**

Direct: Ask someone to search “define genuineness” and read the definition. (I found: the quality of truly being what something is said to be; authenticity.)

Reread verses 17-18. (See Notes Box)

Explain: A person’s fruit might not immediately reveal what kind of tree they are. They might actually produce grapes or figs. Jesus told them to be aware of **the Quality of the Person Leading Them.** Sometimes you have to wait a while and observe the quality of fruit he produces over time. If he is genuinely a follower of Christ, the fruit will be good. We can observe how a person responds to difficult situations or difficult people. We can observe how he responds in good times as well. Both kinds of situations will reveal a person’s character. We can also see how he responds to sin in the world, in those around him, and in his own life.

Discuss: Ask the following series of questions:

- In what way might a person’s response to bad times reveal the quality of his fruit?
- In what way might the person’s response to good time reveal the quality of his fruit?
- In what way might a person’s response to sin reveal the quality of his fruit?

Matthew 7:16

You’ll recognize them by their fruit. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes or figs from thistles?

“Every man produces according to his nature; he cannot do otherwise. *Good tree, good fruit; corrupt tree, evil fruit.*” (Spurgeon, 82)

Matthew 7:17-18

¹⁷ In the same way, every good tree produces good fruit, but a bad tree produces bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree can’t produce bad fruit; neither can a bad tree produce good fruit.

The CSB says the false prophet will be recognized. The KJV says that we will “know” them. Spurgeon asserts, “Our King is a great teacher or prudence. We are not to judge; but we are to *know...* It is not ours to hew or to burn; but it is ours to *know...* Who wants to build his nest upon a tree which is soon to be cut down? Who would choose a barren tree for the center of his orchard? (Spurgeon, 82)

Further Explanation: (Allow time for discussion and then offer this further explanation and caution.) We need to be cautious fruit inspectors, though. Sometimes a good apple tree will occasionally produce an apple with a worm in it or with a bad spot. This one apple does not mean the tree is diseased. Likewise, leaders can experience bad days or they can slip up. They *are* fallible human beings. Preachers and teachers can also be wrong about things related to Scripture or theology. Just because they are incorrect does not mean they are wolves seeking to mislead the church. Sometimes they are just ignorant about something. This is why we need a plethora of leaders in the church. We need men who live like the men described in the book of Titus.

Read: (Before your group time begins, have someone mark this passage and be prepared to read it. This will save time. Have a different person prepared to read the next passage. Having two different people read it will highlight the point.) Titus 1:5-9.

Say: In this passage, Paul is describing for young Titus the kind of men he needs to place in leadership roles in the churches of Crete. He describes their genus and their genuineness. Our Bibles call these men elders. Paul is describing a pastor. This role could include other leaders in the church as well. That last verse is important for

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our purposes. They are to hold "to the faithful message" and "encourage with sound teaching and to refute those who contradict it." That is what they are to do. The next passage tells us why.

Read: (Have someone else prepared to read this passage) Titus 1:10-11.

Explain: These pastors and other godly, biblically sound men are to deal with these wolves in the church.

Summarize Transition: In this passage, Jesus gives us two word pictures related to false prophets: sheep/wolves and bad/good fruit/trees. Both help us understand the false prophet more fully. We have seen that we have two responsibilities. First, we need to be on the lookout for false prophets. Don't accept teaching blindly (in church or on the internet). If something sounds "new" or "novel" or "tickles your ears," do a little digging and check it out. Also, we are to do our part and guard the church against false teachers. The local body needs godly, biblically knowledgeable people to guard the body against false prophets.

