

ALL I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS IS ...

MATTHEW 7:15-23

CHRISTMAS EVE SERVICE

By Pastor John Carlini, D.Mn

*SINCE SPIRITUAL GIFTS ARE MORE EXOTIC THAN SPIRITUAL FRUIT,
WE TEND TO GRAVITATE TOWARDS THE GIFTS AND FORGET ALL ABOUT THE FRUIT.*

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ALL I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS IS ... MATTHEW 7:15-23

Christmas was always a crazy time around our house when the kids were young. They really got into it: letters to Santa Claus, visiting Santa at the mall, and making out Christmas wish lists.

One year, they were getting a little more crazy than usual, so Luing and I sat them down to remind them what the real meaning of Christmas was all about.

Joe and Maribeth could tell that we really believed what we were telling them, but it all sounded like nonsense to them. They thought something was really wrong with us, so they went off to their room and held a conference as to what could be the problem with Luing and me.

After about an hour, they came to a conclusion as to how to solve the problem. They called us to the living room and had us sit down on the couch. Since Maribeth was the oldest she acted as the spokesperson; "Dad, Mom, we've been thinking about what you told us about how important it is to give at Christmas. With all of our talk about Santa, you must have felt left out. We don't want you to feel this way. So here is what we have decided. Santa doesn't have to get us all the presents. If it will make you feel better, we'll give you a list too."

When I was a kid, two things would start appearing at our house during the Christmas season; gifts and fruitcake. Everybody was really excited when the gifts started to arrive, but the tortured looks and jokes would start when the fruitcakes made their appearance. During my childhood, I would have to say that the most frequently re-gifted item was the fruitcake. People would say something like, "We'll give this to Aunt Edna," or the name of an unpopular friend or relative you felt obligated to buy a gift for. Also the suggested usages of fruitcake were often discussed. The most popular suggestion was that we use the fruitcake as a doorstep.

There was one exception -- the fruitcakes that were soaked in brandy. My father would carefully examine the fruitcakes. If they were the kind soaked in alcohol, he and I would eat them. But if not, they would meet the same fate as the rest of the ordinary non-respected fruitcakes. I often tell my mother that if my dad had tasted one of Yoko's Brandy soaked cakes, he would have divorced my mom and married Yoko.

I. DON'T BE FOOLED BY KNOCK-OFFS (VS 19-21)

Not All People Who Sound Religious And Do Religious Things Truly Belong To God

Nevertheless, fruitcakes don't get much respect. Everybody however, is enamored by gifts. You know that's pretty much the same as it is for believers. Here is the main idea of this evening's text. **SINCE SPIRITUAL GIFTS ARE MORE EXOTIC THAN SPIRITUAL FRUIT, WE TEND TO GRAVITATE TOWARDS THE GIFTS AND FORGET ABOUT THE FRUIT.** As a church family, we are coming to the end of our second round of *the Purpose Driven Life* campaign. We have been talking a lot about identifying our gifts, personalities, talents, passions and experiences. We have been looking to use them in serving God and one another. All that is excellent, but we must not forget that how we serve is as important as serving. Remember we are called to serve in love and with grace. Jesus thought this was pretty important as well. Jesus spoke a great deal about religious hypocrites. In verses 19-21 He warns us, "Don't be fooled by knock-offs." In other words, **NOT ALL PEOPLE WHO SOUND RELIGIOUS AND DO RELIGIOUS THINGS TRULY BELONG TO GOD.**

A. A CONVINCING KNOCK-OFF (21)

Verse 21 describes a convincing knock-off. I have spent a lot of time on the east coast around New York City. About 10 years ago, I started hearing a lot about an area called Soho, located in Chinatown. As you can see, I'm not a designer guy, so someone had to explain to me what Soho was all about. It's a place where you can buy fake designer merchandise. What they do is make cheap copies of famous clothes, purses, accessories, etc. They put designer labels on them, and they look very much like the real thing. But in reality, they are cheap imitations. Satan cannot create an

original thing. But what he is good at is making fakes. He gets Christians and unbelievers focused on the wrong things, overemphasizing good things to the exclusion of others, or distorting good things to the point of making them evil. Since spiritual gifts have so much potential to do good, we often overemphasize them to the neglect of spiritual fruit.

Really verses 19-21 are all about demonstrating this principle. Verse 21 puts it nicely. It describes Christian knock-offs. Jesus says, "Not all people who sound religious are really godly. There are many people in the church today who go around talking "Christianese," do all sorts of religious stuff, act pious, and even think of themselves as pretty good. They may even talk a lot about Jesus, calling Him Lord, and do it very publicly. But Jesus says there will be people who look like authentic Christians that are not really Christian at all. They do not belong to Him and they will not enter heaven. In the context of this passage, these people may even exhibit something that looks like spiritual gifts.

