

JESUS WARNS THE CHURCH ABOUT FALSE PREACHERS
Matthew 7:15-23; Trinity 8; July 24-25, 2021

In today's Gospel Reading, Jesus warns His Church about false preachers. This preacher in his sermon warning you about other preachers might appear to be self-serving. You could wonder if I am trying to justify myself as a true preacher by attacking others as false, seeking popularity by tearing others down. Jesus' warning about false prophets includes the danger of basing the faithfulness of preachers on how popular their preaching is.

Probably the most hated preacher of his day was the prophet Jeremiah, whom God sent to preach the coming destruction of Judah and Jerusalem by the Babylonians. We get a sampling of what his ministry was like in our Old Testament Reading today from Jeremiah 23 (16-29). The popular preachers of Jeremiah's day were saying that God had no problems with the lives of the people so they could keep living the way they were, and they had nothing to fear from the Babylonians. Plots to kill Jeremiah to shut him up were made, and he was thrown into a pit to starve to death. He was accused of being a prophet of doom who was depressing the people and taking away their hope of being spared conquest, death, and exile.

Hear what the true prophet Jeremiah said in God's name: **Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. They say continually to those who despise the Word of the LORD, 'It shall be well with you'; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, 'No disaster shall come upon you.'"** The biblical test of whether or not someone is a true prophet is what he said came true (Dt. 18:22). Jeremiah was proven to be a true prophet.

False prophets claiming to be speaking for God were a problem in Jeremiah's day. Jesus warned His disciples in His day and the Church from now and until the end of the world that false prophets will continue to be a problem. **Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.**

A wolf dressed in sheep's clothing wants to appear harmless like a sheep. But how does a wolf get a sheepskin to wear? He has to kill a sheep first. Any wolf that has killed a sheep to disguise himself as one of the flock has only evil intents. He wants to get among the flock so he can kill and steal from the sheep.

A false preacher does not care what happens to the flock in the end just as long as he can get what he wants from them first. Jesus doesn't want His flock destroyed by false preachers so he warns us about them and tells us how to recognize them. **You will recognize them by their fruits.** Jesus compares false prophets to thornbushes, thistles, and rotten trees, examples of things that don't produce the good fruit of true faith. **Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.**

When Jesus said this He was quoting a true prophet of God. Do you remember who said that first? It was John the Baptist, who came to prepare the way for God's Christ (3:10). John's preaching built on the Old Testament prophets preaching about God's people, Israel, being like an unfaithful vineyard producing wild grapes in their sin and unbelief instead of true grapes in faith. Jesus built on John's preaching. We can recognize false prophets by their bad fruit. If false preachers produce bad fruit, what then is the good fruit that is produced by the preaching of a true prophet?

Bear fruit in keeping with repentance (Mt. 3:8). True preaching of God's Word produces the good fruit of repentance for sins and true faith in God. In contrast to that, false preaching will deny that what God calls sin is actually a sin, something not requiring sorrow for it and God's forgiveness. The false prophet says something like: "No one has the right to judge what you choose to think or do. You don't need to change anything about yourself; God accepts you just the way you are." What this actually means is that you don't need to be saved from anything, except those who disagree with you. Rejecting God's Word of law that identifies and condemns our sins ends up being a rejection of Jesus Christ as our Savior because it claims that you really don't need Jesus to save you from your sin and unbelief; you don't need Jesus to die on the cross to forgive your sin.

That is the same sin that God denounced through Jeremiah. It is despising God's Word. People are encouraged to stubbornly follow their own hearts desires, which are against God's Word. False prophets encourage sin by telling sinners that their sin is not sin and that life will go well with you as long you do what seems right to you.

How are we going to recognize false preaching when we hear it so we can reject it and the false preacher who is leading us astray? Since a wolf in sheep's clothing will always claim to be speaking God's Word, even when he or she is not, we need to be hearing and learning God's Word in the Bible regularly to know the truth and recognize false preaching when we hear it. Christians know that the devil is hard at work in the world, constantly speaking lies in the name of God to deceive people while leading them into "false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice."

We need to watch daily our habits to be careful not to let the pattern of the world around us determine how we live our lives. The world around us is mostly godless, without true faith in God. If we are comfortable living and working in a society that mocks Christian belief and morality as backward and hateful, we have become "of the world" not just "in the world" and need to reevaluate everything. If we think that the Church should be flexible enough to fit into the way the world does things today, we have bought into the lie.

Bearing fruit in keeping with repentance begins, of course, not with those sinners "out there" but in our own hearts. God's Word reminds us that we remain in sinful flesh. We will struggle with sin our whole lives, a struggle that won't end until we die. One of the lies Christians can fall for in this struggle is that we can be sorry for our sin but there is nothing we can do about it; it's not our fault; the world around us forces us into sin so we have no choice but to continue in our sin. This is a sign that we are more afraid of losing what our flesh desires than afraid of God's judgment against us for sinning. All of us have our own pet sins that we want to care for and protect, but that does not excuse them. Admitting our sins, even from weakness, does not excuse them and certainly does not forgive them. There is a difference between struggling against sin and thinking we can continue in that sin without consequence because "that's just the way I am." Worse yet, we can blame God for our sins: "He made me this way."

God's Word faithfully proclaims true teaching and the life and morality that come from true faith. Christians need a regular hearing and learning of God's Word, especially since the devil, the world, and our own flesh try to drown out God's Word, deny it, or contradict it.

Again, what is at stake with false preaching by false prophets in the Church? The Gospel of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation in Jesus Christ alone! Jesus' warning to us is: just because false prophets preach **"in My name"** does not make it God's Word. **"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven."** When God condemns false prophets to the fires of hell, it will be after those false prophets claimed to be true prophets.

False prophets will tell you that you get to believe in God on your own terms, which is a rejection of repentance and true faith. Believe them and you will end up in hell with them. Jesus teaches us to repent of our sins, sins which are defined according to God in His Word, sins which will condemn us to hell if we won't repent of them. But even more than that, Jesus teaches us that our sins are forgiven for His sake and for the sake of His suffering and death. True preachers will always point sinners to Jesus for their life and salvation, not their own thoughts and desires, to, **"Bear fruit in keeping with repentance."**

To help us with this, Jesus gives us His Holy Spirit to believe in Him, His salvation for us, and the forgiveness of our sins. With the Holy Spirit in our hearts and working through God's Word, we are given the will and ability to repent of our sins and live a new life. When we sin, we don't claim, "I couldn't help it," the same as saying, "God can't help me," which is false. God can and does help us in faith to live as His own people. We are weak, but He is strong to save us.

When the wolf comes in sheep's clothing he is going to tell us that no one can lay guilt on us, that we have nothing to fear, and we should live the way that feels right to us. Is that true? No. Jesus has warned us about these false preachers who have crept into the Church. God's Word says, **"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"** (1 Tim. 1:15). God preserve the true preaching of the Gospel in His Church! Amen.