2. OBEDIENCE (MATT. 7:21-23)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew 7:21-23.

Explain: In this passage, we see that **Jesus has the authority to declare who is right with Him.** We must understand that this passage flows out of the previous one. Jesus is still referring to the wolfish false prophets. However, this passage also flows *into* the next passage, which refers to "everyone." As a result, the words here speak not only of leaders in the church but to everyone. In Jesus' words, we can see two kinds of wolves: **Deceived Church Folk and Devious Charlatans.**

Deceived Church Folk

Verse 21 reveals that it is not our words but our actions that reveal our ultimate destination. On the day Jesus establishes His eternal Kingdom, or at our death, we will face the judgment. There are many who, during their life and upon their death, will declare "Lord, Lord." They speak "with great devotion and correct Christology." (Preaching, 198) However, their verbal declaration will not be enough because Jesus knows our hearts. It appears that Jesus is speaking of those who have been deceived by this world and their own hearts here. He could be speaking of those who might have attained glory in the church but missed the gospel altogether. He could be speaking of those who understood morality and ethics but missed God's grace and mercy. He could be speaking of good folks and great church members who missed the mark of the Father's will. He is speaking to "those... who claim to know Jesus without really being known by Him." (ETBC, 67) We need to be reminded that church attendance, great giving, saying "yes, sir," nor being a good guy will win a person entrance into the kingdom. It is only by "doing the Father's will." The Father's will is outlined in the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and expounded on in the whole of Scripture. It is God's will that we repent of sin and become fully devoted disciples of Jesus. On "that day," the deceived church folk will be enlightened of their darkness. Every person should stop and consider their lives and determine if they are truly disciples of Christ. There are others who on the last day will also cry Lord, Lord. These are the **Devious Charlatans.**

Devious Charlatans

In verse 22, Jesus presents those who have put on a really good show for the world. Again, it appears that these people were deceived and actually thought they were living in accordance with the Kingdom. The words of Jesus present them as truly shocked to come to the end of all things and fail to enter the Kingdom. They had done "great things" like preaching and teaching, exorcism, and miracles. As O'Donnell puts it, "They list the gifts of the Spirit but not the fruit of the Spirit. They boast of great religion but not true religion (James 1:27)." (Preaching, 198) We should consider the implications for the church today.

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Ask a group member to search for the definition of the word charlatan (I found, “a person falsely claiming to have a special knowledge or skill, a fraud.”)

Explain: In the church, there have always been charlatans. In the passage from Titus that we read before, we saw that false teachers seek financial gain. Sometimes they seek power and influence. A good speaker and even a person who does great works can still ruin entire households (Titus 1:11) and endanger souls. It is not just those who serve for their own benefit who will call out “Lord, Lord” to no avail. It is also those who serve *out of their own beliefs*.

Ask a group member to search for the definition of the word syncretism (I found, “an amalgamation or attempted amalgamation of different religions, cultures, or schools of thought.”)

Explain: In Acts 19, we see a group of people practicing syncretism. There, we are presented with some Jews who are not followers of Jesus. These men attempt to merge Christianity with the practice of Judaism. They “attempted to pronounce the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, ‘I command you by the Jesus that Paul preaches!'” (Acts 19:13). This did not end well for the men. The merging of other faiths with Christianity has been a practice of many. In a collection of ancient manuscripts held in Paris, we find magical incantations that reveal that “Ancient magicians were syncretists and would borrow terms from any religion that sounded sufficiently strange to be deemed effective.”¹ It wasn’t just the ancients who did this. We see it in the church today as well.

Discuss: In what ways do we find Christians attempting to combine Christianity with other faiths or cultural worldviews?

Explain: There are many ways we can attempt to blend Christianity with other faiths. One of the most pernicious is called universalism. This is the belief that all faiths lead to heaven. This belief states that if a person is a good Buddhist, Jew, Muslim, or whatever, they will please the Father and enter the Kingdom. Jesus has already discounted this kind of thinking earlier in Matthew 7, where He instructed us to enter the narrow gate (7:13). In John 10, He declares that He is the gate to the Kingdom (10:7).