But look at the heart of the matter. The principle is described in the last sentence of verse 21, "The decisive issue is whether they obey my Father in heaven." In other words, it is not about displaying good works or demonstrating great spiritual power. It is about simple obedience.

B. THE REAL MERCHANDISE (20)

Verse 20 gives us a way to identify the real merchandise. If I were to go to Soho and buy some sort of a designer fake, I wouldn't know the difference. But Jesus gives us a way to identify authentic Christianity. Jesus said that the way we can identify authentic Christianity by the fruit it produces. This would be a good time to name the fruit of the Spirit. The interesting thing about the fruit of the Spirit is that it is singular, yet it is described as 9. It is almost like the fruit of a fruitcake. They are all mixed together in the life of a believer. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. Fake Christianity may demonstrate a lot of good works, legalistic keeping of rules, and demonstrate great spiritual power. But the fruit of the Spirit will be conspicuously missing. The real merchandise is proven to be authentic by looking at the fruit. I imagine that people who identify knock-offs of designer merchandise know how to identify it by looking for key characteristics that only the original factory can build.

C. AUTHENTICATING THE MERCHANDISE (19)

Verse 19 demonstrates the process for authenticating the merchandise. When knowledgeable shoppers look for the exact stitching or identifying marks for the original and don't find them, they will reject the merchandise as a fake. That is unless you are really looking to buy a fake. In Christianity, if people who claim to be Christian are not found with the fruit of the Spirit, Jesus will reject them as fakes. I don't know how you evaluate your Christianity, but I know that I look for the fruit of the Spirit at work in my life. If it's not manifesting itself in me, then I start the process of confession and repentance. Authentic Christianity has nothing to do with me preaching a good sermon, teaching a good lesson, counseling someone, or appearing to be holy. It has everything to do with "How" I am doing these things. Satan could teach a good bible lesson, preach a good sermon, and counsel people. But only God can manifest love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control in my life. Satan, the world, or I can't fake that. So let's remember this. **NOT ALL PEOPLE WHO SOUND RELIGIOUS AND DO RELIGIOUS THINGS TRULY BELONG TO GOD.**

II. DON'T BE FOOLED BY THE GLITTER (VS 22-23)

We Are Attracted To Flashy Displays Of Power. But Displays Of Power Can Be Misleading.

We know that, yet we are continually attracted to all sorts of preachers, ministers, and church people who seem to demonstrate a lot of spiritual power and run around doing all sorts of good works. But verses 22-23 remind us not to be fooled by the glitter. It seems to me that **WE ARE ATTRACTED TO FLASHY DISPLAYS OF POWER. BUT DISPLAYS OF POWER CAN BE MISLEADING.** Please don't miss the words of Jesus because they are clear and they are plain. The reason we become confused in life is because we don't accept life the way it comes to us as described in the bible.

A. MIGHTY FINE GIFTS (22)

Verse 22 describes some mighty fine gifts. On the judgment day, many will stand before Jesus and say, "Lord, Lord, I did so many things in Your Name. I prophesied, I cast out demons, I performed many miracles ... all in Your Name." Those are all demonstrations of the miraculous Spiritual gifts. They are prophecy, healing, miracles, etc. We might say things like, "I tithed, I taught Sunday school, I pastored a church, I feed the poor, I visited the sick, I served on the board, did all sorts of work for the church and went to church every Sunday. I even brought my share of the doughnuts and bagels. These people did some pretty awesome things for the church. Take time to think about the powerful display. They prophesied. In other words, they spoke the word of God powerfully and what they predicted came true. Think about it. Great preachers, even mediocre preachers like myself could be preaching and teaching great sermons, but not be an authentic Christian. These people cast out demons. That's a pretty impressive display of spiritual power. And they performed dramatic miracles, perhaps healing sick people, or many other things. Our society is a celebrity driven society. If people hear a church is healing the sick, casting out demons, and miracles are happening, and to boot, there is a real dynamic preacher at the church, they flock there. But remember, all that glitters is not gold. Fools' gold also looks like the real thing.

