The Passages At Issue

19 *Every Tree Without Good Fruit*

But when he [John the Baptist] saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said unto them, Ye offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? (8) Bring forth therefore *fruit worthy of repentance*: (9) and think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. (10) And even now the axe lieth at the root of the trees: *every tree therefore that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire*. Matt. 3:7-10 (ASV).

(14) For narrow is the gate, and *straitened [narrow] the way, that leadeth unto life*, and few are they that find it. (15) Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves. (16) By their fruits ye shall know them. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? (17) *Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit: but the corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit.* (18) A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. (19) *Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.* (20) Therefore by their fruits ye shall know them. (21) Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, *shall enter into the kingdom of heaven*:
but *he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven*. Matt. 7:14-21 (ASV).

**The Warning**

Jesus and John the Baptist in the passages above both make the following statement: “every tree therefore that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.” (Matt. 3:10; 7:19.)

John the Baptist explained his meaning by emphasizing the need to have “works worthy of repentance.” (Matt. 3:8.) He ridiculed the prevalent idea among the Jews that because they were Abraham’s sons (the theory of election of those days), they were somehow a chosen people for personal salvation. John the Baptist rejects this, saying each individual must bring forth good fruit or be cast into the fire. He made the salvation formula very personal. It was not by national election as some supposed. One could not trust in one’s election as Abraham’s son. Instead, one had to bring forth personal fruit worthy of repentance.

Jesus makes this very same statement in the context of warning about false prophets: “Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.” (Matt. 7:19.) Jesus promises burning in fire for every “tree” that lacks good fruit.

What does this expression mean?

**What ‘Bringeth Forth Good Fruit’ Means**

The verb tense for “bringeth not forth good fruit” is the Greek present active participle of *poie*. (*Interlinear Scripture Analyzer.*) The verb *poie* means to do or to make. In Greek, this thus means everyone who “does not keep on producing good fruit” will eventually be cut down and thrown in the fire.
Are Trees An Individual Or A Nation?

Some proponents of cheap grace recognize this passage as a problem passage for their doctrine. They argue that Jesus does not intend to establish good fruit as a criterion for salvation. Rather, good fruit is supposedly a criterion whether a people as a nation are to be rejected. Thus, the burning which Jesus threatens allegedly does not mean *hell* fire. It means supposedly persecution for a people group who are lacking good fruit. Therefore, because it is a nation-group, the suffering supposedly can only mean a temporal suffering. It allegedly does not mean such a people group will end up in hell.

Hence, this view argues a *tree* in this verse is not intended to be an individual. It is supposedly intended to be an entire people group. From this, cheap grace advocates deduce the fire cannot be hell fire, and thus we are to suppose ‘fire’ means merely persecution.

But what does Jesus *really* mean by *tree*? Individuals or nations? In other words, what *object* did Jesus intend to warn?

Jesus in context tells us to test whether a prophet is false or true by means of examining their *fruits*. In Matthew 7:20, Jesus says “surely you will be knowing them from their fruits.” (Incidentally, Jesus says the fruit that proves they are false is because they work *anomia*. Matt. 7:23.)¹

Thus, in context, the warning is about *individuals*, not nations. We are to examine the prophets whether their fruit works *anomia* (*i.e.*, negation of the Law or lawlessness).² We

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1. *Anomia* means either “the negation of the law” or “lawlessness, lawless conduct.” (See my prior book, *Jesus’ Words Only* (2007) at 61.) Jesus and Deuteronomy 13:1-5 tells us that if a prophet has signs and wonders “that come to pass” yet seeks to seduce us from obeying the Law given Moses, then they have evil fruit. This is how you know they are false. This applies therefore to anyone who proclaims Christ, like Balaam, but who thereafter falls because he “teaches [us] to not follow the least command” in the Law of Moses. (Matt. 5:19.)

2. See footnote 1 *supra*.
test their doctrine against the Law given Moses. Was their personal doctrine and actions good or bad? God will do the same with every tree. Then those lacking good fruit, such as those who worked anomia, will go into the fire. Hence, every tree must mean every person. It does not mean every people group.

