

Authority Acknowledged

JESUS'S WORDS HAVE AUTHORITY.

“Authority” is my *favorite* word to describe the Bible. I’ve also used two other terms not found in the Bible. When applied to the Bible, “inerrant” means “does not contain an error.” “Infallible” means “cannot contain an error.” These words are accurate but “authority” is a better word I use to describe the Bible. Matthew used the Greek word for “authority” in Matthew 7:29 (as well as nine other times in his Gospel account).

Authority means “the Bible has power over how I live my life.” Authority governs the way I live and provides principles and rules for me to follow. It also demands that I think, act, and speak in certain ways that are positive in my relationships with God and people—and that I don’t think, act, or speak in other ways that are harmful to my relationships with God and with people.

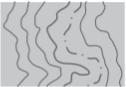
Three days after I graduated from high school, I enlisted in the United States Air Force and flew to San Antonio, Texas, for basic military training. Those six weeks gave me a new perspective on authority. During my first four years of service to America as an enlisted man, I experienced more of what authority meant.

The time I spent at DaNang Air Base in South Vietnam provided me reasons that authority was necessary. One May night in 1972 when the loudspeaker informed us that we were under attack, I put on my flak jacket and helmet and jumped into the foxhole *immediately*. That night a jagged piece of metal (from a rocket shot into the base) missed my head by less than an inch. Had I not responded immediately to that authority, only God knows what would have happened.

After completing my four-year enlistment, I studied and graduated from Baptist College at Charleston. I spent the next eight years at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, graduated twice, and became a pastor. Then I became a college and seminary professor, USAF chaplain, and after earning my doctorate in New Testament and Greek, I became an editor of Adult Sunday School material at Lifeway Christian Resources in Nashville, Tennessee. Over the seventy-four plus years of my life, I have had even more insight into what God’s authority over my life means.

Matthew 7:1-29

Matthew 7 opens with Jesus’s teaching on not judging (vv. 1-6) and His teaching on asking and giving (vv. 7-11). Jesus then summed up the Old Testament teachings on relationships—the Golden Rule—“whatever you want others to do to you, do also the same for them” (v. 12). He described the way to enter God’s kingdom and taught that few would find it (vv. 13-14). Finally, Jesus concluded by contrasting the character and behavior of false prophets and true disciples (vv. 15-20) by obedience (vv. 21-23) and by wisdom (vv. 24-27). Matthew ends the chapter by describing the reaction of the crowd to Jesus’s sermon (vv. 28-29).


 ▶ EXPLORE THE TEXT ◀
 

Fruit (Matt. 7:15-20)

Jesus continued His Sermon on the Mount by warning His listeners of false prophets, who are deceptive and dangerous. He taught that false prophets are recognized by their fruit (character and behavior). True disciples can be identified by their good works. Judgment and eternal punishment await those who aren’t true disciples.

VERSE 15

“Be on your guard against false prophets who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravaging wolves.”

The function of a prophet was to declare God’s will and word into the situations the people were facing. The function of the priest was to represent the people. Today, pastors lead churches in both the prophetic role and priestly role.

Jesus’s role in the sermon was prophetic. As the human Word of God, He declared the original intent of God’s written Word, and that set Jesus apart from all others. Jesus’s command to His disciples was to **“be on your guard against false prophets.”** *Be on your guard* has been translated most frequently as “beware” (ESV, KJV) and less frequently as “watch out for” (NIV). The Greek word means to “hold the

mind towards,” “pay attention to,” “be cautious about,” and other similar warnings. The grammatical form of this Greek verb means that Jesus’s disciples must be constantly on alert for *false prophets*.

In addition to Old Testament prophets, Paul (Acts 20:28-31), Peter (2 Pet. 2:1-3,17-22), and other New Testament writers also addressed the problem of false prophets. These false prophets may have been the same enemies of the gospel that Paul wrote against in Galatians: Judaizers—people who taught a person had to practice Judaism in addition to trusting Jesus to be saved. If they were not the same, they were a similar group Jesus often spoke against in Matthew which included the scribes and Pharisees (see especially the “woes” of Matt. 23:13-36).

What defines the *false prophets* was their inability to understand and teach God’s intent for His Word. These false prophets also were deceptive; they appeared externally to be helpful (**sheep’s clothing**) but internally were harmful (**ravaging wolves**).

