Testing the Prophets



Week Nine: November 22–28
Read This Week's Passage: Matthew 7:13–29

Like a Diamond
inTro

A real diamond is one of the most valuable gems on earth. Of course, many other things can be made to look nearly identical to diamonds, but these are ultimately worthless. The best way to tell whether a diamond is real or fake is, of course, to test it. Most tests are not conclusive on their own, but if a diamond passes several tests, one can be confident that the diamond is real.

A diamond is one of the strongest materials on earth. A genuine diamond can withstand very high temperatures and dramatic temperature changes. To test a diamond, you can heat it with a lighter or a torch and then drop it into cold water. A real diamond will not be damaged, but a fake diamond will likely shatter.

The gift of prophecy is more valuable than any diamond, but someone who claims to have this gift cannot simply be taken at face value. That claim must be tested (1 Thess. 5:19–21). No single piece of evidence confirms a prophetic ministry. Anyone who claims to be a prophet should be evaluated according to a variety of biblical tests to determine whether the prophetic manifestation is genuine. The Bible offers certain non-negotiable qualifications for true prophets that must be relied on to discern the difference between true and false claims.

One important test is to assess the role of the supernatural. During the Exodus, the Lord spoke to His people about the prophetic gift among them, saying, "Hear now My words: If there is a prophet among you, I, the LORD, make Myself known to him in a vision; I speak to him in a dream" (Num. 12:6). A prophetic message and calling involves the supernatural; it undeniably goes beyond a mere impression or idea that a person may have.

A prophet receives direct communication from God, often through prophetic dreams or visions (Dan. 8:1; Isa. 1:1; Acts 9:10, etc.), that may be accompanied

by marked physical phenomena. When Daniel received visions from God, certain unmistakably supernatural phenomena occurred (Dan. 10:7–19). Daniel stopped breathing and lost his strength as he went into vision. He was then dependent on God for the duration of the experience. Although those who were with him did not go into vision, the presence of the Divine was so strong that they ran away and hid in terror. God sometimes uses physical phenomena to draw attention to a prophet so that the prophetic message will be noted.

Though visible phenomena show that a supernatural power is at work, this does not automatically mean the person experiencing the phenomena is inspired by God (Deut. 13:1–3). Satan can demonstrate the supernatural too. Apart from physical phenomena, a prophet's message must also be tested. For us to validate someone as God's messenger, they must pass all the biblical tests of a prophet.

The Bible is always the final standard of any claim to inspiration (Isa. 8:20). Prophets must be tested by comparing what they say with what the Bible says. A true prophet will never contradict, minimize, or draw attention away from biblical truth. That's why knowledge of Scripture is so crucial for those who want to follow the Lord and not be deceived by false teachers or false prophets.

In the Old and New Testaments, successive prophets often highlighted and pointed back to previous prophetic writings as the standard for their own prophetic ministry. Later biblical prophets revealed additional insights into God's plans and the way of salvation, but they never contradicted basic principles and concepts already given by God.

The Old Testament foundation for understanding the plan of salvation was established in the first prophecy given by God Himself, in Genesis 3:15. The sacrificial system exemplified this plan, but the details of how God's Lamb, Jesus Christ, would come, live, and die for humanity were slowly clarified in later prophecies. The biblical record shows that God unfolds truth when His people are able to comprehend it. This allows the understanding of truth to deepen with each new generation.

There is, however, a crucial point that cannot be overemphasized: new revelations of truth will never contradict the truth God has already given.



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Make an outline or mind map of Matthew 7:13–29. Write out verses 15–20 from the translation of your choice or rewrite them in your own words. Note the differences between true and false prophets.

Circle repeated words/phrases/ideas.

Underline words/phrases that are important and have meaning to you.



Draw **Arrows** to connect words/phrases to other associated or related words/phrases.

What special insights do your marks overall seem to point to?