**Are Only False Prophets & Not Believers Being Warned?**

Some proponents of cheap grace try to argue that Jesus’ message in Matthew 7:19 of cutting down trees without good fruit is limited to false prophets. The false prophets are mentioned in 7:20. Then the argument goes that since false prophets could never have been one who believed in Christ, Jesus is not warning a believer they must have good fruit. The believer can supposedly trust that Christ’s righteousness covers them and they have no personal duty to have good fruit. They allegedly will not be sent to the fire of hell for lacking good fruit.

There are several flaws in this argument. Let’s start with the last one.

First, the covering of Christ is withdrawn from a sinning Christian, but is re-applied to such a Christian upon repentance from sin. So says Apostle John. (1 John 1:7-9, ASV.) Thus, from Apostle John’s statement, one would deduce that Jesus means precisely in Matthew 7:19 that a sinning Christian is a tree without good fruit, and is sent to the fire. Apostle John gives us the reason: in such a case, the blood of Christ no longer covers the sinning and unrepentant Christian. (For more discussion, see page 1 et seq.)

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3. “(7) but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanseth us from all sin. (8) If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. (9) If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (ASV)
Second, even if Matthew 7:19 were a warning to false prophets, such prophets were not persons necessarily who never believed in Christ. It is possible to have been a believer in Jesus Christ, even prophesying of Him, but later fall into damnation. This is precisely the case with the prophet Balaam. Before he became false by teaching it was permissible to violate the Law (Rev. 2:14), Balaam was a believer in Christ and true prophet of Christ. In fact, he is one of the greatest prophets of Christ, as discussed below.4

This means that Jesus’ warning of knowing whether a prophet was false by his fruits meant to direct us to examine even true believers in Christ by this standard. For Scripture actually speaks of a believer in Him (Balaam) — a true prophet of Jesus Christ — who later fell into damnation by working the negation of the commands of God. (Rev. 2:14.)

Let’s study Balaam’s life briefly.

Moses wrote the account of Balaam being filled with the Holy Spirit (Numbers 24:1-2), and then prophesying that a star would rise over Judea signaling the birth of a king who would rule the world. (Numbers 24:17.) This is known as the famous Star Prophecy.

What Is The Star Prophecy?

This is the messianic prophecy that led the Magi in Matthew 2:1 to find the baby Jesus in a manger. The Star Prophecy brought them to a place to worship Jesus as a baby, bringing gifts of frankincense, gold and myrrh.

However, later, Balaam fell by teaching the negation of the Law given Moses. Balaam told the people they could eat meat sacrificed to idols and fornicate. (Numbers 31:16; Rev. 2:14.)

4. You can find a full discussion on this background of Balaam in my prior book, Jesus’ Words Only (2007) at 53-55, 59, 135 et seq.
Every Tree Without Good Fruit

Because Balaam — a true prophet of Christ — negated the Law and seduced the people from following the Law, Balaam later became a false prophet. (Deut. 4:2; 13:1-5.) His work of negating the Law made him have evil fruit. Because he was a tree without good fruit, working negation of God’s commands, we know Balaam is lost despite once being a true believer and prophet of Christ. (Rev. 2:14.)

Thus, there is such a thing in Scripture as a good believing prophet — even one who proclaims Christ — who later becomes false by teaching people not to follow the Law given Moses. It is therefore wrong to assume every false prophet could not originally have been a true prophet and true believer in Christ.5

Accordingly, when Jesus in Matthew 7:19-21 says every tree without good fruit is cut down and thrown in the fire, the term “every tree” is not a warning solely to non-believers. It is not only a warning to false prophets who never knew Jesus. Rather, by “every tree” Jesus means exactly that. By telling us to test prophets in the same context, Jesus did not mean to say look at only non-believers and test their fruit. This same fruit test applies to true believers who proclaim Christ like Balaam did but who later fall by working the negation of God’s law. “Every tree” means exactly that: “every tree.” Thus, merely believing in Christ, as did Balaam, did not insulate Balaam from Jesus’ testing, and finding Balaam turned false. See, Revelation 2:14.

Consequently, Jesus did not intend to exclude believers from the warning about sending to the fire every tree that lacks good fruit. Instead, Jesus was serious when He said every tree is subject to this test. A believer can be like a prophet who becomes a false prophet by the bad fruit of negating the Law. This is why Jesus identified a true prophet of Christ — Balaam — in Revelation 2:14 later becoming

5. See also, 1 Kings 13:1-26 (true old prophet deceives young prophet of Judah, lying to him about a supposed new prophecy that negated a prophetic command God previously gave the young prophet.)
false by teaching the Israelites they could eat meat sacrificed to idols and fornicate. Hence, we know anyone of us similarly lacking “good fruit” can be sent to hell’s fire.