Another insidious, often overlooked act of syncretism is a works-based religion. Many people want to combine the “good enough” morality of our culture with a belief in God and call it Christianity. They might proclaim, “I am a good person. I don’t do terrible things. I take care of my family, and I go to church a few times a year.” The Bible declares that no man can be good enough to enter the Kingdom. (**Read** Romans 3:10-12)

Summarize and Transition: In the end, Jesus will declare those who do not do the Father’s will to be lawbreakers. He will do so not out of malice but in honesty because that is their nature. Whether they are deceived church folk or devious charlatans seeking to deceive others, those who do not accept the will of the Father as presented in the Sermon on the Mount and the gospel message will miss out on the Kingdom. Jesus, as God in the flesh and the Savior who died for the world, has the authority to declare who is right with Him. If

¹ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 403. Polhill cites Lake and Cadbury when he writes, “In the Paris collection of magical papyri, various Old Testament terms are found, such as Iao (for Yahweh), Abraham, and Sabaoth, terms which would have sounded exotic to Greeks and Romans. One spell reads, ‘I abjure thee by Jesus, the God of the Hebrews.’ Another from the same papyrus reads, ‘Hail, God of Abraham, hail, God of Isaac, hail, God of Jacob, Jesus Chrestus, Holy Spirit, Son of the Father.’”

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we do not believe this, we simply have to look for the evidence of His authority. That is what He is going to point us to next.

3. WISDOM (MATT. 7:24-29)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew 7:24-29.

Explain: Much can be said about this passage, but basically, we can see that **The Authority of Jesus and His Words are revealed in the results.** There are two realities presented in Jesus' analogy: (1) Everyone builds a house, and (2) Everyone faces trials in life. The house we build is our life *and our eternity*. The words of Jesus apply to the outcome of our life here and in the hereafter. A man or woman who builds their life on the words of Jesus will stand firm in the face of hardships in this life. Sickness, poverty, tragic loss, all these things and more will buffet us, but in Christ we can withstand them and hold to the faith. Moreover, a man who builds his eternity on the words of Jesus and the gospel message will be able to stand in His presence on judgment day.

We need to remember that this life is not the end, but in the end, Jesus' authority will be demonstrated. Regardless of a person's outward performance in this life, if his foundation is not built on Christ, he will not stand. Verses 28 and 29 help us apply this to our lives.

Reread Verse 28-29 (See Notes Box.)

Explain: The people were astonished by Jesus' teaching. The content and the presentation were both worthy of their astonishment. Matthew tells us that he spoke differently from other teachers of His day. Jesus did not appeal to the authority of others. He did not cite other teachers except when He wanted to counter their arguments (Matthew 5). However, "The ultimate question of the Sermon on the Mount from Jesus is not just 'What do you think of my teaching?' but 'What do you think of me?'" (Preaching, 199) It is one thing to be astonished at Jesus' teachers and even the authority with which He teaches. It is something else to submit to His authority. Only through submission to Jesus will we build a house that will withstand the trials of this life and the consequences of sin.

Summarize and Transition: We must be people who hear and **act on** Jesus' words. We must be what Spurgeon calls a "doing hearer." (Spurgeon, 84) "As R. T. France states succinctly, 'The teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is not meant to be admired but to be obeyed.'" (NAC, 134) And it can only be obeyed fully when a person repents of sin and submits to the rule and reign of Christ through the gospel message.

CONCLUDE

You can search for a lot of things online. But the Truth can only be found in the words of Jesus and in His Word, the Bible. The internet is not the highest authority in our lives; Jesus is. Whether we believe it or not, Jesus has the authority to **declare who is right and who is right with Him**. We can be right when we base our lives on Him and His words. We can be right with Him when we build our eternity on Him. We can maintain an upright life when we build our foundation on His words.

Challenge:

Encourage group members to:

1. Take stock of their beliefs. Are they based on Scripture?
2. Take stock of their faith. Is it based on the work of Christ?
3. Take stock of their foundation. Is it built on the words of Christ?

Notes:

Romans 3:10-12

¹⁰as it is written: **There is no one righteous, not even one.** ¹¹There is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. ¹²All have turned away; all alike have become worthless. There is no one who does what is good, not even one.

Matthew 7:28-29

²⁸When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, ²⁹because he was teaching them like one who had authority, and not like their scribes.