

Grace to You and Peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Matthew 7:15-23: (Please Rise:) "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ By their fruit you will recognize them. You do not gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles, do you? ¹⁷ So then, every good tree produces good fruit, but a bad tree produces bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot produce good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ So then, by their fruit you will recognize them. ²¹ Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. ²² Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and drive out demons in your name and perform many miracles in your name?' ²³ Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Depart from me, you evildoers.'"

We Pray: Heavenly Father, In a world filled with lies and deceit, we ask you to be with us and guide in all truth. Keep your Holy Word pure in our midst and build us up in the knowledge of it. Preserve us from false prophets and their harmful teachings – and help us always to cling to and rejoice in the Means of Grace received in truth in purity! Be with us today. Strengthen our faith as we study Your Word. We pray this all in Jesus' name. AMEN. (Be Seated)

Does Jesus want people to take His teachings seriously? ... Does He really want us to buy into His doctrine? – to everything that He has taught and that is found in His Word? ... To what degree are we as Christians supposed to be in agreement with Him? – 75%? -90%? – 99%?

Silly questions right?! But these are questions that matter. These are questions that will have an effect come Judgment Day. They have ETERNAL implications! If we want to have a positive Judgment Day experience, if we want to hear Jesus say, "**Come unto Me!**" rather than "**Depart from me!**" we need to make sure that we understand and appreciate our Lord's instruction to "**Abide in His Word**" – to not depart from it – even when difficult, to "**contend for the faith.**" And in order to do these things, it is important that we heed the warning that Jesus gives in our text today: **Beware of False Prophets and Their Fruit!**

There. Are. False. Prophets. To even point this out goes against the ecumenical nature and spirit of our age and culture – and it makes those with a deep-seeded "Minnesota Nice"-ness rather uncomfortable – but it is true, and it is important that Christians recognize this fact. This is serious! Jesus Himself, who was LOVE incarnate, wasn't afraid to point this out. Out of Love, He calls out false prophets. As He said: "**There are false prophets. Watch out for them. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.**"

They are disguised – they are not easily recognized or identified. They don't come and tell you: "*Hey, I'm a false prophet!*" Satan isn't going to tell you who or what he is. The devil and those in league with him will lie and deceive. They will arise claiming to come in the name of God – but they are not speaking for God. They are instead straying from God. As Jeremiah described (in our Old Testament lesson): "**The words of the prophets who**

prophesy to you, make you worthless; they speak a vision of their own heart, not from the mouth of the LORD." Likewise, St. Paul warned: "There will come a time when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, because they have itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in line with their own desires. They will also turn their ears away from the truth and will turn aside to myths."

This is frightening for us. Tricky people, false teachers and prophets will arise within the church, to lead people away from God's truth! We're not talking about Mohammed, or Buddha, or Joseph Smith, or any leader of some other world religion – we can easily mark them as outside of the veil of Christianity. We are to watch out for those who are within the church – who presume to come in the name of Jesus and yet misrepresent Him and His clear teachings!

You are to be vigilant. You must listen carefully and with understanding when you hear that other preacher on the TV or on the radio – so that the red warning flag goes up in your minds when they start spouting things that aren't in line with the teachings of the Bible. Or when the message of the popular song on the Christian radio station sounds a little off and fishy – or when some of the details of that "new Christian film" are not in line with what you have been taught – DO NOT let these things influence you or take you away from what the Bible teaches! **Watch out for false prophets!** Or you young people out there – and those influencing young people, as you start looking at where to go to college – there are many colleges out there that claim to be "Christian" and yet the people teaching there are NOT holding to the truths of the Bible – but are teaching according to their own desires – devising myths! Do not let such false teachers at institutions like these take you away from what God actually teaches! (And please see what a great blessing we have in Bethany Lutheran College – because we know that God's Word is taught in its truth and purity – it is held to as the "One Thing Needful!") Even here at your own church – if you hear your pastor say something that doesn't sound right – you have an obligation to go and speak with him. Look into God's word together – review the catechism. If he has spoken in error he needs to know!

This is serious! God does not want anyone to be devoured by disguised wolves or led astray by their subtle nuances and seemingly good teachings. You must not be duped or fooled. Instead stick with the promise and solemn oath that you made when you were confirmed: "*Do you intend to remain steadfast in this confession (– the teachings of God's Word) and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it?*" Those who heed Jesus' warning in our text will answer "I DO" to that question.