**Similar Lesson In The Parable Of The Sower On Producing Fruit Applies To Individuals**

The fact this good fruit-requirement applies to individuals is corroborated in several ways. First, when Jesus tells the Parable of the Sower in Mark 4:20, He says the saved seed are the ones who “are hearing” (present participle active) the word and are “beside receiving it” (Interlinear Scripture Analyzer) “continuing to produce fruit.” The Greek for produce fruit is in the present active indicative of karpo-phore, and hence it means keeps on producing fruit.

Thus, Mark 4:20 says the one who “receives” (believes) the word and “keeps on producing fruit” is saved. In parallel, Matthew 7:19 says the one does not “keep on bringing forth fruit” ends up in the “fire.” The two passages are corollaries of one another, thereby confirming the meaning of each passage. This parallelism allows us to understand Jesus is talking in Matthew 7:19 about the necessity for an individual to continue to produce good fruit because an individual is clearly in view in the Parable of the Sower in the fourth seed that is saved after producing fruit to the end.

**The Parallel Message In The Metaphor Of The Vine Applies To Individuals**

Furthermore, in John 15:1-6, Jesus gives a statement about burning non-productive branches that parallels Jesus’ threat to burn non-productive trees in Matthew 7:19. This parallel proves Matthew 7:19 is just as much directed to individuals as Jesus’ words were in John 15:1-6. In the latter, Jesus tells the apostles that “you” are the branches and Jesus is the vine. These are true individuals — people, not nations. Jesus then says the branches that “keep staying” in Jesus are continually kept clean and produce fruit. However, those
branches who “do not produce fruit” are “taken away” (15:2). Because they “do not stay”\(^6\) in Jesus, they do not “produce fruit” and are as a branch that has withered. It is cut off, thrown outside the vineyard and “is burned.” Clearly in John 15:1-6, the branch that is burned is an individual. Jesus says the apostles are the branches. They are individuals.

Thus, in the Metaphor of the Vine, Jesus warns an apostle they too can be cut down, just as the tree in Matthew 7:19 is cut down. Jesus warns the apostles likewise in the Metaphor of the Vine that once cut down they will be “thrown outside” and “burned.” Hence, we can be certain that the principle in Matthew 7:19 of being cut off and thrown in the fire for lacking good fruit is one Jesus wants us to understand applies to individuals, even apostles.

The Parallel Passage Of The Parable Of The Fig Tree

In Luke 3:8, after a call to “repent or perish” (Luke 3:2-5), Jesus says in effect “Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.” Jesus says:

(6) Then Jesus told this story: A man planted a fig tree in his garden and came again and again to see if there was any fruit on it, but he was always disappointed. (7) Finally, he said to his gardener, “I've waited three years, and there hasn't been a single fig! Cut it down. It's just taking up space in the garden.” (8) The gardener answered, “Sir, give it one more chance. Leave it another year, and I'll give it special attention and plenty of fertilizer. (9) If we get figs next year, fine. If not, then you can cut it down.” (Luke 13:6-9 NLT)

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6. The Greek word is from meno which is the root of our word remain. It means to stay or continue in one place.
The Warning

Thus, Jesus teaches here to have fruit consistent with repentance. God will help through His Holy Spirit and be patient. But an ultimate judgment based on fruit is coming.

What Does ‘Cast in the Fire’ Mean In Jesus’ ‘Fruit of the Tree’ Message?

What does Jesus mean about “cast into the fire” in Matthew 7:19? Is it a place of smelting Christians so their bad works are burned off but they are otherwise in heaven and not in hell?

Certainly, in context, Jesus means that among those sent to this fire are the false prophets who we will recognize by their lack of good fruits. (Matt. 7:20.) The false prophets who are “cast into the fire” must mean they are sent to hell. However, the warning Jesus gives is broader than merely false prophets. It applies to “every tree.” Thus, because persons who are prophets are clearly one type of tree within Jesus’ meaning, then when Jesus warns the risk to “every tree,” Jesus must mean to warn “every person.”

Thus, from context, we know Jesus is warning everyone who does not have good fruit that they will be cut down and thrown in the fire. If false prophets are in hell, so is every other tree that lacks good fruit.

