

Matthew 7:15–23 (Trinity VIII)
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
August 7, 2022

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. In this passage Jesus is speaking to all Christians, whether male or female, old or young, wise or foolish, rich or poor. In this passage, Jesus is speaking to you. All Christians are to beware of false prophets infiltrating the Church. Sometimes people think it is up to the pastor, or the elders, the church council, or the seminaries, and the hierarchy of the church to guard against false teaching in the church. Yes, God has given many gifts to His Church for building up the body of Christ. We thank the LORD for shepherds, for fathers in the faith who guide us into the Scriptures. We thank the LORD for those He has raised up throughout the history of the Church to guard the Church from false doctrine. We thank the LORD for our parents or grandparents, for mentors and godparents, who brought us up in the Christian faith or brought us to the Christian faith. We thank the LORD for those who continue defending the faith and teaching it to us. We are not alone in this spiritual battle. But in the end all Christians must know and use God's Word for themselves to defend against false teaching.

This morning Jesus warns us against false prophets who come in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. Jesus is *not* warning against wolves who come in wolves' clothing. We already know not to go near them! The children of this world walk in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God, callous, given to the pleasures of this life, and greedy to practice every kind of impurity (Eph 4:17ff, Rom 1). We, the baptized, avoid living the way non-Christians live. We see clearly from Scripture and

from nature that their ways are not God's ways. The world walks according to its own way, the way of death. We walk our LORD's way, the way of life (Jer 21:28), and so we avoid living the way the world lives. We know that if we come near those wolves we'll be devoured.

But false prophets come in sheep's clothing. They come from within the church. On the outside they look like any other prophets. A prophet simply proclaims God's Word. A prophet simply receives God's Word, the Holy Scriptures, and declares that Word of God unto you. And on the surface that's exactly what a false prophet does, too. False prophets are so tricky because they seem to be preaching God's Word. They use parts of Scripture, often out of context, to undermine the totality of Scripture. Or they use principles drawn from Scripture to attack concrete teachings of God's Word. They enter as innocent sheep, but beware the wolf underneath!

A number of weeks ago (Trinity IV), we considered how false prophets take the command to "judge not" out of context, turning God's Word into an excuse to overlook sin. False prophets, contrary to God's word, tell us it is unchristian and unloving to judge or condemn sin. In a similar way, false prophets abuse God's Word when they use the truth that "God is love" to undermine God's condemnation of our sin. Yes, God is love . . . and in love God condemns our sin. In love God sent us a Savior, Jesus Christ our LORD, a Savior from sin, death, and the devil. True love does not condone sin. True love condemns sin and turns the sinner to our loving Savior. False prophets proclaim love according to the world's standards rather than love according to God's standards. False prophets enter the church, or grow up in the midst of the church, but they fail to teach the whole truth of God's Word. They neglect the whole counsel of God. And in this way they lead people both inside and outside the church to a false understanding of Christianity.

It has been said that wherever God builds a church, the Devil builds a chapel next door. Wherever God's Word is proclaimed in its truth and purity, there Satan, that old serpent, appears, that he might tear down what God is building up. And of course, Satan, like the false prophets, does not reveal his true identity. He camouflages himself as an angel of light (2 Cor 11:14). And if Satan disguises himself as an angel of light, it is no surprise if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Consider the Fall of man in Genesis 3. The serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field. "Did God really say? God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." There is truth to what the Devil told Eve. In eating of the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve would know good and evil. The Devil is a liar (John 8:44), and like any good liar he has to include just enough truth to make the lie go down easy. It's the same thing when Satan, that ravenous wolf, came to our Lord in sheep's clothing, trying to tempt Jesus in the desert. The Devil twists Scripture and uses just enough of the truth to mask his great lies. But Jesus does not fall for it. He uses the sword of the spirit, the Word of God, to counter the Devil's attacks.

So it is with false prophets. Like their father, the Devil, false prophets come with their great signs and wonders. They twist God's Word and take it out of context so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect (Matt 24:24). That's why Jesus warns all Christians ahead of time: "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits." Jesus is saying you will be able to tell what kind of prophet you are dealing with based on what they say and what they do. The proof is in the pudding. Just as a healthy tree bears good fruit and a diseased tree bears bad fruit, a true prophet speaks and acts in accordance with God's Word in its entirety while a false prophet

speaks and acts contrary to God's Word. The well-being of a tree can only be determined from its fruit. A prophet can only be judged as true or false based on what he says and does.

