**Matthew 7:15-27** June 18, 2017

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*Matthew 7:15 [Jesus said,] “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. 16By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? 17Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. 18A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. 19Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. 21“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ 23Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’*

*24“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. 25The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. 26But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. 27The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”*

**Discernment: Building on the Right Foundation**

Dear Friends in Christ,

It’s the time of year when we turn the corner. Not the corner from spring to summer—though we have certainly turned that corner. The corner I am thinking of is in our Christian church year. We can kind of divide our church year in half. From December to about the end of May, our church year focuses on the *life* of Jesus. It starts in December with Jesus’ birth. Then going through Epiphany, Lent, Good Friday and Easter, we consider how he lived and died for us. Then at the end of May we remember Jesus’ ascension and how he sent the Holy Spirit. This week, the second Sunday after Pentecost, we turn the corner.

If we pay full attention to Jesus’ life for only half the year, what could we possibly pay attention to in the other half? Here it is, in a general way – Christmas to Pentecost are about Jesus’ life; June through November are about Jesus’ teachings. We have turned the corner into the *teachings* of Jesus.

Which is why the second Sunday after Pentecost has a similar emphasis each year. What emphasis?

You heard it in the first reading. In Deuteronomy it said, *“Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds… Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates!”* (11:18-20) And Jesus said it in our sermon text. If we are going to talk about the teachings of Jesus, God’s word tells us to look no further than this book. Which I hope makes all of you Lutherans say, “No kidding, Pastor!” But I mean it. Look no further than this book, the Bible. For a guide to spiritual truth, do not look into pop culture and the spirituality of today’s stars. Do not consult the latest “scientific studies” that contradict what last decade’s “scientific studies” said and which the scientific studies of the 2020’s will again reverse. Look to God’s unchanging, reliable Word.

But that is so unpopular. Most people who call themselves “spiritual” have the “*I* think” type of religiosity that saturates our day. Our world frowns on anything that insists it is truth. Even many Christians think that insisting on one correct understanding of God’s Word is just argumentative, nit-picky, silly, trivial, majoring on minors, arrogant. Even we sometimes treat differences over God’s Word as secondary to emotional fulfillment, a welcoming atmosphere and all the rest.

Do you know what sin is most condemned in the New Testament? It isn’t unfriendliness. It isn’t neglect of the poor. It isn’t greed. It isn’t hatred or anger. It isn’t sexual immorality. *It is* false doctrine.

Teaching contrary to the Bible is condemned more often than violence or neglect of the poor or greed. It is the most-condemned sin because if you distort God’s word, then you have no truth. If we agree to put the Bible to the side because we can’t agree on it, then we have no truth about violence or sexuality or generosity or money or the family. We don’t even have knowledge of a Savior.

So, as we turn the corner of the church year and start down the road of the teachings of Jesus. We start down the road with Jesus’ own words, ringing in our ears, ***“Watch out for false prophets!”*** Not all who claim to have God’s message do. ***“Watch out for them.”***

Jesus would not be well received in America’s universities or town hall meetings or even joint prayer services. Jesus smashes the popular spiritual messages: “All roads lead to heaven.” No they don’t. “We all worship the same God.” No we don’t. Jesus agrees with none of those popular lies. In fact, anyone who suggests this inclusive view of religion contradicts Jesus. Let them have their inclusive religion. Jesus will have no part of them, neither now nor in eternity. He claims truth to be the exclusive right of God’s one revelation to mankind, the Bible. Jesus’ message is that there are in fact falsehoods, false prophets, false preachers, false religions, false beliefs.

About them, he says: ***“Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”*** [On Judgment Day, Jesus] will say to them plainly, ***“I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!”*** These are not mass murderers, these are false prophets. They will be condemned, so will be their followers.

They are dangerous, so ***“watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing.”*** Be discerning.

Oh, if only these false prophets would come to us as ferocious wolves! Then we would never go there, would we! If only they would tell us, “I am a false prophet,” we wouldn’t give them a second thought. But these misrepresenters of God’s truth survive by putting on a harmless front, by portraying their poison as medicine, and the truth as intolerant and unloving. They do things that appeal to our sensibilities.