What should Jesus’s followers do about these false prophets? The task of those who follow Jesus is not to “shoot the wolves” or even to “disrobe” them of their sheepskins. Jesus’s disciples’ task is to hear and obey the words taught by Jesus.

VERSES 16-18

“You’ll recognize them by their fruit. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree produces good fruit, but a bad tree produces bad fruit. A good tree can’t produce bad fruit; neither can a bad tree produce good fruit.”

The principle behind the statement **“You’ll recognized them by their fruit”** is repeated elsewhere in the New Testament (Matt. 12:33; Luke 6:43-45; Gal. 5:19-23; Jas. 3:10-12). In Luke’s “Sermon on the Plain” (Luke 6:17-49), Jesus said that good and bad people are revealed in the same way trees are “known” by their fruit (vv. 43-45). In Matthew’s account, Jesus used a form of the same Greek word translated *recognized*. In outward appearance, true prophets and false prophets look the same (like sheep). The difference becomes apparent in the **fruit** they produce. **Good fruit** is doing the will of God. Jesus reminded His disciples that **grapes** do not come from **thornbushes** nor do **figs** come from **thistles**.

From those two examples Jesus then stated, **“In the same way, every good tree produces good fruit, but a bad tree produces bad fruit.”** It is impossible for a good tree to produce bad fruit or a bad tree to produce good fruit.

VERSE 19

“Every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

Again, a **tree** refers to a person and the **fruit** to that individual’s actions. The false prophets would face God’s judgment for their actions. They would be **cut down and thrown into the fire**. The form of these words in the Greek indicates an ongoing action and may also look toward God’s final judgment.

These actions of cutting down and throwing into the fire first appear in John the Baptist’s warning concerning the coming of God’s judgment and wrath (Matt. 3:10; Luke 3:9). These words also point to Jesus’s parable of the “Wheat and Tares (or Weeds)” in Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43. Similar language also appears in Jesus’s words concerning the vine and the branches (John 15:1-8).

In light of the eternal security of the believer, it’s important to emphasize that verse 19 should not be understood to support any kind of works-based righteousness. We are saved by faith in Christ alone (Eph. 2:8-9). But we are saved to do good works (v. 10). We should also stress that believers’ lives should exhibit spiritual fruit. Good works don’t save us, but in reality are the result of being redeemed, the fruit of our salvation. As Paul pointed out, good works grow out of our faith in Christ Jesus through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit (Gal. 5).

VERSE 20

“So you’ll recognize them by their fruit.”

Jesus repeated this principle—**“So you’ll recognize them by their fruit”**—which He first mentioned in verse 16. His repetition of this principle indicates the importance that His followers of all ages constantly assess the speech and actions of those who preach and teach us. We are to observe their words and deeds to make sure they are teaching us the whole gospel.

Perhaps the reason Jesus used the metaphors of both bad trees/fruit and wolves is this: Jesus’s followers can become “fruit inspectors” by simply waiting and watching. This waiting doesn’t produce significant problems. However, wolves devouring sheep calls for immediate action. When Jesus’s followers are deceived by false teaching, they lose influence instead of being light and salt in a dark world. This requires more than simply waiting; it requires immediate action by Jesus’s disciples.



Explore Further

Read the article “Works” on pages 1668–1669 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What are the ways Paul and James addressed the relationship between faith and works? As stated in the article, how are their teachings “two sides of the same coin”?

Obedience (Matt. 7:21-23)

True disciples affirm Jesus’s lordship, submit to His authority, and obey His commands. Neither words nor actions are suitable proof that someone follows Jesus. People transformed by the gospel are true disciple, and they will seek to obey Jesus in all areas of their lives.

VERSE 21

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.”

Whereas verses 15-20 warned of the fruit of the false prophets, verses 21-23 further explain the character of the false prophets by focusing on their words and actions and their inability to enter heaven. Verses 21-23 also indicate three ways these false prophets/teachers claimed to be true disciples of Jesus: lip service, spectacular signs, and doing these signs in Jesus’s name (based on His authority).

The genuine measure of discipleship is not what any person *says*, but what he *does*. The proverb “Your actions speak much louder than your words” certainly applies to this verse. The criteria for entry into heaven is not only what a person says about Jesus, although confession is important (Rom. 10:9). A person’s actions reveal to whom his heart truly belongs. Actions must be consistent with the Father’s will. However, the false teachers who used the title **Lord** without full commitment or obedience to the Lord provides evidence of lip service rather than a genuine relationship with God the Father through Jesus the Son.

