

## ***Wheat and Straw***

In the name of him who came to cast fire rather than peace on the earth, dear friend in Christ: much to the delight of parents and the mixed apprehensions of children, school begins this week – and with it what many people are anticipating even more: the fall sports season which features America’s favorite game, football. It’s strange: almost everywhere else in the world people get most excited about the game of soccer. Why, I’m not sure; because as a spectator sport it rates right up there with watching grass grow for its levels of excitement and drama. But here in America – and only in America – football is the undisputed king of sports. And again, I’m not quite sure why; but there are several factors that I think contribute to the game’s popularity. First, it’s a lot more interesting than soccer – I mean somebody actually scores once in a while; that’s a vast improvement. Second, there’s the higher level of physical contact. Fans like the shock and awe of the linemen colliding every play, as well as the satisfying crunch of a good tackle. It’s more of a gladiatorial spectacle in that regard. Then there’s the strategy involved. The teams have to pick the right plays at the right times. There’re a lot of options available to both the offense and the defense, and so much of the game is outwitting your opponent by doing the unexpected. It’s almost like poker in that regard. There’s more to recommend it, but I think one of the biggest factors that accounts for the game’s popularity among Americans is that it’s “cleaner”, “crisper”, and more organized than soccer. With soccer the two teams are just running around all mixed up all the time and most of what happens is pretty subtle and seemingly inconsequential to the casual observer; but with football the lines are more clearly drawn. The game is broken into a series of unmistakably distinct plays that have definite beginnings and ends. At the start of each one the two teams are separated and facing each other across a clearly demarcated battle line: us over here, them over there. And at the conclusion of each play you can digest and evaluate what happened: Was it good for us or bad? Did it work; didn’t it? I think that maybe American sports fans resonate better to the more clear-cut structure of the play of the game.

Oddly enough, the same is true when we go to war. Our armed forces are probably the best and the most well equipped the world has ever seen. And in head to head, all-out conflict with the armed forces of any other nation we’d come out on top. We don’t do quite so well, however, as we proved in Viet Nam and are now learning again in Iraq, when the lines are not so clear: when it’s harder to tell who’s friendly and who’s not, when the enemy employs guerilla and terror tactics instead of facing us head on, and when it’s difficult to evaluate progress in any measurable way. We don’t like that at all. We want everything to be clearer and more distinct.

And I think the same is true of the way we approach our religious faith. We want things simple, straightforward, and clearly delineated. We want to say this over here is Christian and right and true and good, and that over there is not. And so we can really get into a story like the one of the prophet Elijah and his showdown with the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel. You remember that story: how Elijah stood alone against the 450 pagan prophets. How both sides built an altar and placed a sacrifice atop it. And how then both sides in turn called upon their respective deity to answer by fire from heaven in order to prove once and for all who was the real God. It’s a great story. One that’s very neat and tidy. The good guys and the bad guys are clearly distinguished, and at the end of the day there aren’t any questions about what happened. The prophets of Baal struck out completely. They proved that there was no one home to answer their prayers. They went down in defeat. Meanwhile the Lord God of Israel had come through in spades. Before Elijah was even done with his brief prayer, the Lord was raining down great balls of fire that consumed the sacrifice offered to him, stone altar and all. The message was perfectly clear. There was no question about who was the true God and who was his true prophet – and I think that’s why we remember this story so well, and why it is for us the defining moment in the life and ministry of Elijah.

But today’s Old Testament lesson comes to us from the book of the prophet *Jeremiah*. And I’m willing to bet that very few of us can remember even a single story about him, much less one that defines his life and ministry in any meaningful way. And what’s really strange about that is Elijah never wrote a thing that we know of, and everything we do know about him happened in a period of just three short years. On the other hand,

we have pretty much Jeremiah's whole story, from his call to be a prophet of God when he was little more than a child, on through his sixty or more years of service to the Lord – during which time he wrote one of the longest books in the Bible (in addition to one of the shortest). So we have available to us far more information about him—and yet, compared to Elijah, we know almost nothing about him.