In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7), Jesus outlined the foundations of the Christian church, which included instruction for testing prophets. Jesus warned that history would be full of false prophets (Matt. 7:15) and gave believers tools to detect the difference between the true and the false: "By their fruits you will know them" (Matt. 7:20).

The quality of a fruit can be judged only over a period of time. A tree does not bear fruit instantly. However, over time, a tree becomes known by its fruit. A tree that bears bad fruit or no fruit cannot hide the problem forever. Eventually, the fruit reveals the truth about the tree. Many false prophets have been exposed for leading people into sin. People claiming to be prophets sometimes speak the most arrogantly, live the most extravagantly, and lead the most shocking double lives. By seeing a prophet's character and watching what results come from his or her messages, we can see whether that prophet is drawing others to God or leading them away from Him. In their words and lifestyle, a true prophet reflects the character of Jesus.

Being a prophet, however, does not make a person sinless or infallible. We see mistakes or character flaws in the biblical examples of Jonah, Paul, and Peter (Jon. 1:1–3; Acts 15:36–39; Gal. 2:11–14). God alone is flawless; His messengers never are. Prophets, like all of us, have weaknesses, but the trend of their lives must clearly be toward God, and even if they speak truth, the prophets must not negate their ministry by a lifestyle that is contrary to the message they share.

No prophet perfectly imitates the example of Jesus, but a true prophet is committed to the principles and lifestyle of God's kingdom (Matt. 7:16–20). Anyone who claims to be God's messenger yet whose lifestyle blatantly contradicts the message he or she carries should be regarded with suspicion.

Although the prophetic call is difficult, many prophets showed good fruit during their ministries. For example, Moses successfully led the children of Israel through the wilderness (Deut. 34:10–12). Haggai's faithfulness encouraged the inhabitants of Judah to start rebuilding the second temple, which had been put on pause for nineteen years (Hag. 1:12). Isaiah's unflinching ministry served four Judean kings, guiding them through a tumultuous period and pointing indisputably to the Messiah (Isa. 1:1; 39:5, 6; 53:4–6). We cannot forget Daniel's heartfelt confession (Dan. 9:15) or Jeremiah's tear-filled lament (Jer. 9:1), both made on the people's behalf. Notwithstanding how they often were persecuted and mistreated, God's prophets always showed a genuine love for Him and His people, which is a hallmark of a fruitful ministry.

Questions to explore:

What kind of fruit might you find in the life of someone who claimed to be a prophet?

How often have men or women of God disappointed you by their actions or character flaws? What important lessons can you learn from those experiences, remembering that God alone is perfect?

Journal your answers at the bottom of the previous page.

People often think of a prophet as someone who predicts the future, but that is only one aspect of a prophet's work. Prophets lead people back to God's Word and provide counsel, warning, and encouragement.

Besides helping people know about and prepare for future events, prophecies help people know which prophets can be trusted. The predictions of a true prophet should always happen as prophesied: "When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him" (Deut. 18:22). God's people should understand that a true prophet's predictions are reliable.

Conditional prophecies depend on how people respond to God's messages.

Many prophets delivered competing messages in Jeremiah's days. Most of them promised a bright future for Jerusalem, but Jeremiah predicted disaster for the city. He challenged people to compare his predictions with those of other prophets of his time and see whose prophecies were true (Jer. 28:9, 15–17). The people could know which prophet was trustworthy by identifying whose predictions were accurate.

While helpful, this test can be challenging to apply because some prophecies are conditional—they might not come to pass as the prophet predicted if the conditions were not met. We see this idea with Jonah and his warning against Nineveh. Jonah's prediction was fairly short and pointed: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jon. 3:4). Even though he was sent by God (and was therefore a true prophet), it didn't happen as he predicted. Why?

