

Trinity 8  
 August 2, 2009  
 Jer. 23:16-29; Acts 20:27-38; Matt. 7:15-23

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*Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and Our Lord Jesus Christ.*

**Matt. 7:15 “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. 16 You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? 17 So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. 18 A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. 21 “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. 22 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?’ 23 And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’ (ESV)**

You have just heard a strong warning from our Lord against false prophets. A prophet is someone who prophesies. That doesn't only mean someone who tells of a future event. It also means someone who proclaims or teaches something from God. There are true prophets, pastors, who proclaim God's Word--and there false prophets who are not called by God, but say that are--and say that they are teaching, 'God's Word.'

The 2 verses before our gospel lesson are these, **“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”** It is after these words that Jesus says, **“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits.”**

Do you see the connection? Jesus confronts us again with the reality that narrow is the road to heaven and broad is the road that leads to destruction. Many try to make this verse mean that those who walk the strait and narrow--and are 'good people'--make it to heaven--and those who are 'bad' go to hell. This is false. Those who are on the narrow road and those on the broad road are all equally sinful. Jesus shows us the proper connection. Those on the road to heaven are those who listen to and believe the Word of God proclaimed by true and faithful pastors. Those who are on the path to destruction reject the true Word of God and are lead astray.

Furthermore, those who are on the narrow road – those whose sins are covered with Christ's righteousness in Baptism, joined to Him in Holy Communion, and hear often His Gospel proclaimed must, **“Beware of false prophets.”** Satan needs not lead astray those who are already on the path to hell. It is Christians that he wants. Satan wants to lead God's children away from the true Gospel to a different gospel that is no gospel at all. Satan wants to destroy your faith and create in you unbelief and misbeleif. He wants you to suffer eternally and so he sends his fiery darts your way. And how does he send his darts? How does he tempt you to exit the road to salvation? Remember, Satan appears as an angel of light. And just as Christ sends out true messengers with His Word that is life, Satan sends out his messengers with words that are

death. God's Word places you on the narrow path and keeps you there, and false prophets, with their doctrine, lead you to the broad road, which leads to destruction.

So, how can you tell the difference between a pastor sent from God or a pastor sent from the devil? It isn't by their appearance. Don't forget that false teachers are in sheep's clothing. They look the same as true prophets. Jesus says, "**You will recognize them by their fruits.**" Many misinterpret these verses and think that you can tell a true prophet from a false prophet from how they live their lives. They think the fruit is the seemingly godly life of the prophet. No. Prophets and false prophets can lead outwardly moral lives that look like the fruits of the spirit. The scribes and Pharisees, Gandhi, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, the pope, Billy Graham, Joel Osteen, and pastors and leaders of every denomination, including the LC-MS, can all lead outwardly moral lives. This is not the fruit Jesus is talking about. The fruit is the doctrine that they proclaim. A bad tree bears bad fruit. This is how you recognize a false prophet. As it also says in I John 4:1, "**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.**" How do you test a spirit? You test it against the Holy Spirit. Where is the Holy Spirit? He dwells in the Words of Scripture. We test prophets against false prophets with The Bible. This is how you recognize a false teacher.

You can't recognize a false prophet by their morals or by judging if they are sincere or not. Many are sincere and are unaware that they are messengers of Satan. Many false prophets think they are doing the Lord's work. **Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?** "Lord, did we not lead small groups in your name, play in the praise band in your name, distribute Bibles in your name, or work with youth in your name?" There are many who pray and teach *in the name of Jesus*. However, just because someone thinks or says that they teach *in Jesus' name* doesn't make it true. This is what should make you sit up in the pew. This should cause you to take seriously Jesus warning to you. "**Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.**"

Satan does his work in the name of Christianity--in the name of Jesus--and from all appearances his false prophets look like good Christian leaders. This should cause you to think twice about what 'Christian' book, magazine, or devotional you are using. This should make you think twice about the preacher you watch on TV or listen to on the radio. This should make you think twice about allowing your youth to attend the fun activities of other congregations. This should make you think twice about attending the Bible studies that claim to be 'just the Bible and just Christian.'

The advertisements that lead you to exit the narrow road are appealing. The billboard of a false prophet may look nice and glossy. It may promise you health, wealth, or happiness *in Jesus' name*. The teaching of a false leader may be entertaining, engaging, and appear holy and Biblical. **Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD.**

Here is our reality. There are many denominations, in America especially, that claim to be Christian. They claim they believe and teach the Bible alone. They say and do things *in Jesus' name*. Yet, they all say different things. Holy God doesn't send out prophets to proclaim His Word that all nations, including babies, are made by baptizing and teaching them all that He commanded--and at the same time send out prophets that proclaim, "No, baptism doesn't save, doesn't forgive sins, doesn't create faith, doesn't cover you with Jesus' righteousness, isn't for

all people, but only adults who have decided for themselves that they should be saved.” One is a true prophet. The other, though living a moral life and very sincerely concerned for people, is a false prophet. **You will recognize them by their fruit.**

Maybe you wrongly think that this is such a minor difference. The response is, “Satan is good at what he does. It is hard to tell the difference.” This is why Jesus repeatedly warns you to beware of false prophets. **“Don’t you know that a little yeast ferments the whole dough?”**<sup>1</sup> The difference between ‘Christian’ denominations isn’t the difference in some obscure point of doctrine. No. It is the difference between how a person is saved. It is the difference between trusting that Jesus does all of the saving or that you play a part. We confessional Lutherans teach *just the Bible* and don’t add, subtract, or misuse it. Those who are not confessional Lutherans don’t teach *just the Bible*. Those who teach in other denominations are false prophets. And on top of that – there are some who teach in our denomination who are false prophets too. We always must be alert. We must always beware and test the doctrinal fruit. Listening to false doctrine or thinking it is not that big of a deal is dangerous. Thinking that it is OK to play with fire is sinful. We must repent.

The question that always comes up after hearing such warnings is this, “You are telling me that everyone who isn’t a confessional Lutheran is on the road to destruction?” This is the wrong question. How many billboards of false doctrine can you believe and remain on the narrow path? That judgment is reserved for God. I can only prophesy to you here in time, “Beware. Flee false teachers that are wolves in sheep’s clothing. Their fruit will lead you astray.” If you still don’t think that pure doctrine is important, then reread today’s readings and Romans 16:17, II Thessalonians 3, Titus 3:10,11, I Timothy 6:3-5, I Cor. 5:6, II Cor. 6:14, II John 9-11, and I John 4:1 – just to list a few.

This is a difficult thought when we ponder our loved ones who are misled by false prophets. But think about this: As much as you want you loved one to repent and enjoy the pure Gospel that is heralded by true prophets, God wants it more. As much as you want your baby grandchild to be born again in the waters of Holy Baptism, how much more Christ, Who died and made Baptism the place where His death on the cross is delivered to sinners?

God wants the whole world to enter the kingdom of heaven. This is why He walked the narrow road, without sinning, in your place. This is why He walked the narrow road that led to Calvary to pay for all of your sins and the sin of the world. This includes Him paying for your sins of dismissing His Words that are too divisive. So, repent from your sins and believe that your sins are forgiven--because they are. Covered with Jesus in Baptism, fed by Him at His Altar, and hearing His prophets often, nothing can knock you off the path. You are in His heavenly kingdom now and will be on the Last Day. **For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**<sup>2</sup> Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> I Cor. 5:6

<sup>2</sup> Romans 8