The doubling of Jesus’s title/role (“**Lord, Lord**”) is found three times in the Gospels (Matt. 7:21,22; Luke 6:46). The use of the term translated *Lord* is found on the lips of true disciples as well as those who were seeking to be disciples. It was much more than merely a term of respect

such as “Rabbi” or “Master.” The early (perhaps the earliest) Christian confession is “Jesus is Lord” (Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3; Phil. 2:11).

This is the first time in Matthew that Jesus used His favorite address for God—“**my Father**” (occurs thirteen times in Matthew). Just referring to God as *Father* does not guarantee a person’s entry into heaven. Rather, the criteria for entrance into heaven is that the individual “**does the will of my Father in heaven.**” (It is the “good fruit” in Matt. 7:17-18.) Jesus also referred to “the will of my Father in heaven” in Matthew 12:50 where He linked that phrase with those who are His brother, sister, and mother. In John 6:40 Jesus states that “the will of my Father” is “that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him will have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” The things Jesus taught are the equivalent of “the will of my Father in heaven.”

In Greek the term translated **does** refers to continuous actions, habits, and the prevailing character traits of an individual as opposed to a singular event. Matthew’s Gospel gives special emphasis to the Son’s commitment to doing Father’s will. By His unwavering obedience, Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies of the promised Messiah, the Anointed One.

VERSES 22-23

“On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, didn’t we prophesy in your name, drive out demons in your name, and do many miracles in your name?’ Then I will announce to them, ‘I never knew you. Depart from me, you lawbreakers!’”

The phrase **on that day** refers to the judgment day at the end of this age, the day the “age to come” begins (that is eternity). The **many** refer to the false teachers in Jesus’s day and also identify those today who claim to know Jesus without really being known by Him. The way the three questions (about prophecy/confession, exorcism, and other miracles) are formed in Greek expects a positive answer. Yet these people did not submit to Jesus’s lordship. These individuals expected commendation; Jesus pronounced condemnation. Jesus’s response was that He **never knew** them. The only way that people are saved is by having a personal relationship with God the Father (knowing Him) through Jesus the Son made possible through the Holy Spirit’s conviction of sin that person had committed that leads to repentance and faith in Christ. Paul revealed that even a person who does great miracles but fails to have love is “nothing” (1 Cor. 13:2).

Jesus's words "**Depart from me, you lawbreakers!**" mean these people have no place in God's eternal kingdom. The term *lawbreakers* stands in opposition to those who do "the will of My Father in heaven" (v. 21).



Explore Further

Read the article "Obedience" on pages 1176–1177 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What is the

- definition of obedience? What does it mean to be obedient to God?
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Wisdom (Matt. 7:24-29)

The wise person is the one who has responded to Jesus's teachings and the fool is one who has rejected the gospel. The wise man is prepared for the day of judgment, but the one who hears and doesn't act on Jesus's words will face calamity.

VERSE 24

"Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock."

The six verses in this section comprise the third time Jesus stressed the need to choose between life and destruction (see also vv. 21,23). The key in choosing is obedience to Jesus's teaching, specifically His teaching found in the Sermon on the Mount. This section begins with the choosing of Jesus's teachings and concludes with the crowd's amazement at the authority of Jesus's teachings.

Jesus's words in the Sermon on the Mount were primarily directed toward His disciples (5:1-2). But now at His conclusion to the sermon both His disciples and the crowd are challenged to do more—to put Jesus's teaching into practice in their lives. The word **Therefore** links these verses on doing rather than merely hearing to Matthew 7:15-20 which stresses the fruit of righteousness and 7:21-23 that more fully stresses doing God's will. In Hebrew thought a person fails to hear genuinely until that person **acts** on what has been heard.

The tense of the Greek verb for *acts* indicates a lifestyle rather than individual actions.

Most rabbis of Jesus's day cited other highly respected rabbis to support their pronouncements. But Jesus cited Himself as the authority to make His pronouncements as the phrase **“these words of mine”** indicate. In ways we don't completely understand, God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are one. When one Person of the Trinity speaks, the others are in agreement. Jesus had already indicated that His words were the Father's will (v. 21). For grammatical reasons, the phrase *these words of mine* refer specifically to Jesus's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.