Fruit Thrown Outside In John 15:1-6 Corroborates That The ‘Fire’ In Matthew 7:19 Means Hell

The conclusion that “fire” in Matthew 7:19 means hell is corroborated once more by John 15:1-6 — the Metaphor of the Vine. Jesus gives the analogous lesson as in Matthew 7:19. Jesus says the branch that does not produce fruit is to be thrown “outside” the vineyard and then burned.

What is the place outside where people wait to be sent into the fire? Is this a place of scolding for the saved? No.

For we know anyone thrown outside to be burned is destined for hell. We know this for several reasons, but the two most important are:
First, Jesus tells us that unprofitable servants who do not produce fruit with the riches (talents) given them are thrown outside to a place of weeping and gnashing. (Matt. 25:14-30.) Because we know there are no tears or weeping in heaven (Rev. 7:17; 21:4; Isaiah 25:8), this place outside cannot be inside Heaven. Jesus likewise tells us this place of weeping and gnashing is meant to signify hell’s fire. (Matt. 13:42, the ensnared are thrown into the “fiery furnace” where there is weeping and gnashing.)

Second, we learn the same thing from Revelation 21:8 and 22:15 — those outside waiting to be burned are the ones going to hell’s fire. In Revelation 21:8, it says “outside” are the “dogs, and sorcerers, and whoremongers, and murderers, and idolaters, and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie.” In Revelation 21:8, we are told these same categories of peoples (cowards, unbelievers, sorcerers, etc.) will be thrown in the “lake of fire.” This must be hell because Revelation 19:20 tells us the devil and the beast are thrown into the same “lake of fire.”

Thus, the sequence in John 15:1-6 of being thrown outside and then burned precisely matches Revelation 21:8 and 22:15. These people — those who did various evil things — are thrown outside the New Jerusalem who then are thrown in the lake of fire.

This means that in John 15:1-6, Jesus wants us to understand those “branches in me” who are found “without fruit” are thrown “outside” to be “burned” must mean they are sent to hell. Then when we look back at the parallel warning in Matthew 7:19 about trees without fruit, we must conclude Jesus means by “fire” the fires of hell itself as well.

**Conclusion**

Jesus is beginning to be repetitive on the same issue. Over and over, it is those who do good things that are resurrected. (John 5:29.) It is not those who merely believe who will be saved. (John 12:42, believing but cowardly rulers. See
Rather, for example, those who have added works of charity can expect salvation, while those who have not, are promised damnation. (Matthew 25:30-46, the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, discussed at page 219 et seq.) Jesus repeats it again here in Matthew 7:19 by saying every tree that does not keep on producing good fruit will be cut down and thrown in the fire. This is a warning as severe as Jesus can make it.

What makes Jesus’ point unmistakable about “fruit” is Jesus gives the same lesson in several obvious parallel statements. See Table 1 below.

For example, Jesus gives the same warning in His Parable of the Unprofitable Servant. That servant does not produce fruit with the riches given him. He is thrown outside to a place of weeping and gnashing. (Matt. 25:14-30.) This place of “weeping and gnashing” is the “fiery furnace.” (Matt. 13:42.)

A second example is that Jesus gives the identical message in the Metaphor of the Vine. (John 15:1-6.) Those who fail to produce fruit are those who fail to keep staying in the vine. Jesus says they are like a branch that is withered, thrown outside and which are later burned.

These and the other passages cited below all corroborate that Jesus intends the literal meaning of His statement: “every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown in the fire” (Matt. 7:19).

### TABLE 1. Parallels Of Statements On Fruit, Profit Or Good Deeds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONDITION</th>
<th>RESULT</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If not keep on producing good fruit</td>
<td>Then cut down and thrown in the fire. Matt. 7:19-21.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you fail to produce any interest/profit on God’s deposit of talents (riches)</td>
<td>Then thrown outside where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Matt. 25:14-30. Place of weeping and gnashing is the “fiery furnace.” Matt. 13:42.</td>
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Every Tree Without Good Fruit

