

Matthew 7:15–23
Trinity VIII
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
July 21, 2024

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,

From the very beginning, in the Garden of Eden, man has been making distinctions. God created a diverse world. He created everything, then He divided the unformed matter into opposites. And then He filled those places with diverse forms of life. Light was separated from darkness, the heavens were separated from the earth, and the dry land with its vegetation was separated from the waters. Then God filled the day with the sun and the night with the moon and the stars. He filled the heavens with birds and the waters with fish according to their kinds. God filled the dry land with the beasts of the earth, the livestock, and creeping things all according to their kinds. Finally, as the pinnacle of His creation, God created man in His image to rule over all creation. Adam was given the task of working and keeping the garden as well as naming all the animals. From the beginning, man as both male and female would make distinctions, systematizing, organizing, naming, and reveling in the unity and diversity of God's magnificent creation.

Of course, after the Fall into sin so much changed. All creation was cursed because of Adam's sin. The ground would bring forth thorns and thistles, making man's cultivation difficult. Anyone who has spent time cutting back the blackberry vines in your backyard or rooting out bull thistle from your garden knows how painful the thorns can be, even if you're wearing gloves. Or if you've brushed by stinging nettle here or poison ivy in North America, you

experience firsthand how all creation fell in Adam's Fall. The pain of fallen creation is a reminder that because of sin you will die and return to the dust from which you were taken.

After the Fall into sin, man continues making distinctions in creation. The listings of clean and unclean animals from the time of Noah's ark through to the Levitical Law are an exercise in taxonomy. But after the Fall, the distinctions we make in creation are not just about exercising dominion and rejoicing in the diversity of God's created world. The distinctions we make in creation are also a matter of life and death. Modern man, with the luxury of modern grocery stores and restaurants, often forgets how critical distinguishing between different plants and animals truly is. In North America, Coral snakes and King snakes seem indistinguishable to the uninformed. But in the South you know that not recognizing the difference could be deadly. "Red touches yellow, bite a fellow. Red touches black, you're ok Jack." The same goes for eating wild plants or foraging for mushrooms. Some of the most common edible plants in the wild also have an evil twin you must beware of. Queen Anne's Lace and Poison Hemlock look the same, until you know what to look for. Since the Fall into sin, man's distinguishing of the plants and animals has become a matter of life and death.

In our Gospel Lesson this morning, Jesus uses man's ability of discernment in creation to say something about man's discernment in spiritual matters. Jesus speaks of animals and plants as a warning against following lies that are dressed up as the truth, or death that has the appearance of life. The principles of discernment at play in the physical world mirror the principles of discernment in spiritual things. Spiritually speaking, proper distinction between what is true and what is false is a matter of life and death. Jesus says: "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves." A prophet speaks on God's behalf. In many and various ways, God spoke to His people of old by the prophets.

Abraham was a prophet (Gen 20:7). Moses was a prophet, who pointed to the coming of the True Prophet, Jesus Christ. The prophetic books of the Old Testament were written by prophets in both the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel. There were also many nameless prophets in the Old Testament, as there are many nameless prophets today, who simply speak God's Word into the lives of God's people.

But not all prophets are the same. Already in Deuteronomy 18, God warns against false prophets: "the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die." A true prophet is sent by God to proclaim God's truth to God's people. A false prophet can look the same on the surface. He might speak like a prophet of God, but if he wasn't sent by God then he's a false prophet. Or if he speaks not on behalf of the true God, but for other gods—for demons—then he is a false prophet. Or if what he says turns out to be a lie, then you know that this prophet is no prophet of god, but a false prophet. That same prophet shall die. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

False prophets come in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. Sheep's clothing means they look innocent. They look like sheep, like they're part of God's flock. They might even resemble the Lamb of God Himself. In Matthew 24:5, Jesus warns: "many will come in my name, saying 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray." False Christians look like true Christians. They might confess the Creed. Or they might use the Bible as a cover for their errors. False prophets use the leaven of false doctrine to leaven the entire lump. They include just a little bit of poison in what otherwise seems safe to eat, and so they trick Christians into harming themselves spiritually.

A wolf in sheep's clothing seems innocent enough. They are welcomed into the flock of God's church and given a place at the Lord's Table. But then the wolf in sheep's clothing turns to attack the true sheep. Like a fishhook hidden inside the bait, so does a false prophet cover his false doctrine with the truth of God's Word. Well-meaning Christians take the bait, and before they realize it they are captured and reeled into a dangerous place. The picture of a wolf in sheep's clothing shows us how tricky false teachers are, yet how innocent they appear. That's where the danger lies. And that's where the Holy Spirit must guide our study of God's Word that we might learn to recognize the subtle differences between truth and error, between the Word of God and poisonous false doctrine.

Jesus continues with another analogy from nature, another admonition to make distinctions: "You will recognize them by their fruits." The fruits here are the fruits of faith: fruits of doctrine and fruits of life, fruits of word and fruits of deed. You will recognize the difference between true and false prophets in what they say and in what they do. As Jesus says later, in Matthew 12: "Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit . . . out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil." A true prophet, a true teacher of God's Word is saturated in the Word of God. The LORD has taken away his heart of stone and given him a heart of flesh, a good heart. And out of the treasure of God's Word in the prophet's heart, the true prophet proclaims God's Word.

A false prophet, however, a false teacher, is saturated in something else. Maybe it's a philosophy of this world or a political ideology or what he perceives as common sense, or simply that prophet's own imagination and desires. Whatever it is, if a teacher claiming to be from God

is peddling something other than God's Word, then that prophet is a false teacher, a wolf in sheep's clothing. A thorn in the side of the true prophets of God. You can distinguish between a true and a false prophet by learning to distinguish clearly what is being said. Is the argument based in God's Word? Is the teaching rooted in the Bible? Are the Scriptures used as a deep well, the clear fountain of Israel? Is the Gospel of free forgiveness in Jesus Christ at the center? Does everything taught line up with the basic outline of Christian teaching, which we call the Creed, the rule of faith? Are grapes gathered from thornbushes or figs from thistles? No. A good teacher will speak the truth of God's Word. A false teacher will speak as God's Word what is merely the confusion of His heart. And it is the duty of every Christian to understand the difference, to distinguish between truth and falsehood as the Lord created us to do, not just in general, but in every detail of doctrine. The Devil truly is in the details, in the smallest jot or tittle. Even the smallest error, the smallest crack or misspoken word, leaves enough room for the serpent to come in. So pay attention to the little things, too.

Besides what is taught, Christians are also called upon to examine the lives of their teachers. A teacher of God's Word will exhibit the fruits of the Holy Spirit, however imperfectly in this life: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The fruits of the Spirit are the fruits of a true teacher of God's Word. The love of God is manifested in love towards others, which becomes apparent in one's life. Remember though that it's easy to fake good works. Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. They use just enough of God's Word or put on just enough of a good show to make the lie go down smoothly. I think of old Christian heresies like Islam or Mormonism. A veneer of good works might be there. But without faith in the true God, all our works, however good they seem, are but filthy rags.

Without faith it is impossible to please God. Their end will correspond to their deeds (2 Cor 11:14–15). As Jesus says: “On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’” All teachers are judged by what they say and by what they do, by their words and by their works that flow from faith. A Christian must be able to distinguish the difference between what is true and what is false.

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. Test the doctrine and the life of those who teach you God’s Word. Learn God’s Word for yourself so that you might have a standard for judging their fruits, that you might learn to discern, to distinguish between the truth and the lie, between what leads to life and what leads to death. Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. Learn to recognize them by measuring their fruits of doctrine and life against the standard of God’s Word. To this end, I pray that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. 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.