Why is that? Well my best guess is that it's because his story isn't quite so crisp, clean, and straightforward as Elijah's. You see, the bad guys in Jeremiah's life were not the idol-worshipping prophets of Baal. They weren't nearly as obvious as that. They were instead the men serving alongside Jeremiah as priests and prophets in the Temple of the Lord. They were men who claimed to be faithful to the Lord, men who had studied the Scriptures and knew them well. They were offering sacrifices and prayers to the Lord on a daily basis. They were men who were outwardly helping God's people in any number of ways, and who were admired by the people they served. In fact, they were the ones who were most popular with the rulers of the nation and the vast majority of the people. Jeremiah's enemies looked like good guys.

But the reason they were so popular was that they told people what they wanted to hear instead of what the Lord God said. And they were good at it. I mean they weren't so obvious as to say black has now become white or vice versa, or that God's "no" had suddenly become "yes"; nothing as clear and distinct as that. Instead, they operated in shades of gray and subtle academic distinctions by which "no" became "sometimes", "maybe", and "yes, under these special circumstances". And they could make it all sound so very scholarly while they dissembled and obfuscated and beat around bushes that by the time they were done, it sounded like it must be right. Even more, they made it sound so loving and caring because they were the ones teaching inclusion and acceptance and "Hey, let's not be judging anyone. Who's to say what's right or wrong? Can't we all just get along? And can't we accept that the Lord God is big enough to be approached in any number of ways – and by people who call him any number of names? There's room for everyone and every opinion and every lifestyle in the house of God."

Well, Jeremiah didn't think so. And among the prophets who claimed to be speaking for the Lord he pretty much stood alone in his position. And for the stand he took on God's Word of truth he was called a hateful, judgmental doomsayer, and a backward, ignorant liar. At one point his divinely inspired writings were burned by order of the king. Other times he was imprisoned for speaking the messages God sent him to deliver. Once it got so bad for him that Jeremiah tried not to speak the Word God gave him because he knew that angry people would make him suffer for it; but then he found the Word of God burned like fire in his soul until he had to speak up and let it go.

Jeremiah had the unhappy task of delivering the unpopular message of God's judgment against sin to people who didn't want to hear it, and who were quite content to listen to other prophets who told them what they wanted to hear. The difference was, of course, Jeremiah was speaking God's truth and the others weren't. And unfortunately, throughout his many years of ministry by which the Lord tried time and time again to call his people to repentance, almost no one listened. That's what the long book of Jeremiah is mostly about. His other book, the short one, is called Lamentations. It describes the prophet's reactions as he walks through the smoldering ruins of Jerusalem weeping over the mass carnage there – all the city's inhabitants who had been slain because they failed to heed the prophet's warnings and the Lord's call to repentance through him. They preferred the comfortable lies of the false prophets to the uncomfortable truths of God. And so, when God's judgment finally fell, they paid with their lives; every last one of them. They didn't listen to Jeremiah. The question is: will we? Will we learn the lesson the Lord God spoke through him?

The message we heard this morning from Jeremiah is part of a larger section in which he is warning people about the many false prophets who were distorting God's Word and filling people with vain hopes. And again, it needs to be said that these guys didn't walk around wearing signs that clearly identified them as false prophets. No. It wasn't that obvious. They looked good. They were educated, well-spoken, and seemed to be very spiritual men. People liked and admired them. Nor in most cases were they simply hucksters and conmen who were consciously trying to deceive people. Instead they were very sincere about the things they taught. The problem is that they were sincerely wrong, and their false teachings were leading people away from the truth of God to judgment and ruin. And so, in the process of warning people about them, Jeremiah says several things that will help his hearers learn how to recognize a false prophet. And inasmuch as there

are many false prophets around today – probably a lot more than Jeremiah ever had to contend with – we will do well to pay attention to what he has to say.

