

Trinity 8 – Vicar Lehne Sermon
Matthew 7:15-23: “Who Can You Trust?”
7/29/23; 7/30/23 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Dear Father in heaven, we are all too willing to turn from you and follow false prophets. However, there is one who never turned from you, your only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. For his sake, forgive us for turning away from you and lead us back to you, so that we may enter into the heaven that your Son won for us, in whose name we pray. Amen.

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

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

¹⁵“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but a diseased tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

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

In Christ Jesus, in whom we can always put our trust, dear fellow redeemed:

The last few years of my life were spent in the classroom learning how to be a pastor. Throughout those years, there were many times when the professors would have me, along with my fellow classmates, read commentaries on the books of the Bible. Because the people who wrote these commentaries were much smarter than me, I tended to give them the benefit of the doubt and assume that what they said in their commentaries was accurate. However, when it came time for us to discuss in class what we learned from the commentaries, there were times when I felt like I was the only one who assumed that the writers were right, as my classmates seemed to be much more willing to question the writers on points that they made than I was. It was then that I realized that, going forward, I should be more critical when reading commentaries on the books of the Bible and should not assume that they are right just because they are smarter than me.

There are times when all of us can assume that someone knows more than us in a particular field because they studied in that field more than us. We trust plumbers who come to fix the pipes in our houses. We trust doctors who tell us if we are sick and what we should do to get better. We trust pastors who tell us what the Bible says and how we should apply what the Bible says to our daily lives. However, while there can certainly be consequences in this life if the plumbers and doctors we trust are wrong, our eternal life can be at risk if the pastors we trust are wrong. So, when it comes to pastors and preachers, **who can you trust? (1) Trusting solely in people leads to destruction, while (2) trusting in Jesus leads to heaven.**

In our text for today, Jesus warns us to not trust every preacher who comes to us. After all, just because a preacher comes to us does not mean that he was sent to us by God. Jesus called these preachers “false prophets” and says in verse 15 that they “come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.” They look like true prophets on the outside, but in reality, they are false prophets who, if followed, will lead us off of the path to eternal life and down the path to eternal destruction. And it’s no mistake that they appear to be like a fellow sheep either. It’s important to false prophets that they appear to be innocent and harmless, because if they let their true nature show, then the true sheep who follow the true Shepherd would recognize that these so called “prophets” are trying to lead them astray and would turn from them.

These false prophets come in many different forms. Some false prophets rely on miraculous signs and wonders to win people over to them. They have no intention of actually preaching the gospel. They just want to make better lives for themselves by using their lying wonders.

Sometimes they don’t have any miraculous powers at all and only stage their miracles in order to fool us, kind of like a magician doing magic tricks. It may seem real, but there is actually some really clever slight of hand that very few people recognize. Sometimes they actually are using real powers. However, these powers do not come from God. In reality, they are demonic powers. The devil and his angels do have limited powers, and they use those powers to lead people astray.

In our text for today, we do not see Jesus deny that the false prophets were performing miraculous signs. When he says in verse 22 that many false prophets will say to him on the Last Day, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?”, he says in verse 23 that he will respond to them by saying, “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.” These false prophets may be able to fool people, but they aren’t able to fool God. God did not give them these powers, and even if they are claiming to do these miracles in his name, they actually had no intention of honoring anyone but themselves.

Another form that false prophets come in is one that distorts God’s Word, intentionally lying about what the Bible says. These false prophets will often try to win us over by using kernels of truth, such as saying that Jesus preached that we should love one another, as he told his disciples on Maundy Thursday in John 13:34-35. However, they will then preach a lie to go along with it, such as saying that, because Jesus told us to love one another, therefore we should never judge anyone for living a different way than we do, and we should support every kind of lifestyle that exists out there, even though the Bible condemns some of those lifestyles.