Conditional prophecies depend on how people respond to God's messages. God promised that even after He announces judgment against a wicked nation, He will reverse the approaching judgment if that nation repents of its sins (Jer. 18:7, 8). Similarly, when God promises to prosper a nation, that prophecy is given on condition of their faithfulness to Him. God will withdraw His promised blessings from the nation that turns away from Him (Jer. 18:9, 10). If the people change their attitudes and behavior, the predicted event may not happen. The people of Nineveh took Jonah's prediction to heart and changed their ways, so God did not destroy them (Jon. 3:10). When later generations forgot this prophetic warning and Nineveh again became an evil, cruel place, God destroyed it. Our choices greatly determine our future realities.

After looking at your scribed and annotated text, what are your main takeaways from the passage? What questions emerge? What parts are difficult?

Why is it important to understand the concept of conditional prophecy? How could this understanding help us better grasp biblical truth?

Memorize your favorite passage from Matthew 7:13–29. Write it out multiple times to help with memorization.



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How do the following passages help us understand common traits of false prophets?

A pleasing message:
- Isaiah 30:9, 10
- Jeremiah 5:30, 31
- Luke 6:26
- 2 Timothy 4:3, 4

Guided by their own hearts:
- Jeremiah 23:16, 17
- Ezekiel 13:1–10

What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with how identify a true prophet?

Review the passage you memorized from Matthew 7:15–20.

What a prophet teaches about Jesus is another key test. In accordance with 1 John 4:1–3, exploring whether a prophet believes in Jesus' incarnation quickly rules out people who claim to be prophets from other major world religions, or from those who claim to connect to the spiritual realm without subscribing to any particular religion. If a person "does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh," that person "is not of God" (1 John 4:3).

When John wrote these verses, he was thinking of false teachers who were teaching that Jesus was not really a human being and only appeared to be human. This test, however, goes further. It isn't saying only that a prophet should agree that Jesus was a real person who lived on earth. Even many secular historians believe this about Jesus. John was dealing with a very specific issue at the time—but his prophetic words contain important truths with a wider application for later generations as well.

True prophets believe that Jesus was God incarnate, yet also fully a human being (John 1:1–3, 14). They teach that Jesus was tempted and yet had no sin (Heb. 4:15; 2 Cor. 5:21). Their ministry helps people understand Jesus' mission to save sinners (John 3:16). They build people's faith in the resurrection and help people look forward to His second coming (John 11:25; 14:1–3). They embrace the complete truth about Jesus—His mission, sinless life, atoning death, resurrection, high-priestly ministry in heaven, and Second Coming. It must be more than an intellectual agreement that Jesus lived on earth. Christ must be the center of a true prophet's teachings and not just something added on. His or her messages should lead people to a saving relationship with Jesus.

The Spirit-inspired prophetic word is God's spotlight, dispelling the darkness in us until Jesus, the Morning Star, dawns in our hearts, and the prophetic gift unites us with Him and continually points us to Him.

Prophets who uplift Jesus do not promote themselves or try to create their own following (Acts 4:12). They're ready to serve and don't take advantage of those to whom they've been sent. At the same time, God's prophets are human beings and, like the rest of us, sinners who need the gospel.

Questions to consider:

Why is understanding that Jesus, who is fully God, died as our substitute and bore the penalty for our sins so central to our faith? What do we lose if we lose that teaching?

Journal your responses and a personal prayer to God at the bottom of the previous page.

From the inception of the church, Ellen G. White has faced similar challenges to those of many biblical prophets. Some questioned her prophetic claims after her very first vision in December 1844. This skepticism and distrust led Sabbath-keeping Adventists (later called Seventh-day Adventists) to develop arguments in support of Ellen White's prophetic gift.

First, they addressed whether the gift of prophecy ended with Jesus, offering theological justification for their belief that it will continue until the end of time. Based on Joel 2:28, 29, Revelation 12:17, and other scriptures, they argued that the prophetic gift would be visible in the "last days" and would become an "identifying mark" of God's end-time people.[1]

Second, early Adventists noted that Ellen White's gift had a positive influence on believers. For example, her prophetic insights helped to unify believers attending the late 1840s Sabbath Conferences when they disagreed on biblical doctrines. Her gift continued to bear "good fruit" in the decades that followed, and her writings remain influential within the Seventh-day Adventist community to this day.

