

Matthew 7:15-23: Misunderstood and Misapplied

Five Ways This Instruction Is Misunderstood

1. **The _____ of Jesus' Instruction**
Who does Jesus actually address in this passage?
 2. **The _____ of the Phrasing**
What do these words and phrases actually mean?
 3. **The _____ of Evaluation**
What exactly are we supposed to be examining?
 4. **The _____ of Evaluation**
Why does Jesus give us this instruction?
 5. **The _____ of the Application**
How far should we extend this teaching?
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Matthew 7:15-23 (ESV)

"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? 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. Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"

Exegesis vs Eisegesis

Exegesis:

Drawing meaning _____ of the text

The careful, systematic study of Scripture to discover the _____, intended meaning of the author.

Exegesis asks: "What did the author of this passage say and mean to the original audience?"

Eisegesis:

Reading meaning _____ the text

The practice of interpreting Scripture by imposing one's own ideas, experiences, or preconceived notions onto the text.

Eisegesis subtly asks: "How does this passage support what I already believe?"

The Goal: Let Scripture _____ us what God thinks and cares about.

Why Do We Unintentionally Misunderstand Scripture?

When we begin Bible study with our own questions rather than the text's intended message, we create a new interpretive framework.

1. _____ + **Vector** = **Destination**
Beginning with our concerns rather than the biblical author's purpose shapes every subsequent interpretive decision.
2. _____ **Bias in Interpretation**
We unconsciously search for evidence that supports our preconceived conclusions rather than allows the text to challenge our assumptions.
3. **Cultural Lens** _____
Our modern context can obscure the ancient context, and God's correction of that context, leading us to miss the author's understanding and concerns.
4. **Proof-Text** _____
Isolating verses from their literary and historical context to support predetermined theological positions.

The remedy is to begin with careful _____ work, allowing the text to set the agenda for our understanding and application.

Three Critical Interpretive Mistakes

1. Mistake the _____ of Biblical Words

Assuming contemporary definitions for ancient terms, or imposing theological concepts that developed centuries after the text was written. Words carry _____ and cultural baggage that must be carefully examined.

2. Mistake the _____ of Biblical Statement

Misunderstanding the type of literature, the author's intent, or the scope of the statement. Is this a universal principle, a specific cultural application, or a contextual response to a particular situation?

3. Mistake the _____ of Biblical Statement

Extending the text beyond its intended scope or applying it to situations the original author never envisioned. This often results in _____ applications that miss the heart of the passage.

Each of these mistakes compounds the others, leading to interpretations that may be sincere but are fundamentally disconnected from the biblical author's intended message.

The Proper Flow of Bible Study

1. _____

What does the text say? Careful reading to identify the facts, structure, and literary features of the passage without interpretation.

2. _____

What does the text mean? Using historical context, grammar, and literary analysis to understand the author's intended message.

3. _____

How does this relate to its truth and others in Scripture. Is there a command or an enduring principle that applies to us today. This cannot contradict the Scripture or abandon the passage.

4. _____

How should we respond? Drawing appropriate implications for contemporary faith and practice based on sound interpretation.

These three steps must function in proper sequence and relationship. _____ provides the foundation, interpretation builds understanding, and application completes the process of engaging Scripture faithfully.

When we skip observation and interpretation to rush toward application, we risk building our spiritual lives on unstable hermeneutical ground.

The Subject of Jesus' Instruction

The Need to Identify _____

"By their fruits ye shall know them" (Matthew 7:16 ASV). This is one of the key points in Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, and in context he is speaking of _____ in the church who come in sheep's clothing "but are inwardly ravenous wolves" (Matt. 7:15), leading disciples astray."

Kevin VanHoozer, Biblical Authority After Babel, p. 1

The context of Matthew 7:15-23 is crystal clear: Jesus is warning his disciples about _____ who will infiltrate the community of faith. This is not a general principle about evaluating all Christians, but a specific instruction about discerning those who claim to speak with _____ authority.

