

Foundational Matters

In the name of him in whom we are justified by faith apart from the works of the Law, dear friends in Christ: In this morning's Gospel reading we heard what are the closing words to Jesus' famed Sermon on the Mount – which is the longest single record we have of our Lord's teaching. And really, what he says there about how hearing his words and putting them into practice being a wise thing to do – like building a house upon a rock – would be a good conclusion to all of his other teachings as well because certainly that's what we want to do: build our spiritual lives on the firm foundation of Jesus and his holy Word. And especially now as we are again beginning the long Pentecost season, the time that we focus particularly on growing in Christian faith and life, it matters immensely that we start at the right place, because if you mess up on the foundation – if you're not building on the rock of Christ's pure Word and teaching – then sooner or later your life of faith will come crashing down, and great will be the fall of it.

So, with that in mind, it's no surprise that Jesus concludes his sermon with a warning: Beware of false prophets – that is, people who claim to speak on behalf of God; but don't. Today we'd use the word *pastor* or *Bible teacher* instead of prophet; but it's the same idea. False prophets are out there, and you have to be on your guard and watch out for them. From the very beginning Satan has been working hard to lead people astray, either directly or through his spokesmen; and he hasn't given up. Why should he? He's had lots of success. His goal is to get you to build your faith on something that looks good, sounds right, and that appears solid enough to support you; but that underneath is soft and squishy and will cause you to fall.

And it's important to understand that when Jesus speaks of false prophets, he's not talking so much about those who are obviously not Christian and who make no pretense about rejecting the words of Jesus. Those are very clearly wolves in a spiritual sense and you ought to recognize them at once and avoid them. But here Jesus speaks of false prophets who are wolves *disguised* as sheep. That is they look pretty harmless – just like one of us; but they are not at all what they seem. Though they use the name of Jesus and though they use his words when they teach, it's a different Jesus they proclaim, and they twist and turn his words to mean something other than what he intended. And sure, some of these false prophets are simply con-men who deliberately attempt to deceive people for their own material gain; but there are others more numerous and far more dangerous who sincerely believe what they are teaching; it's just that they are sincerely wrong about it. They are as deceived themselves as the people they unwittingly lead astray.

This is why Jesus says to you, the hearer, that it's *your* job to watch out for them – which is something of a challenge because they don't walk around with big signs that say, "Danger: I'm a false prophet; you best ignore me." Remember: they're disguised. And they could be very earnest and filled with passion about what they believe. So the question is then, how are you to tell? Especially considering that many of them have studied the Scriptures in detail and maybe have all kinds of degrees in theology so that they can bamboozle and talk over the heads of any of us. How's the typical layperson supposed to be able to tell the difference between a true prophet and a false one?

The answer, Jesus tells us, is that “You will recognize them by their fruits.” Well, great. That sounds pretty straightforward ... the only question is, what does he mean by it? And here I need to warn you that it’s one of the most misunderstood passages of the Bible. The most common mistake is to assume that he means that you ought to examine the prophet’s life and outward behavior. If he acts like he’s good, then he must be good and therefore truthful and correct when he teaches. But consider for a moment, at the time of Jesus who were the people that everyone would have said were the best behaved? The Pharisees, of course. But Jesus routinely trashed them and their teachings. So also today, if bad outward behavior were the litmus test for recognizing a false teacher, you’d have to conclude that *anyone* who behaved pretty well was teaching correctly regardless of what he actually said. Now obviously, you wouldn’t want to listen to a teacher who is reveling in sin or who is openly advocating behaviors clearly condemned by Scripture; but by itself the quality of one’s outward behavior cannot be what Jesus means when he speaks of recognizing false prophets by their fruit. The worst of heretics can outwardly be the nicest and most righteous person you would ever care to meet.

So, having rejected that idea, the next common mistake is to assume that what Jesus meant by “fruit” is the relative success of a prophet’s ministry. If when he teaches, he gains a large following and sells lots of books and becomes very popular, well, then obviously his ministry is being blessed by God and therefore he must be all right. And hopefully you can see what’s wrong with that line of reasoning. By it we’d have to conclude that Islam and Mormonism are right on the money, because after all they’re growing so fast. It also flies in the face of what Jesus said about the way that leads to destruction being broad and wide and many going into it; but few finding the straight and narrow way that leads to life. Elsewhere Jesus makes it clear that the true Gospel and those who adhere to it will always be subject to persecution and rejection; they’ll be beaten and despised by the world. It’s never going to be very popular. So again, the relative success of his ministry cannot be what Jesus means by the fruit of a prophet.

So, what did he mean? Well, ask yourself: What is the fruit of a farmer? It’d be whatever it is he grows, right? Or of a cobbler? That’d be shoes. A baker’s fruit is bread; a carpenter’s fruit are the homes he builds. In the same way, the job of a prophet, pastor, or Bible teacher is to proclaim God’s Word. The question is: What is he actually saying? And here it might seem that we’re back to square one: how’s the typical layperson supposed to know if the teacher is right or wrong in his understanding of God’s Word? People being people, isn’t it natural to want to defer to the supposed expert? I mean if I take my car to the garage because it’s acting up, or if I’m feeling sick and go to see the doctor, how am I supposed to know if what they’re telling me needs to be done is right? I don’t know very much about auto mechanics or medicine. I have to trust them, don’t I? In the same way, isn’t it natural to expect your pastor, whoever he may be, to give you the right answers about your theological questions and teach correctly? And if he’s totally messed up and yet is sincerely convinced of his point of view and can present a cogent argument to defend it, how are you to know any better?