I've spoken with people who have been hesitant: "*I don't know Pastor, these other people also have a lot of good things to say too... And how do I really know what to believe and what NOT to believe? How are we supposed to even know?! Everyone has their own angle – everyone has their own truth. I don't want to be judgy – Doesn't Jesus even tell us NOT to judge others?*" ...It's actually in the very same chapter as our sermon text where Jesus says, "**Do not judge, so that you will not be judged,**" and then He talks about the speck in our brother's eye versus the log sticking out of our own. The point there is that we are not to presume to look into other people's hearts and be hypocritical – holding others to a standard that we don't stick to ourselves! That's hypocrisy. But this isn't an issue of judging the hidden parts of other people's hearts. We have a measuring stick – a standard by which we hold ourselves AND all others

accountable to. It is a measuring stick and standard that we use whenever someone presumes to speak for God – We can judge what other people say, because we know what God has already spoken in His Word, the Bible!

When He tells us to “**Beware of false teachers**” Jesus IS telling us TO judge! – Not to judge people’s hearts – after all, false teachers might be very genuine and sincere, they don’t have to be maliciously, intentionally leading people astray to be wrong. Not even to judge by the apparent miraculous things others might do – as our text pointed out even those who cast out demons in Jesus’ name might still be sent away to destruction.

Not once, but twice in our text (for the sake of emphasis), Jesus says: “*By their fruit you will recognize them.*” So what is the bad fruit of a false prophet? What is it that we are to judge? It is what they produce – their teachings! Do their teachings line up with the standard and measuring stick of ALL TRUTH?! –God’s Word?! Paul praised the Bereans because they understood this – they took Paul’s message and then “**examined the Scriptures every day to see if these things were so.**” (Acts 17:11) By doing so they saw that what Paul was teaching was true! ...This is how you must judge. This is how you “**test the Spirits to see if they are from God.**” You hold what you hear up to the truth of God’s clear Word.

This is why it is so important for us to always continue to study and know God’s word – to come to church and Bible study – to review our catechisms and stick to what we’ve learned and made an oath to stick to. When you enter into battle you want to be prepared – you want your weapons to be sharp and in good working order. When false teachers come before you, you want you to be ready and prepared to compare their fruit with the truth of God’s Word, so that you don’t fall into the temptation of eating and ingesting that poisoned fruit – to your harm and doom!

Again, Dear Friends, this is serious! Jesus is serious about this warning! He shares this warning with us so we might watch out for false teachers and their fruit. He does NOT want to say on Judgment Day: “**Depart from me!**” Instead, He wants to find you among those who have “**DONE the will of His father in Heaven**” – who will be welcomed into Heaven.

SO what is God’s will? We pray for it in the 3rd Petition of the Lord’s Prayer: “**Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven!**” And as we profess in our catechism: “*God’s will is done when He breaks and hinders every evil counsel and will which would not let us hallow His name nor let His kingdom come, such as the will of the devil, the world and our own flesh; but strengthens and keeps us steadfast in His Word and in faith until our end. This is His good and gracious will.*”

The will of God is for you to be saved! He wants you to have His Saving WORD. He wants you to hear this WORD declare that you, a sinful person, who may have fallen into the traps of false teachers, are forgiven before Him. It is God’s will for you to receive the declaration of His love for you – so that you have a happy, positive judgment day experience – but He also wants you to have this declaration of absolution and of His Love for you – well before Judgment day. He wants you to have it now; so you can cling to it and keep it, to not let any false prophet – or any false prophet’s fruit start to pry it from you. God gives you the tools needed to drive any false prophet away, He has given you the **sword of the spirit** – His holy Word – He has given you the faith building sacraments of Baptism and the

Lord's Supper. He comes to you Himself and takes up residence in Your heart and reestablishes that residence whenever you receive the Means of Grace!

As you receive the Word and Sacraments in their truth and purity, Jesus Himself comes to you, bringing with Him everything that He accomplished. His perfect life of righteousness – He brings to you – He shares it with you as your own righteousness! The forgiveness of sins that He won with His voluntary suffering and death upon the cross – He comes to you, giving that forgiveness before God to you! His victory over death and the grave – His new eternal life – which He won on Easter – He also comes and gives to You, so that it is Your victory as well!

Jesus Himself comes to you with everything you need to make sure that You will be with Him on Judgment day and forever after. He also places in your hands the Holy Scriptures, the Word of Truth, so that you can have confidence and certainty that you will have a positive Judgment Day experience! Yes, this is serious. We should watch out and beware of the false prophets, but we need not be worried! We have the measuring stick, the standard of truth given to us by our Lord! By it, He gives us the ability to judge what is true and false. In this Word of Truth, that dictates everything we believe and teach here at our church, we hear Jesus Himself NOT saying: **"I don't know you, Depart from Me, you evildoers"** – but rather the opposite: **"Come to me! You are my good and faithful servant! The Kingdom of Heaven belongs to you!"**

Dear Friends, reject and forsake the false prophets and their fruit – rejoice in the Word of Truth that Jesus Himself proclaims to you! **All Glory be to Him! Amen.**

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard and keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.