Some of these lies can be more convincing than others, and often times the lies are slowly introduced, so that we don’t realize that we are being lied to until it’s too late. This is why we have to be on alert and not trust everyone who claims to be from God. But if false prophets can be so convincing at times that we aren’t aware that they are lying to us, then who can we trust? While trusting solely in people leads to destruction, there is one man in whom we can put our trust: the God-man Jesus. Trusting in Jesus leads to heaven.

Unlike false prophets, who lie in order to win us over and lead us astray, Jesus never lied. Everything that he said during his time on Earth came true. When a centurion demonstrated the great faith that he had after asking Jesus to heal his servant, Jesus said, “Go, let it be done for you as you have believed” (Matthew 8:13). After Jesus said this, the verse continues by saying, “And the servant was healed at that very moment.” After Peter told Jesus that he would never fall away, even if everyone else did, Jesus said to him, “Truly I tell you, this

very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times" (Mark 14:30), which ended up happening exactly as Jesus had said. And after Jesus cleansed the temple when it was being used as a house of trade, the Jews asked him, "What sign do you show us for doing these things" (John 2:18)? And Jesus responded, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). The Jews thought that Jesus was talking about the temple that they were currently standing in, but Jesus was actually talking about his body. So, the account continued by saying, "When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken" (John 2:22).

Therefore, when Jesus says things such as, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die" (John 11:25-26), and "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32), we know that we can trust that he is speaking the truth and can confess, as Peter did, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

But while we would certainly like to think that we will always believe what Jesus says, in reality, we go through doubts all throughout our lives. We often find ourselves turning to what false prophets say, because what they say sounds better to our sinful nature than what Jesus says. There are times when we don't think that the Bible makes sense the way that the true prophets of God explain it, so we turn to the false prophets that explain the Bible in a way that does make sense to our rational but sinful minds. There are times when we don't like to be told that we are wrong or that we need to change, so when we hear false prophets telling us that we are perfect the way we are and that we don't need to change, we want to listen to them.

We may not sit and listen to a false prophet each week like we listen to our pastor in church, but our sinful nature is always whispering in our ears, urging us to do the things we know are wrong and to neglect the loving things we know we should do. In a way, our sinful nature is the biggest false prophet of them all, and we follow it all the time.

While these false prophets often tell us what we want to hear, Jesus tells us what we need to hear, and what we need to hear is not only that we are poor and wretched sinners who deserve God's wrath and punishment for turning away from him, but also that Jesus has paid the price for all of our sins so that eternal life is ours. Jesus accomplished this for us by his perfect life and innocent death. During his life, Jesus did not turn away from the Father, like the devil kept tempting him to do, but perfectly followed his Father's will, which led him all the way to the cross to die for our sins of turning from the Father and following false prophets. And because Jesus perfectly listened to his Father in heaven, that perfect listening is credited to us as righteousness.

The salvation that Jesus won for you is a free gift. This is another way that he sets himself apart from the false prophets. You don't have to give money in order to receive blessings from God, like some false prophets tell you to do. You don't have to follow a program that false prophets plan out for you. Salvation is already yours, freely given to you by God through his Word and Sacraments.

Therefore, knowing that Jesus speaks to you truthfully through his Word, you can use his Word to test your pastors. Jesus says in verse 16 that "[y]ou will recognize [false prophets] by their fruits." Your pastors are called to preach God's Word. Therefore, follow the example of the Bereans, who "examin[ed] the Scriptures daily to see if these things [that Paul and Silas were saying in the synagogue] were so" (Acts 17:11). If your pastors are not preaching the sound doctrine that is found in God's Word, you will know that they are false prophets, but if they are

preaching the sound doctrine that is found in God's Word, you will know that they are true prophets who have been sent by God.

While you may at times not know who you can trust, you know that you can always trust Jesus. He became flesh to live a perfect life and die an innocent death on the cross in order to save you from your sins. He never failed to keep his promises, and he still comes to you to bless you through his holy Word. He truly is the one you can trust.

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.

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