Fortunately, Jesus doesn’t leave us guessing. He asks, “Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles?” The obvious answer is, “No. That’s impossible.” Then he goes on to explain, “So, every healthy tree produces good fruit, but corrupt trees produce bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a corrupt tree bear good fruit.” According to Jesus it’s an unchangeable law of nature.

So, what's it got to do with knowing who is or isn't a false prophet? Just this: false prophets consistently deny it. In one way or another they invariably teach that bad trees are indeed capable of producing good fruit. False prophets preach the impossible.

What do I mean? Just this: ever since the fall of mankind into sin each and every one of us is a bad tree. We came from bad seed. From our parents we inherited a fallen, sinful nature. And therefore, by nature we can produce only bad fruit. It's simply not possible for us to produce good fruit. Now, it happens that some of the fruit we produce is obviously bad. I'm speaking of our easily recognized sins whatever they may be: lying, cheating, stealing, killing, lusting, coveting, hating ...about such things there is no argument. They're bad and everybody knows it. No, the real issue concerns those things we do that appear to be good: our noblest qualities, our best achievements, our most pious spiritual aspirations, our earnest seeking after God, our desire to walk in his ways, and so on. What about them? Here the false prophet sees good fruit and encourages his hearers to strive for more of the same. A true prophet tells it like it is. These too are bad fruit: sins that need to be confessed and forgiven.

"Whew! That's a pretty harsh judgment", you might be thinking—which only underscores the point and demonstrates how easy it is to be led astray. You see, to the extent that I think I am righteous on my own, that at least some of my own fruit is pretty good, to that same extent I am rejecting Christ's atoning work for me on the cross and the righteousness that comes through faith in him. So, by declaring such things to be good, the false prophet is preaching against Christ and his gracious gift of salvation, and he is instructing his hearers to build their spiritual lives on the shifting sands of their own works.

And it's here that the false prophet finds an ally in each one of us because deep down in the very soul and fiber of our sinful beings we hate the idea that there is no goodness to be found within ourselves. We flatter ourselves with the notion that I really am a good person on the inside despite the fact that sometimes I go astray, and that the Lord understands that about me and he loves me for it. It's not that I'm dead in sin; I'm just a little sick. I need a little help, a little motivation, some positive thinking, to bring out the best in me. And this is precisely what the false prophet provides: a version of Jesus who is there to assist you to become a better person. And this can be so subtle and toned down that it may escape notice, like insisting that the one thing that separates you from those who are perishing is that innate spiritual wisdom or cleverness that caused you to make your decision for Christ. But you see that even that little bit means that your eternal salvation ultimately depends on you and your good decision rather than on a gracious God who does all things to save you in Christ – even going so far as to create in you the gift of faith by his Word and the work of the Holy Spirit.

It's offensive to us this truth that there is nothing good that dwells within, and the sinful nature in us fights it tooth and nail, always searching for something positive that speaks well of us before God. We see it in the false prophets even at the very end when they stand in the judgment. They plead their case before Christ, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?" They sincerely thought they were working for Jesus; but notice what they're attempting to stand on: what they did supposedly in Jesus' name. That doesn't sound very much like "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling" does it? That's because it's not. And that's why Jesus sends them away saying, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness."

That last word is key. Jesus says they worked *lawlessness*. And it's not because they were running around breaking the law and telling people to do the same – exactly the opposite is true: they were telling people to obey the law, telling them that it could be done and that by it, even perhaps in some very small way, they could produce good fruit. By so doing they showed that they didn't understand what the law is for. They thought it was meant to bring out the best in us. It's not. The purpose of the law is to show us what's wrong with us, to show us how corrupt we are, and how that even the things we think are good in us are in fact filthy rags in the sight of God. It's only when we understand just how truly and thoroughly rotten we really are that we can despair of ourselves and our works, and feel the heat, as it were, of the judgment we deserve. Then we can understand that the only thing to be done with the bad trees that we are is for them to be chopped down and thrown in the fire so that the Lord can plant in this lifeless soil something else, something living and good, namely Christ and his righteousness.

Because there is only one good tree: the cross of Jesus. And there is only one good fruit that we need: his body broken and his blood shed on behalf of sinners. And these he freely gives us on account of his great love, goodness, and mercy. A true prophet will always be directing you to that good fruit from the Tree of Life which, if you eat, you will live forever. And in this way, you will be building your life of faith upon the Rock.

And so, with all of this in mind, we will do well to examine ourselves and ask the questions, "What is it in me that I think of as good fruit? What is it that I think I can take credit for in the sight of God? In what ways have I been led astray by the teaching of false prophets – or indeed, by the imagined noble religious aspirations of my own sinful nature? How much of my life am I building on the sand?" Seeing it, despise it. Repent of it. And together let us receive again the good fruit of the Tree of Life given to us by God for our forgiveness and salvation through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!