The word **wise** in this verse (and “foolish” in v. 26) point back to a central feature of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. This contrast between the *wise* and the *foolish* appears numerous times in the Old Testament, particularly in the prophets and in the wisdom literature (Prov. 3:35; 10:14; 12:15; 13:20). The comparison of God the Father to a rock is also found in the Old Testament (Deut. 32:4; 1 Sam 2:2; 2 Sam. 22:3; Ps. 18:2; Isa. 17:10). This stresses His strength and stability.

The imagery of construction would have been familiar to Jesus's audience. The wise builder constructed his dwelling on a secure rock to protect it against flash floods that occurred during sudden storms. Those who built their houses on sand were exposed to the destructive forces of nature. In Jesus's parable, the two builders (the wise and the foolish) represent the two responses of people to the sermon. The similarity between the two is this: both groups *heard* Jesus's teaching. The difference was that the wise people continued *to do* what Jesus's taught. Although present throughout the sermon, in His conclusion Jesus stressed the necessity of His followers *doing* what He taught rather than merely *hearing* what He said. “Obedience as the necessary result of true hearing was emphasized in the OT [Old Testament] . . . Judaism . . . and the NT [New Testament] . . . Both the Hebrew and the Greek connote the message that one has not truly ‘heard’ . . . until one has ‘obeyed.’”¹

In His conclusion Jesus stressed that His true followers are not those who merely profess to be His disciples but in reality those who do God's will (Matt. 7:21; meaning also to follow Jesus's teaching). Jesus used the parable (or example) of the two builders to reinforce this truth that doing is the ultimate mark of true discipleship.

VERSE 25

“The rain fell, the rivers rose, and the winds blew and pounded that house. Yet it didn't collapse, because its foundation was on the rock.”

Jesus joined the Old Testament prophets as He likened storms to God's judgment. For those who construct their houses on rock—who listen to and act on Jesus's words—no matter what forces try to destroy the house, **“it didn't collapse, because its foundation was on the rock.”** This echoes the Old Testament's blessings on those who follow the Torah (the law) and curses on those who fail to follow it. Paul certainly reflects this in his writings (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Jesus may have had in mind a double application of this strong *foundation*. On the physical side, He may have referred to a natural disaster and the preparation needed to help lessen its effects. On the eternal side, Jesus may have been looking forward to the events that would surround His second coming.

Like the house built on the foundation of rock that does not collapse under the pounding of storms, those who build their lives on the foundation of Jesus's teachings and act upon them need never fear. The solid foundation of Jesus's teachings provides strength and security to those wise people who live their lives according to Jesus's teachings.

This points to the truth of the old adage “Only what's done for Jesus will last forever.” These verses, along with many others in the New Testament, answer the question of what it means in God's eyes to be a genuine Christian. Those who merely listen to Jesus's teaching without obeying them are, in Jesus's words, fools. In Matthew 7:15-23, Jesus exposed these “false Christians.” The point of this contrast between the wise and foolish builders (here and in Luke 6:47-49) is the choice the two “builders” made in acting upon or not acting upon Jesus's words.

VERSES 26-27

“But everyone who hears these words of mine and doesn't act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, the rivers rose, the winds blew and pounded that house, and it collapsed. It collapsed with a great crash.”

Along with rhythm, a primary element (perhaps the primary element) of Hebrew poetry is parallelism. A simple definition of parallelism is saying the same thing using different words (Ps. 120:2; Prov. 3:13). Various types of parallelism are in the Bible. Verses 26-27 provide an example of antithetic parallelism—presenting the same meaning by using opposite words. An example of this in English is a speaker saying “it is hot, not cold.”

These two verses present the opposite of the two verses preceding them. Listening to (obeying) Jesus’s teaching produces good results; not hearing (not obeying) Jesus’s teachings produces bad results: collapse. Therefore, if we want to avoid destruction from the storms of life, we will obey Jesus’s teachings.

VERSES 28-29

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

The crowds were **astonished** at Jesus’s teaching. The reason was that Jesus **was teaching them like one who had authority, and not like their scribes**. The *scribes* were considered experts in what the law said, and as their authority they cited statements made by previous rabbis. However, as Jesus pointed out, these scribes often missed God’s original intent in the law (5:21-48). Jesus’s source was Himself and God the Father. The Greek word usually translated as *authority* also conveys the idea of power. Jesus said His authority and power came from His heavenly Father (Matt. 11:27; 28:18; see John 5:19-23).

 **Explore Further**

Read the article “Salvation” on pages 1403–1404 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What role does obedience to Jesus’s commands play in the life of the believer?

1. Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 275.