B. MIGHTY DISAPPOINTING VALUE (23)

Verse 23 describes a mighty disappointing value assigned to these works. As a pastor who preaches and is involved in all sorts of these ministries of healing, casting out demons, etc. ... these words of Jesus are sobering, "I never knew you. Go away; the things you did were unauthorized." Can you believe it? People who go around doing all sorts of good works and things for the church may be rejected when we stand before Jesus on the judgment day. You know we have been talking a lot about getting involved in the ministries of Devon Church. And we should because Jesus commands that we do these things. And we should value the Spiritual gifts He has given us. But we must not lose sight of what is important and what order of importance things have. We all like the thought of receiving Spiritual gifts because in some sense they demonstrate power. Power and control appeal to us. The church in Corinth was perhaps the richest church in the New Testament when it came to Spiritual gifts. Yet they were the most destructive church. They were using their Spiritual gifts to tear the church and one another apart. Hear this warning. **WE ARE ATTRACTED TO FLASHY DISPLAYS OF POWER. BUT DISPLAYS OF POWER CAN BE MISLEADING.**

Let's review where we are. First of all, it is possible to look like a Christian and not really be an authentic Christian. Fake Christians tend to focus on outward acts and appearances. We tend to think that people who do a lot of good things, give a lot of money, talk about Jesus a lot, and display some real spiritual power are authentic Christians. But if we judge this way, we are setting ourselves up to buy a fake.

III. DON'T BE FOOLED BY SIMPLICITY (VS 15-18)

We Tend To Be So Proud That We Often Overlook What Is Of Authentic Value.

Verses 15-18 instruct us not to be fooled by simplicity. We oftentimes over think and over complicate Christianity. **WE TEND TO BE SO PROUD THAT WE OFTEN OVERLOOK WHAT IS OF AUTHENTIC VALUE.** I don't think this is overly complex. There are many Christians who run around doing all sorts of good stuff, but they are often angry, judgmental, and bitter. You feel no grace or mercy from those people. Jesus makes it simple.

A. MIGHTY FINE LOOKING FRUIT (15-16)

Verses 15-16 describe some mighty fine looking fruit. Jesus warns us that there will be many people, including pastors, who will come to His people looking all holy and good and powerful. But they may be like wolves looking suck the life out of the community. The fruit of the wolves is that they are self-absorbed. Life is all about them. They may do good works, but in the end, it is all about them getting recognition. These people are all about surface appearances. Jesus says that good people, authentic Christians are identified by their fruit. Again, let me state what will characterize the authentic Christian, the one who belongs to Jesus, and what will characterize their authentic godly works. They will be characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control. Look for those in people.

B. MIGHTY FINE VALUE (17-18)

Because as verses 17-18 demonstrate, the fruit of the Spirit holds some mighty fine value. A fake Christian may be able to do some things that really look good and holy. But you cannot fake the fruit of the Spirit because that comes directly from God. We don't like to focus on the fruit because when God's fruit takes hold of us, we find ourselves in a servant position. We are no longer in control and we are no longer in the higher, powerful position. We are in the lowly servant position. That takes a lot of humility. And that's the problem. **WE TEND TO BE SO PROUD THAT WE OFTEN OVERLOOK WHAT IS OF AUTHENTIC VALUE.** The next time you see a fruitcake and are tempted to ridicule it, re-gift it, or use it as a doorstop, use it as a reminder that even though the fruit of the spirit is not very exotic and puts us in a lowly servant position, it is the one real test that authenticates our status as God's children.

IV. EPILOGUE

SINCE SPIRITUAL GIFTS ARE MORE EXOTIC THAN SPIRITUAL FRUIT, WE TEND TO GRAVITATE TOWARDS THE GIFTS AND FORGET ABOUT THE FRUIT. When we think about doing ministry or think about the real meaning of Christmas, let's remember that fruit is as important as gifts. And the real presence of Christ is more important than the presents we are going to receive. Richard Blanchard tells this great story about presence.

"A military expert was asked to deliver a speech in St. Louis, Missouri. It was during World War II and he had a difficult time getting a seat on the plane. However, he secured it and departed from his hometown, Boston. En route he was 'bumped' in Washington, D.C., by an army general who had top priority. Disgruntled and frustrated, the lecturer sat and cooled his heels while his plane left for Missouri.

His disappointment was nothing, however, compared to the general's disgust when he arrived in St. Louis only to discover that the speaker had to cancel out. The general's dismay was complete when he realized that the speaker was the man whose plane seat he had preempted in Washington!

The story points up an interesting question for the Advent Season: Are our presents to one another crowding out His presence in our midst?"

As we continue through the *Purpose Driven Life* campaign, let's ask the question, "Are we as interested in manifesting the fruit of the Spirit as much as we are the gifts? I hope so. Because Jesus seems to think they are even more important.