TABLE 1. Parallels Of Statements On Fruit, Profit Or Good Deeds

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<th>CONDITION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Every branch in me that beareth not fruit”</td>
<td>“He taketh it away.” John 15:2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“If a man does not continue to stay in me... can do [produce] nothing [i.e., no fruit]. If not stay in me”</td>
<td>Then “cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and they gather them, and cast them in the fire, and they are burned.” John 15:4-6.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If did “good things”</td>
<td>Then you shall rise to “resurrection to life.” John 5:28-29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If did “bad things”</td>
<td>Then you shall rise to “resurrection of damnation.” John 5:28-29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If to least of brethren of Christ you “gave... meat,...drink, and took... in, and clothed... [or when] sick,...you visited.....”</td>
<td>Then “inherit the kingdom” and enter “into life eternal.” Matt. 25:34, 45.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If to least of brethren of Christ you did not “give... meat,...drink, and... took... in, [or]clothed... [or when] sick,... you [did not] visit....”</td>
<td>Then “depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels” and you “shall go away into everlasting punishment.” Matt. 25:41,46.</td>
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</table>

Why is “good fruit” indispensable? Because it represent the works of a repentant heart. Such works are not mere proof of an antecedent repentance of the heart which alone would suffice to save. No! Such works are the repentance worthy of the antecedent repentance of the heart. You have stolen? You pay back, like Zaccheus did.

The Bible always required that if you stole, you could not just sincerely say you were sorry. The one who stole but who had not repaid could not ask God to apply atonement. Instead, you have to first pay back what you stole with interest. (Exodus 22:1-15; Leviticus 6:1-5; Numbers 5:5-8; 2
Conclusion

Samuel 12:6.) As Ezekiel says, eternal life⁷ is by repentance from the heart combined with actual works worthy of repentance:

> [I]f the wicked restore the pledge, give again that which he had taken by robbery, walk in the statutes of life, committing no iniquity; he shall surely live, he shall not die. (Eze 33:15.)

This is why Prophet John-the-Baptist told the Pharisees they could expect baptism avail them nothing without first doing erga axios metanoia — works worthy of repentance. (Matt. 3:8.) They thus lacked the vital fruit that Ezekiel said was necessary to be cleansed and hence live. Prophet John-the-Baptist in a similar vein explained what he meant about “works worthy of repentance.” He said that “a tree without good fruit [i.e., works worthy of repentance] is cut down and thrown in the fire.” Hence, without works worthy of repentance, one lacks good fruit, and you will go to hell.

Jesus in Matthew 7:19 deliberately quotes John so as to emphasize the necessity first to have works worthy of repentance — what John had equated with good fruit in the identical expression that Jesus borrowed. Otherwise, the cleansing which baptism represents would have no effect in God’s eyes. (Notice neither baptism nor atonement are effective to cleanse without works worthy of repentance / reconciliation with the one you offended. See page 5 supra.)

This explains perfectly why the evangelical sermon of Jesus and the apostles primarily focused on repentance.

> “And they went out and preached that men should repent.” (Mark 6:12.)

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⁷. Ezekiel uses life to mean eternal life, and death to mean damnation. See, Ezekiel 33:12-16, where Ezekiel says the dead receive life by repentance, and the living go from life to death by sinning and disobedience. Hence, Ezekiel speaks of dying and living in a spiritual, not physical sense.
This explains why Peter’s first two sermons that brought the first converts concluded with this exhortation:

“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of sins.” (Acts 2:38.) “Repent ye, therefore, and turn around, that your sins may be blotted out.” (Acts 3:19.)

Note again how blotting out sins — atonement — is conditioned upon repentance. Peter clearly understood what Ezekiel and Jesus previously declared.

Peter did not invent this evangelistic speech. For his first two sermons were simply obeying what Jesus in His last message expressly taught was to be the evangelical message:

And He said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” (Lk. 24:46-47.)

Repentance was key because without works worthy of repentance, we lack the good fruit which is essential to escape the fire. (Matt. 3:8;7:19.) However, if we have such works worthy of repentance, we shall “live” forever. (Eze 33:15.)

Where have we heard this same message before that faith alone, without works is dead and cannot save? Ah, yes, the message from Jesus’ brother in the flesh — James. He said in total accord with Jesus, Ezekiel, Peter, and all the prophets:

(14) What [is] the advantage, my brothers, if someone is saying he has faith but is not having works? Such faith is not able to save him, is it?** *(17) So also such faith if alone, is dead if it is not [also] having works****

(24)... [A] person is justified by means of works and not by means of faith alone.... (James 2:17-26.)