The imagery of "sheep's clothing" and "ravenous wolves" indicates _____ and spiritual danger. These are not merely ineffective leaders, but dangerous counterfeits who pose a serious threat to the flock's spiritual welfare.

Understanding the subject correctly is foundational to proper application of this passage.

How to Identify False Prophets

The Introduction

"Beware _____"

Jesus begins with a clear warning about spiritual deception within the community of faith.

The Response

"Lord, Lord, did we not _____?"

They claim spiritual authority and divine endorsement of their ministry.

The Objection

"We cast out demons, did miracles, and prophesied in your name"

They point to supernatural manifestations as evidence of their authenticity.

The Meaning of the Phrasing

"_____ " Analysis

This is not a universal statement applying to all believers. Rather, it's a _____ statement: "Out of everyone who says 'Lord, Lord,' one group does not belong—the false prophets."

The phrase creates distinction, not condemnation of all who claim Christ.

"You Will Know Them by Their _____"

This specific phrase is used by Jesus only in Matthew to refer to _____ religious leaders (see Matthew 12:33-35).

The context determines the meaning: this is diagnostic language for spiritual leaders, not general Christian evaluation.

The Criteria of Evaluation

Not a _____ of Fruit

The problem is not that false prophets produce no results. In fact, they may be quite successful by external measures and produce impressive spiritual manifestations.

Not _____ of Their Fruit

Jesus doesn't critique the quality of their spiritual activities. They genuinely cast out demons, perform miracles, and prophesy. The issue isn't their spiritual giftedness.

The Presence of _____ Fruit

The problem is fundamental: despite their impressive spiritual resume, they practice _____ (anomia). Their ministry contradicts God's revealed will and character.

Key Insight: False prophets can be supernaturally gifted and outwardly successful while fundamentally opposed to God's purposes. External spiritual manifestations alone are insufficient evidence of divine endorsement.

The criteria Jesus establishes focuses on _____ with God's revealed character and commands, not merely on visible spiritual effectiveness or charismatic appeal.

The Purpose of Fruit Evaluation

1. **Identify those who are _____ prophets sent by God** - Distinguishing authentic from counterfeit spiritual authority
2. **Identify who truly _____ for God** - Recognizing legitimate spiritual leadership

3. **Identify who deserves spiritual _____ in your life** - Making wise decisions about spiritual mentorship and guidance
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The Extent of Application

- **Centered on textual meaning** - Applications should flow from the passage's original intent
- **Limited to grounded implications** - Extensions beyond the text's scope risk eisegesis
- **Consistent with biblical teaching** - Applications must never contradict clear scriptural commands and principles

Three Tiers of Application

Tier 1: _____ Application

Direct textual meaning

Tier 2: _____ Reference

Implied but supported by text (Malachi 3:6)

Tier 3: Neither _____, Nor _____

Speculative applications beyond textual warrant

Sound application builds from Tier 1 foundations, carefully considers Tier 2 implications, and avoids unsupported Tier 3 speculations.

Matthew 7:15-23 Correctly Understood and Applied

Subject

Identifying _____

Jesus specifically addresses the need to discern those who falsely claim to speak with divine authority within the Christian community.

Meaning

Christ Followers Should Be _____

Believers must exercise discernment regarding those who claim prophetic authority, as spiritual deception poses a real threat to the church.

Criteria

Evaluate Message, _____, and _____

Examine whether their teaching, approach, and overall ministry align with God's revealed character and commandments, not merely their spiritual effectiveness.

Purpose

Follow Leaders God Has _____

The goal is positive identification of authentic spiritual authority, enabling believers to receive legitimate spiritual guidance and protection.

Proper Application

Identify the fruits of a false prophet's ministry by examining whether their _____ and practice demonstrate lawlessness (opposition to God's revealed will) despite impressive spiritual manifestations. This passage equips the church to make wise decisions about spiritual leadership and authority.

When we interpret Matthew 7:15-23 within its proper context, we discover a powerful tool for church health and spiritual protection, rather than a weapon for general Christian criticism.