A third argument relates to the supernatural elements of her visionary experiences. As we have noted previously, while in vision, Ellen White exhibited supernatural manifestations—reporting facts and circumstances unknown to her, revealing future events, exhibiting greater-than-natural strength, not breathing while in vision, and being unable to control or influence the timing of her visionary experiences, among other phenomena.

Fourth, in harmony with 1 John 4, Ellen White's prophetic messages consistently directed people to the Scriptures and uplifted Christ. She wrote: "Lift up Jesus. . . . Let all your powers be directed to pointing souls, confused, bewildered, lost, to 'the Lamb of God.'"[2] At her last address to a General Conference Session (a business meeting where leaders from the world church assemble), she held up the Bible and said, "Brethren and Sisters, I commend unto you this Book."[3]

Seventh-day Adventists today continue to highlight these evidences for the validity of Ellen White's gift. While these arguments are sound, a powerful "proof" of her gift is a personal experience with her writings. As the psalmist David urged: "Taste and see that the LORD is good" (Ps. 34:8). It's only when we prayerfully read Ellen White's writings that we can evaluate her prophetic claims.

One place to begin is with her small but most popular volume, *Steps to Christ*. Follow this with the five-volume *Conflict of the Ages* series, which traces the great controversy theme from Genesis to Revelation. Her writings are widely available in paper and electronic versions (see EGWWritings.org) and have been translated into many languages. Test her for yourself.

To discover more, visit www.WhiteEstate.org/ABSG/9.

1 See Gerhard Pfandl, "The Gift of Prophecy and God's Remnant Church," *The Gift of Prophecy,* chapter 4.

2 Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers* (1915), 160.

3 Arthur Lacey White, *Ellen G. White: The Later Elmshaven Years: 1905-1915,* vol. 6 (1982), 197.

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As we journey through this study, it's important to engage deeply with the material and reflect on its implications for our faith and daily lives. In your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group), use the outline of questions below to lead a thoughtful discussion based on this week's main passage and supporting verses.

Examining the fruit:

1. Why is it important to examine the life and ministry of anyone claiming to be a prophet? Matt. 7:15–20

2. Though true prophets have good fruits, do they ever make mistakes and have character flaws? Jon. 1:1–3; Acts 15:36–39; Gal. 2:11–14

Testing the prophets:

1. How should we respond to someone claiming to receive prophetic messages? 1 Thess. 5:19–21

2. What types of supernatural manifestations can be expected with prophets? Num. 12:6; Dan. 10:7–17

3. Are supernatural manifestations and fulfilled prophecies necessarily proof that someone is a true prophet? Deut. 13:1–5

4. How should every prophet be tested? Isa. 8:20; 1 John 4:1–3

5. How must a true prophet relate to the truth of Jesus? 1 John 4:1–3

Personal reflection: *Supernatural occurrences are more common in some cultures than in others. Why must we be very careful when exploring whether something supernatural really is of God? What are some ways we can tell?*

Predicting the future:

1. How do fulfilled predictions help verify whether a prophet is true or false? Jer. 28:9, 15–17

2. In seeing whether a prophecy has come true, why is it important to understand and remember the nature of conditional prophecies? Jer. 18:7–10; Jon. 3:4–10

3. How do conditional prophecies influence your perspective of God's character?

Personal reflection: *If someone came to you claiming to be a prophet with a message for you, how would you respond? What do you believe are the most important tests of a prophet?*

Key takeaways to remember:

- Prophets should not be automatically rejected but should be carefully tested.
- True prophets have good fruits in their lives and ministries. Their messages uplift Jesus and agree with the teachings of the Bible.
- Prophets accurately predict the future, but some prophecies are conditional on people's responses.