

Matthew 7.15-23
8th Sunday after the Feast of the Holy Trinity
6 August 2017
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

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Fellow-redeemed: Grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Today's sermon is based on the Gospel we just heard, and especially these words: "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."

Oremus: Haec, pater sancte, verba tua sunt, etc.

It's no secret. We here at St. John's, we in the Missouri Synod, place a premium on truth and purity of doctrine. If you've heard it once from this pulpit or once from a teaching lectern somewhere here in our classrooms, you've heard it a million times.

And that seems to drive us right into conflict with nearly all the other churches. They want joint services. In spite of significant differences in teaching. On everything from who works faith in us to how the world came to be. To whether Baptism and the Sacrament actually do anything or not. In other words, we disagree on the apostles' teaching.

In fact, preachers and teachers near and far, from Rick Warren to Joel Osteen, from Joyce Myers to Beth Moore and Max Lucado, would like to put *their* message in our ears. And to have us buy their books and their programs and their theology. This is nothing new. Less than 30 years after the Lord's ascension Paul warned the Ephesian elders: "From among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them." (Acts 20.30) And so to all of this we respond with Paul: "Mark those who cause divisions and offenses among you contrary to the doctrine which you have learned, and avoid them." (Rom 16.17)

And they don't like it.

In fact, it might even make *us* feel a little uncomfortable sometimes. Maybe even a little cocksure. Arrogant. Proud. As if the Lord had given us a corner on His truth and no one else.

And then there's the times. Aren't we now living in a so-called post-Christian age? The proof's in the pudding, isn't it? Christians are squeezed from every angle. Jobs and sports and all the idols of this age don't just crowd out life, they crowd out the Lord's day! The best-read catechism in America wasn't written by Martin Luther, but by Hollywood. And in the face of the enormous pressures against the church there's comfort in numbers: shouldn't all Christians of goodwill simply forget their differences? And didn't Jesus pray to His heavenly Father that "they might all be one, Father, just as You are in Me and I am in You"? (John 17.21)

And so our continued protestations, our continued refusal to compromise—it makes it seem like we are what we are: a bunch of stubborn Germans. Like this is our little Missouri Synod hang-up. Our one-string

fiddle in the orchestra of all the religions of North America. The thing we get to tell ourselves to make us feel better. Superior. A notch above.

But in the Gospel for today Jesus Himself puts a premium on the truth. “Beware of false prophets,” He says. And that was a word not only for those gathered around Him to hear the sermon on the mount. But for all times. For the Word of the Lord endures forever.

And that premium on the truth? It’s not just an aesthetic nicety made for a bunch of stubborn Germans.

Jesus explains why it matters. Just like a bad tree brings forth bad fruit, bad *doctrine* brings forth bad fruit.

In our neighbor’s yard he’s got what Doug Lehmann kindly identified for us as a tree of heaven. That’s its name.

At our house we secretly call it the tree from hell. It grows so fast it crowds out desirable species like oaks and elms. It stinks. When you crush its leaves you have to wash your hands. It’s a super-seeder and it has runners. So its little weedlets pop up all over our yard. And when it pollinates it coats everything—house, patio, porch—with a stinky dust. It’s a bad tree. And how do I know? Because its fruit is bad. Oh, did I mention? It’s dangerous, too. It grows tall and fast. Its wood is weak. And it can’t stand up to Kansas storms. Take cover under an oak. But under a tree of heaven only at your own peril.

Bad tree, bad fruit. In the same way: Bad doctrine, bad results. And bad results with eternal consequences.

This is what those results look like: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven.... Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and do many mighty works in My name? And I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness.’”

Now, I need to pause for a minute to clear up something. You’re not saved by being orthodox. You’re saved through faith alone. You’re saved through Jesus alone.

Say “faith alone” and it means “Jesus alone.” Say “faith alone,” and it means that your salvation is nothing other than this:

- The fact that the Son of God took on human flesh for me in the womb of the Blessed Virgin
- The fact that the Son of God obeyed the first, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and so on, commandments perfectly—not only not breaking them, but keeping them in His mind and heart. For me
- The fact that the Son of God, in spite of His innocence, was made to be sin for me
 - And to suffer the horrible death on the Cross for me
 - And to be laid in the cold darkness of the grave for me.
- The fact that He, and not I, descended to hell and proclaimed victory over Satan for me.
- The fact that He has ascended to heaven to prepare a place for me.
- The fact that He has sent His Baptism and Word throughout the world and through them rescued me, who couldn’t help myself, from my sins and death and from the devil’s power.