So how do we judge a prophet's fruit? How do we Christians judge a preacher of God's Word and the teachings we hear in church? First, we look to the words and deeds of the great Prophet, our LORD Jesus Christ. In Deuteronomy 18, Jesus is referred to as the prophet greater than Moses. Jesus did not just speak God's Word to the people. Jesus is God's Word, the Word of God in human flesh. Like all true prophets, Jesus was sent by God to proclaim the Kingdom of God (John 8:28; 17:8), a kingdom He Himself was ushering in. Jesus was welcomed into Jerusalem as a prophet (Matt 21:11), and there He was reviled, persecuted, and falsely accused (Matt 5:12). That's how God's true prophets are treated. That's also exactly what the Old Testament said would happen to the coming Messiah, the prophet greater than Moses. He was flogged and crucified for our sins (Matt 23:34), in accordance with the Scriptures. He was buried and rose again from the dead for our justification, in accordance with the Scriptures, and then He appeared to many witnesses, who then wrote Scripture (1 Cor 15:3-5). Jesus's resurrection is proof that His message was true, proof that the Scriptures as a whole cannot be broken, because it is those very Scriptures that so accurately prophesied the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (John 5:39; 10:35). We recognize Jesus as the greatest prophet, *the* Prophet, by His fruits, by His words and deeds, by His death and resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus is proof of His testimony. It is a validation of everything Jesus said and did. It is a validation of the Scriptures, which bear witness to Christ. We test the spirits by comparing what they say and do to what we know Christ said and did, as recorded in the Scriptures (1 John 4:1). If the message of a modern prophet does not line up with what the great prophet, Jesus, says in the Bible and about the Bible, then you can be certain you are dealing with a false prophet. Flee from that wolf!

In Galatians 1, the Apostle Paul warns against such false prophets, saying: “even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.” In Galatia, false prophets were preaching a different Gospel. They were distorting the Gospel of Jesus Christ by adding human works to the grace of God. The basic contours of the Gospel were still there. There was enough truth to make the lies palpable. But in the end a little leaven leavens the whole lump (Gal 5:9), that is, a little error can ruin the entire teaching. The false prophets were recognized by the fruit of their teachings. Their addition to the Gospel took away from the honor that belongs to Christ alone and put the salvation of many at risk. The false prophets were not preaching in accord with the entire counsel of God. They were adding to God’s Word because they were wolves in sheep’s clothing.

At the end of Romans, St. Paul again warns against following false prophets. He says to “watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive” (Rom 16:17–18). The only way to ward off the wolves in sheep’s clothing is to immerse ourselves in the doctrines of Scripture that we have learned. Like the Bereans, we receive the message with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things are so (Acts 17:11). With a basic understanding of the faith, a Christian can judge rightly whether or not a prophet is speaking the Word of God or if he is speaking words simply to suit the hearers and their passions. God gives us the Holy Spirit so that we can distinguish between the truth of God’s Word and the myths of this world. In the Catechism we have the basics of the Christian faith, a summary of Scripture distilled to its foundations. God’s Law is summarized in the 10 Commandments. The Creed outlines everything the triune God does for our creation, redemption, and sanctification. The

Lord's Prayer teaches us what God provides us and what we are to ask for. Baptism, Absolution, and the Lord's Supper show us how God continues coming to us today with every grace and favor. With the basics of Christianity you are able to judge any teachings you hear. Anything that does not conform to the totality of God's revelation to us is to be rejected. And anyone who does not teach in conformity with God's entire revelation is to be rejected.

So study the Bible. Immerse yourself in its teachings. Learn the basics of the faith and go over them again and again. Learn the catechism by heart and use the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God, to defend against Satan and his false prophets. They will try to deceive you, coming in sheep's clothing, like the prophets of God. They will know the Scriptures and try to use them against you. False prophets, like the Devil, will appear as angels of light. But beware, behind the facade is a ravenous wolf seeking to devour you. Look at the fruits of what they teach. How does it compare with Scripture? Listen to the voice of your shepherd, the Word of God. Hear the great prophet, our Lord Jesus Christ. Search the Scriptures daily to see whether these things are true. "Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever" (Jude 23-24). In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.