

“Beware of False Prophets”

Matthew 7:13-23

Trinity 8

August 1 – 2, 2009

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Jesus says, **“Beware of false prophets.”** Our Lord would not warn us against something that wasn't a real threat to us. The threat is real, not only because the world is filled with false prophets, but also because we like what they have to say. False prophets tell us what we want to hear. It is written in 2 Timothy, **“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 desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.”**

A true prophet preaches repentance. But false prophets know that condemning sin and warning people to be saved from the coming judgment doesn't sell too well these days. It's so negative and outdated and depressing. Nobody wants to be told that they need to turn from their self-centered ways. What people want is something practical to help them in their families and at work, something uplifting, a spirituality that helps us to feel better about ourselves.

This is what the prophet Jeremiah spoke of in the Old Testament reading. The false prophets say to those who despise God, **“The Lord has said, 'You shall have peace' And to everyone who does whatever they want to do, the false prophets say, 'No evil shall come upon you.’”** False prophets will often come across as very inclusive and loving and with the times. But in truth, they let people get away with their self-justification and rationalization of sin. They let fraudulent spirituality sit unchallenged next to Christian truth to avoid offending anyone. While they may seem to be so nice, there is nothing caring or loving about tolerating false teaching or ungodly living. For such things are lethal to the soul and invite God's judgment. That is the broad path that leads to destruction.

False prophets are also a real threat to us because they look like the real thing. Jesus said, **“They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly, they are ravenous wolves.”** False prophets look like sheep of the Good Shepherd. In fact they may look more godly and holy than a true prophet and preacher of God's Word. For

while some false prophets will overlook sin, other false prophets will stress very strongly that you need to live a holy life. They'll be all about doing good works and being a good person and following these rules and those regulations for right living. You'll look at them and say, "**They must be from God. Look at how religious and devoted they are.**" Orthodoxy with all its pomp looks good. The evangelical preacher giving you step by step instructions on how to become a better you looks good. The passionate Jehovah's Witness, the family-values Mormon looks good. But in the end, they are in the same camp as the Pharisees, those whom Jesus called "**whitewashed tombs,**" who falsely believed that living an obedient life is the way you gain God's favor. Those who trust in their own good works to keep themselves close to God or to make themselves better candidates for heaven are just engaging in a more spiritual form of self-absorption. They're in love with their own righteousness. The devil is perfectly happy with that sort of religion.

Repent, then, of your own succumbing to the spirit of false prophecy. Confess where you've misused God's Law as a way to try to exalt yourself and earn His blessing. Acknowledge where you've ignored God's Law for the sake of convenience and rationalized away your sin. Turn from all of that and humbly seek His mercy. Turn your attention to true prophetic words.

But how can you be sure of who a true prophet is? Well, to begin with, there is really only one true Prophet, and that is Christ himself. He alone speaks the words of God without flaw and without fail. He is the Word of God in the flesh and the fulfillment of all prophecy. His alone are the words of eternal life. Do not put your trust in any man. I am called and sent by God to be your pastor, but your faith should never be in me or my opinions, but only in the Word of God which I am given to speak. Paul reminded the pastors at Ephesus that false prophets would arise from among themselves. Good prophets would go bad. In every pastor there is a false prophet called the old Adam, his sinful nature. So make sure, first of all, that it is the word of Christ that you are hearing, the holy Scriptures that are being proclaimed to you and not just some pious human wisdom. Do as the Bereans did in the book of Acts. When they heard the preaching of Paul proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah and Savior, they searched the Scriptures to see if what he was saying was true. The solid rock upon which the Church is built is the words of Jesus. Everything else is sinking sand. When what is preached is not a vision of the

preacher's own heart but that which comes from the mouth of the Lord, then you are hearing a true prophet.

But you might say, **“I'm no theologian. How do I distinguish a false teacher from a genuine teacher, who both quote the Bible? How can I tell whether or not someone is misusing Christ's Word?”** The simplest answer that I can give to you is this: *Know your Catechism and the Creeds by heart. For there in the Catechism and the Creeds is summarized for you the fundamental teachings of the Scriptures and all that you need to know and believe to be saved.* There is confessed God's holy Law and Gospel by which you are brought to repentance and to faith in Christ. There you have what the church has taught and believed from the Word of God since the days of the apostles. If what someone is preaching sounds a little weird to you, different from the Catechism and the Creeds and the Word of God you know from the Scriptures, then beware of it; flee from it.

Jesus says in the Gospel when judging between true and false prophets, **“You will know them by their fruits.”** The fruit refers not simply to their lifestyle, since that can be the deceptive clothing of the wolf. The fruit refers to the doctrine. *What spiritual food do they offer? What do they hold forth for your souls to feast upon? Is it solely Christ the Bread of Life, the food that fully satisfies you, or are other “ingredients” and requirements added, like arsenic on your plate?* It is written, **“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”**

Here are a couple of tests that you can use. I John 4 says, **“Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God.”** A true prophet of God will not shy away from affirming the concrete, physical realities of our salvation, that God the Son became a real flesh and blood human being, that He offered up His body on the cross to save us, that He rose again in the body, tangibly, and that He comes to us now with His real and literal body and blood in the Sacrament. Those who contradict any of those things are false prophets.

Here's another test: St. Paul said to the Corinthians, **“I determined not to know anything among you except Christ and Him crucified.”** If Jesus and His sacrifice are not the center of everything that is proclaimed, if

they are treated just as history that you sort of have to give lip service to so that you can get to the real important and relevant stuff, then that prophet isn't true. Paul told the pastors at Ephesus **“to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.”** That blood of Christ is the thread that runs through all true prophecy and preaching.

And don't forget, a false prophet may not know that he is one. He may be very sincere. But sincerity is not a reliable test. Jesus said, **“Many will say to Me in that Day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me.’”** It's not the impressiveness of the works or the success or the numbers that you should go by. Jesus said, **“Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.”**

He who does the will of the Father is Christ Himself. Consider that night in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus prayed to His Father, **“If it is possible, take this cup [of suffering] away from Me. Nevertheless not My will but Your will be done.”** It was the will of the Father that Jesus lay down His life for you to rescue you from hell. It was the will of the Father that Jesus be cut down like a bad tree and thrown into the fire of judgment in your place. It was the will of the Father that Jesus be a sheep in wolves' clothing, the pure Lamb of God who allowed Himself to be cloaked in sin and evil at Calvary in order to put them to death in His body, so that you might be delivered from all evil forever. The wolf has been conquered. You have been cleansed from all sin by Christ's blood. You are given entrance into the kingdom of heaven in Christ. He has ascended to heaven, and holding on to Him like a child on His back, you have ridden with Him there. The kingdom is yours in Jesus, by faith now, by sight at the close of the age.

And so, to do the will of the Father, for a pastor, is to preach that, to proclaim Christ alone as the Savior from sin and death, apart from our works. And to do the will of the Father, for a hearer, for you, is to believe that Gospel of Christ and stake your whole life on it. That is the true prophetic Word for you today, the same prophetic Word proclaimed by John the Baptizer, **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand; it is here. Believe the Gospel of Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.”** The

will of the Father was done when you were baptized, squeezed through the narrow way of the cross. The will of the Father is done as you live in the narrow way of your baptism, dying to yourself and to sin and rising to the new life of Christ, the life of faith and love. And the will of your Father is done as you come to the Lord's table in simple faith. For the tree of the cross has borne the most abundant fruit, the body and blood of Christ which gives you His mercy and which will raise you up on the Last Day.

Beware of false prophets. Behold the true Prophet, Jesus. His are the words that give you life. By His fruits you will know Him. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.