- The fact that He lays on my lips His own Body and Blood and weekly forgives my many sins.

That's faith alone.

And say Jesus alone? Well, that means nothing other than faith alone: that I couldn't, can't, and I'll never be able by my own reason or strength to believe in Jesus Christ or come to Him. I did nothing. But the Holy Spirit called me by the Gospel that Jesus had already done it all.

So I hope you understand. You're not saved by being orthodox. You're saved by Jesus. So don't mishear me. And don't mishear Jesus.

Because what Jesus *is* saying in the Gospel is this: you cannot get Jesus and everything He's done for you through false teaching. Let me say that again: you can't Jesus and everything He's done for you through false teaching. Even when it comes to what seems like a trifling little thing that doesn't matter.

Take probably the most common issue that divides the entire Protestant world from the Evangelical Lutheran Church—how we get faith. Your friends in the Protestant churches believe in Jesus. Just ask 'em. They can point to the time and place when and where they decided to be on His team. And shortly after that they went and got baptized to show everyone else they were on His team

And that's false teaching.

Scripture plainly says, "For by grace are you saved through faith, and this not of yourselves; it is God's gift, lest any man should boast." (Eph 2.8-9) Your salvation? A gift. God's grace? A gift. The faith that trusts Jesus? A gift. Take a moment. Look at your hand. Seriously. You didn't decide to make your hand. You couldn't have. Impossible. It's God's gift. That's exactly how it is with faith in Jesus. It's God's gift. Through the Gospel.

And about Baptism? The Scriptures know nothing of getting baptized to say you're on God's team. Instead, they say, "He saved us not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy by the washing of regeneration and the renewal of the Holy Spirit whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior." (Tit 3.5-6) Your Baptism? Not *your* work, but God's mercy. The fact that you believe and have the Holy Spirit? You didn't wrestle Him away from the Father. The Father poured Him out on you through Jesus Christ, who saved you.

Now, let me ask you very frankly: the person whose faith in Jesus is rooted in the moment they decided to believe in Jesus, who regards his baptism as something he did *for* Jesus—is that what Jesus wants for them? To labor under the burden of wondering whether they decided well enough or hard enough or firmly enough or seriously enough? To be driven constantly to prove in their lives and by their deeds that they really really really are Christians? To think they need to be rebaptized again and again and again because the first one didn't take?

Instead, it was all God's gift to them through the Holy Spirit. So that they never need to worry about whether their *faith* is strong enough because that doesn't matter. So that they never need to worry about their sins because that doesn't matter, either. Because what matters is Jesus.

Jesus doesn't say, "Come unto Me all you who are noble and virtuous enough to make a decision for Me and I will put you to work." He says, "Come unto Me all you who are weary. Come unto Me all you who can't be virtuous and noble, try as you may. And I will give you rest. I'll count and call all your works

good and noble and virtuous because you're in Me. I'll even work all things for good for you. All things. Even your sins. Because I'll work repentance in you and draw you to Me." That's what Jesus wants for them.

Because that's how Jesus wants to be their Lord. He wants to be their Lord by saving them. From their sins. From their lack of virtue. From their lack of noble action. Just as He wants to be your Lord by saving and rescuing you. First from your sins. And with them from your death and hell.

And that's why pure doctrine matters. Not as a Missouri Synod nicety. Not as something to palliate a bunch of stubborn Germans. But so that you might do the will of the Father: that is, that you might believe in Jesus Christ. (John 6.40) That you might have all Christ wants to give you. (John 10.10)

So that you can look at this font here whenever you walk in, no matter how burdened by sin and doubt, and say, "There! There Christ made me His." So that you can hear the word spoken by your pastor, "I forgive you," and know on whose death it is staked and by whose merit it comes to you—not by yours, but by Christ's. So that you can kneel at this altar rail wondering if you're saved or not because "how in the world could God save someone like me," and hear Christ's words to you and no one else: "This is My Body. For you. This is My Blood. For you. Your sins are forgiven." And know that God and Christ never lied. Your sins are, indeed, forgiven.

And that's why right teaching matters.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

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