First, it's worth noting that twice in this section Jeremiah indicates that the false prophets were not standing in the council of the Lord. That is to say, they weren't listening to and receiving their words from God. Now you might ask, "How can that be? They were the Bible scholars of the day. If they were constantly reading God's Word how could they not be in the Lord's council?" The answer lies in how the Word of God is approached. Does the preacher place himself under the authority of the Word recognizing it as the true, infallible, unchanging revelation of the Lord Most High – and so actually receive his teaching from it? Or does he place himself above it to begin with, seeing it as an ancient document that reflects a snapshot of what well-intentioned but superstitious people once believed; but now that we've come so far in our evolving understanding of God's plan and purpose we have to filter and correct so that it better reflects the "truth" as we understand it today. False prophets do the latter. And so while they make use God's Word, they only use it to the extent that it supports their own preconceived ideas. What you hear from them is not what God said, but what *they think* peppered with Bible passages that appear to reinforce their teachings.

A second red flag that marks a false prophet is his use of an extra-biblical source of authority or revelation. You see, it's one thing for a false prophet to use his supposedly enlightened judgment to delete parts of God's Word that are contrary to his point of view; but to lend credibility to things he wants to add to his message that aren't in God's Word he has to present to his hearers a reason to believe him – a reason to accept that what he says either comes from God or another source just as reliable. In Jeremiah's day it seems the favorite method was to claim to have inspired dreams by which the Lord communicated new additions his word. And the wonderful thing about dreams is that they are completely unverifiable. Who's to say for sure what another person dreamed or where that dream came from? But if you already held a teacher in high regard and considered him to be a godly person, you might be very willing to accept that his dreams were true revelations from God. And it wasn't only true back then. Even today the aberrant teachings whole church bodies are based on the dreams of supposed latter day prophets. There are televangelists you could tune in right now who are claiming to have dreams and visions on almost a daily basis. But these days I think most of us would be justifiably suspect of such claims. Instead, modern, thinking Christians like ourselves are more susceptible to being taken in by appeals to human reason, superior education, and stories of personal experience. The Bible teacher who is perceived as having all the right credentials – maybe he's a doctor of theology or a bishop of the church, the guy who says "Doesn't it seem reasonable to you that God would do it this way?", the fellow who's got all kinds of sociological studies or scientific research or marketing data to back his claims, and the preacher who can tell an entertaining story about something that happened to him and how God worked in his life – these are the kinds of methods false prophets use to add all sorts of things to God's Word and make them appear to be just as true and reliable. And a lot a people fall for it.

And one more: another common feature of false prophets is that they tend to play fast and loose with the Law of God. In most cases this translates directly into teaching lax moral standards. This was certainly the case in Jeremiah's day. The false teachers he was denouncing made themselves popular by proclaiming a God who chuckled to himself over the weaknesses of his fallen creatures and who winked at the sinful foibles and lusts of the people he called to be his own. These prophets assured the people of the Jewish nation that God loved and accepted them just the way they were—regardless of how they behaved and treated one another. It's a message people still love to hear today. But it is a siren song that leads people to their destruction. For a people without sin do not need to repent. And a people who do not stand in fear trembling before the righteous judgments of a holy God who is angry over sin do not need a Savior. And a God who loves sinners just the way they are does not need to send his only begotten Son to die in their place. So by watering down or softening the holy Law of God, the false prophets end up throwing out the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

And the thing to understand that it's all done very subtly. To use the earlier illustration, it's usually the slow moving and painfully dull to watch game of soccer, not the clear-cut action of football. But Satan, our adversary, who works his mischief through false prophets, is a patient guy. He doesn't care how long it takes to erode away God's truth if in the end he can rob people of the confidence they have in Jesus. And this is why we need to be on guard always. And I know that we don't like doing it. At times it seems nitpicky and unloving and like we're splitting hairs to say, "No. What you're saying is wrong. What God says is this"; but

that's exactly what we're called to do. And we will be accused of all those terrible things—just like Jeremiah was. But we have an obligation to know the difference between the wholesome and nutritious wheat of God's Word and the soiled straw of the false prophets, and to keep them separate. And it really isn't that difficult. Regarding the false prophets, this is what the Lord of hosts says: "Don't listen to them". It's not our job not to censor or silence them as they chip away at God's Word a piece at a time. The Lord will deal with them as he sees fit. But it is our task to keep the Word of God whole, unadulterated and undefiled so that it can be the hammer that chips away at our hard, sinful hearts and brings us into a deeper trust and more faithful walk with our Lord Jesus Christ. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***