Jesus says that their arrogance will be on display even on the day of judgment. They will appeal to him, ***“Lord, Lord, did we not in your name prophesy, and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many works of power.”*** *[Author’s literal translation of the Greek.]* They do not appeal to God’s mercy or his promises. All they can do is slap Jesus’ name on their lies and insist that the incantation of Jesus’ name justified whatever dishonesty they were peddling. They impersonate sheep. They point to amazing deeds and great successes.

And here we notice a key difference between the false prophets Jesus warns about and you.

If judgment day were upon you, and you were to stand before Jesus, and he were to ask you whether and why he should let you into heaven, I would hope that the last thing you would do is say this: *“Lord, didn’t I often come to church every week? Did I not do the best I could by my family? Did I not help the needy? Did I not try to do all that you told me to do?”* Those are the same answers the false prophets give.

True prophets do not appeal to good works or wonders or prophecy or driving out demons or material success. They appeal to God’s mercy and forgiveness in Jesus Christ. To be clear, Jesus is not outright prohibiting miracles or religious experiences or engaging the emotions in your faith life or material success. But he does say that these are not the real test of false or godly prophets.

The real test of the every religious thought is stated most clearly in the Old Testament book of Isaiah 8:20: *“To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn.”* [Repeat.] Do you want to know who speaks the truth? Go to God’s Word.

But you will say, “Pastor, I don’t know my Bible all that well.” In a sense, I understand. As a pastor I have a tremendous privilege—and do not shy away from calling it a privilege—to be a pastor. I can dedicate much time to the study of God’s Word. I *should* be able to open my Bible to 2 Thessalonians, chapter 3, faster than most anyone here. I *should* have a wider variety of Bible passages memorized than nearly any of you. Shame on me if I do not! But that does not excuse Biblical illiteracy on your part. Learn spiritual discenment!

Do you know the original purpose for the Secret Service? The Secret Service was not created to protect the president. It was originally created to combat counterfeiting. It still does. When agents are first trained to spot counterfeit bills, you might think that examine dozens of different counterfeit bills to learn all the tricks of the trade. *They do just the opposite.* To learn about counterfeiting, trainees first study genuine currency. They look at it: the color, the security features, the detailing. They hold it in their hands to learn the feel of genuine, new crisp currency. They listen to the snap of new bills as they are counted off. They learn the feel and sound of older worn genuine currency too. Who knows? Maybe they even learn the smell of it. Then, *then* they are prepared to identify the fakes.

And so with you. The way you will learn to identify the fakes, the false prophets destined for the fires, is if you know God’s Word. That is why Jesus, after warning about false prophets, then said, ***“Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.”*** The way to stand before the false prophets in the great and final day of the Lord is to know the Word of God.

And lest you worry that Jesus seems to be promoting some sort of work righteousness, remember another encounter between Jesus and some people of the world, in John chapter 6: *“Then they asked him, ‘What must we do to do the works God requires?’ Jesus answered, ‘The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent’”* (28-29). The first work of God in you is believing, trusting in Jesus as your Savior. And then, out of thankfulness to him, to learn and to live out all of his truth.

But Jesus said there were two different builders. One who built on bedrock, another who built on sand.

Take me to the building site of your life. Give me a tour. Show me the place. Take a me around to the side of your spiritual house, shovel in hand. Can you step it into the ground and hear the clink of metal on rock? Or will you bury the shovel blade in soft sandy soil?

Where is God’s Word in your life? Weekly visits to God’s house of worship—or is it monthly? Daily meditations on God’s Word—or is that once a week—or merely a pious wish? When was God’s Word the topic of conversation at your house? Do you ever find yourself singing, or at least humming hymns and spiritual songs? Do you know what Bible study is? If you enjoy so-called “faith-based” entertainment, how often do you consult the Bible to see if it is true and accurate, or do you just accept what Hollywood says and figure that the discrepancies don’t matter?

How is the building site tour going? What are you building on? The bedrock of God’s word? Or is the ground, on second examination, looking kind of sandy?

Who of us can claim to give the Word of God the place it deserves in our lives? So many distractions! So often we believe the lies about what is important in this life, for us, for our kids! We can find so many times and reasons to put off God’s Word to another time. God knows that I can!

Lord, forgive us! Lord, redirect us. Lord, help us. Lord, give us strength. Help us make right choices. Help us overcome all the tempting voices of the world around us. Help us put your word in first place in our lives.

Lord, keep on our lips the first line of the prayer we sang before our sermon, “Lord, keep us steadfast in your word!” Amen.