

The Eighth Sunday after Trinity | St. Matthew 7:15-23
Sermon Theme: "God's Name: Hallowed or Hollow?"
August 6, 2017 | Saude & Jerico Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

+ + +

Almighty Father, who by Your Son Jesus Christ taught us to beware of false prophets: Have mercy upon Your Church, we beseech You, to deliver it from all evil; and give us faithful pastors and teachers who shall truly fulfill Your command and preach nothing contrary to Your Holy Word; that we Your people, being instructed, nurtured and comforted by Your heavenly truth, may bring forth fruit to Your glory; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (*Parish Prayers*, ed. Frank Colquhoun, p. 114)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for this morning is taken from the seventh chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

[Jesus said:] "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. / "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. 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 will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness.'" (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, whose name is above every name (Phil. 2:9), dear fellow redeemed:

The Bible uses many titles to refer to God: the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Holy One, the Christ, the Savior, and so on. The personal name which God gave for Himself is "I AM," or "Yahweh" in Hebrew. This is often printed as "LORD" in all capital letters in our Bibles. A name was also given to the Son of God after He was born of the Virgin Mary, the name "Jesus."

The names and titles for God carry with them the weight of God Himself. This is why His name is not to be used lightly. After the First Commandment, which protects His glory, the LORD issued the Second, which protects His name: "*You shall not take the name of the LORD [Yahweh], your God, in vain*" (Ex. 20:7). There is a natural progression to the Commandments. If we do not "fear, love, and trust" in the one true God only, we will not respect His name, and then we will not listen to what He has to say, which is addressed in the Third Commandment.

Most people recognize that God's name has significance, but that does not mean they use it with respect. "O my God," "Good Lord," and "Jesus Christ," are appropriate ways to address God in prayer and thanksgiving. But they are totally inappropriate as expressions of surprise or disgust or frustration. Martin Luther explains that the Second Commandment means we should not curse by the Lord's name, swear by His name, practice witchcraft by His name, lie by His name, or deceive by His name.

I

In today's text from His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks about false teachers who lie and deceive by His name. He is referring to those who use His name like they would a good luck charm. They think that whatever they do "in the name of Jesus" is blessed, even if they are doing something contrary to love for God and neighbor. Others invoke the name of God as one might do in a seance to try to make something supernatural happen. They really don't care where the power comes from as long as they get results. The evangelist Luke describes people like these, "*the itinerant Jewish exorcists,*" who "*undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits*" (Ac. 19:13). But the evil spirit replied, "*Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?*" (v. 15). Then he attacked and overpowered all seven who had come to him.

But the primary misuse of God's name is often more subtle than this. The devil did not come to Eve and say, "Go take a bite of that fruit over there." He began with, "*Did God really say?*" (Gen. 3:1). That's how it is today. False prophets go everywhere around the world and try to get God's people to doubt His promises. "Did God really say?" they ask. We see this in the way that basic moral principles are reversed. What used to be recognized as sin is now praised as good. What used to lead to a preacher's dismissal from a call is now met with a shrug of the shoulders or even with acceptance. The wolf is in the midst of the sheep, and the sheep are unconcerned! This is how the use of God's name becomes hollow. His glory and honor are robbed for the sake of communion and peace in the world.

The Apostle John warns about this, "*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.... They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us*" (1Jn. 4:1,5-6). What is the standard John refers to here for determining truth from error? The standard is apostolic doctrine inspired by the Holy Spirit—the standard is God's holy Word. As soon as you hear a preacher call the Word of God into question, you know you are dealing with a false teacher.

Guarding and defending the Word of God is one of the ways that we hallow God's name. We learned from the Catechism that "God's name is hallowed when His Word is taught in its truth and purity." We sing about this in the hymn verse: "God's Word is our great heritage, / And shall be ours forever; / To spread its light from age to age / Shall be our chief endeavor. / Through life it guides our way; / In death it is our stay. / Lord, grant while worlds endure, / We keep its teachings pure, / Throughout all generations" (ELH #583). If we compromise God's Word or lose sight of its central teaching, we have lost everything.

But we would never do that, would we? Ask yourself if you think our differences with other Christian church bodies are really that big of a deal. Are you committed to this church because of its teaching and not just family tradition? Do you "put up" with certain teachings of our

church, but think they really ought to be changed? Do you, for example, question what we say about the roles of men and women, our position on moral issues, or on how we practice fellowship, including who may be admitted to the Lord's Supper?

When we change our mind in these areas, it is usually to accommodate our sinful weaknesses or to avoid conflict with others. Taking a firm stand on the Word of God is uncomfortable. It forces us to face our weaknesses and acknowledge our sinful behavior. It also puts us at odds with the world. Many self-proclaimed Christians are willing to do this. They are willing to step away from the Word. As the Apostle Paul prophesied, *"For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths"* (2Tim. 4:3-4).

II

But you are here. You have not wandered off. If you have wandered before, God has lovingly brought you back to hear His Word. He wants you to call on His name in repentance. He wants you to admit where you have set His Word aside. He wants you to commit yourself again to hearing and learning it and to living your life by it. Above all else, He wants you to know that all your sins of stubbornness and of weakness are absolved. Jesus paid for them. They are not counted against you any longer. Like a diseased tree, He was *"thrown into the fire"* for your offenses, and He was raised again for your justification (Rom. 4:25). This is true because the Bible tells us so, and the Bible is God's Word, and God's Word is truth.

We hallow God's name by making sure *"His Word is taught in its truth and purity,"* and also *"when we as children of God live holy lives according to it."* The false prophet will not live according to God's Word. As Jesus said, *"the diseased tree bears bad fruit."* That is how false prophets are recognized, *"by their fruits."* *"Their fruits"* refers not only to how they act, because a false prophet may live an outwardly good life. *"Their fruits"* are also evident in what they teach. Jesus explained, *"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven."* No one can honor God's name by teaching contrary to His Word. On the last day, these will say to Jesus, *"Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and cast out demons in Your name, and do many mighty works in Your name?"* But the Lord will reply, *"I never knew you."*

In the end, all who have failed to hallow God's name will be judged for their transgressions. God cannot be tricked by empty words and actions. He will never mistake a bad tree for a good one. Unlike you and me, the LORD knows the heart (1Sam. 16:7). But your heart is not pure. It does not consistently and rightly hallow God's name. Neither does mine. How do you know that God considers you a good tree, and that you will not be *"cut down and thrown into the fire"* on the last day?

You are a good tree in God's sight because you know and humbly admit that you are a bad tree by nature. Your salvation does not come by the things you accomplish, like those false prophets who cite the *"many mighty works"* they did supposedly in the Lord's name. Your salvation comes by the mighty works of Jesus. Jesus says that the one *"will enter the kingdom of heaven... who does the will of [His] Father."* Jesus did this perfectly in your place. He obeyed His Father, whose will was that His Son should suffer and die to save sinners. God's will for you is to hear

His Word and believe it. He wants you to look upon His Son in faith and believe what Jesus did on your behalf (Jn. 6:40).

In this humble faith, you hallow the name of God. His name is certainly holy in itself, but you want it to be hallowed where you live, where you work, where you go to church. You hallow God's name by gladly hearing and learning His Word and by living your life according to it. In these ways, God produces good fruit in you to give others a taste of His kindness and grace. It is our prayer that as the Lord's name is hallowed among us, those around us who do not believe will also be brought to faith. And in this way, we will together avoid the punishment of fire that we all deserve, and we will be freed from this world of lawlessness to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

+ + +