

Our Lord distinguished between what a man is and what he brings forth, between a man's character and his conduct. Yet though He distinguished between these things, He did not separate them. In fact He asserted that there is an organic connection between the two. A man does what he is.

In Matthew 7:15-20 the Lord Jesus made specific application of this general principle by telling his disciples how to tell true from false prophets:

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor figs from thistles, are they? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit; but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits.

Those who are false prophets demonstrate that they are false by what they produce in their own lives and in the lives of those who listen to and follow them; those who are true prophets also demonstrate that fact by what they produce. And in general, good persons produce good actions and evil persons produce evil actions. What a person is known by what he or she does.

Paul puts his finger on what it is in human beings that makes them sinners. He speaks of sin as a principle inherent in human nature, and sin as actions that human beings perform. In Romans 6:12-16 he writes:

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law, but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be! Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?

Notice that Paul on the one hand speaks of sin as something that operates in us in such a way as to attempt to get control of us, something that has evil desires ("lusts"), something to which we should not present our bodies, and something that can no longer have mastery over us as believers. On the other hand, he speaks of sin in terms of actions that transgress the Law of God. He asks, "Shall we sin?" The first use of sin refers to the sin that operates in our nature; the second refers to the sin that we commit. Sin is both something in our nature (not as created, but as fallen; thus we speak of a sinful nature) and expressions of that nature.