

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Jesus said, “So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.”

The very beginning of Matthew 7 starts off with Jesus preaching to the crowd, “Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.” A few weeks ago, we had a parallel account of that in Luke's Gospel.

Now, today, a few paragraphs later, Jesus teaches what you heard a few minutes ago, “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.”

That's interesting, isn't it? Jesus today, though, is teaching you how to judge things you hear. Implicit in that is that you are hearing preachers, and you are called to be diligent hearers. Jesus warns you and teaches you. He's teaching you how to think. He's teaching you this because there is something extremely important at stake, your eternity. Even if someone doesn't want or think he's a hearer of preaching and teaching he always will be. Try as anyone might to the contrary, he's going to be listening to preachers. Not all these preachers are in churches but can be heard and seen in the things which we hear and see daily. So, what do you do? Well, Jesus teaches you to recognize wolves in sheep's clothing by their fruits. Judge what you see and hear by the life and content of the preachers.

Primarily this is about the church and false preachers. It's good for you to consider this first and foremost. False preachers exist. Jesus tells you that and warns you. Not only does he warn you, but he tells you how you will recognize them. Jesus is teaching you about your duty as hearers of the word of God. You must be concerned with the Scriptures. One of the things that's so tempting is for you to get caught up and lose sight the things of God that you are swayed and lured into the lies and tricks of the devil. This manifests itself in different ways. One of those is what you heard in the Old Testament reading from Jeremiah where God warned his people and warns you about false prophets, “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.’” Did you catch that?

The prophets in Jeremiah's day were telling people it would be ok for them when they despised the word of God and “stubbornly follows his own heart.” That was his day but it's not any different now, that could be the description of 2024. It doesn't matter what year it is, wolves in sheep's clothing and false prophets don't admonish. They don't call to repentance instead they affirm what people want. In Jeremiah's day they also taught it wasn't a big deal if they had gone after false gods. The false prophets teach tolerance. They don't teach what God says. Wolves entice. Wolves affirm people in their life choices. Wolves may “challenge” people, but they direct them to find comfort and new life in themselves. Wolves also redefine terms and twist God's word. They don't point you to where God is active and working in baptism, his Scriptures, absolution, and the Lord's Supper. They put your Christian life in the hands of your experiences, your prayers, which is to see it's all ultimately in your own works. All these things are deadly. Jesus says this too in the Gospel reading about wolves when he said, “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. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your

name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’” That’s all terrifying for you to hear. It terrifies preachers to the core and calls them to examine very closely what we say. It should jar us and knock us back and cause us to take a long and hard look at our lives.

Understanding what Jesus says isn’t hard but it makes you uncomfortable at times. The reason is because deep down we don’t like controversy and we don’t like to have to think and evaluate what we hear and see. Our society, and ourselves included, is consumer driven. We want to just consume content be it on our phones, tablets, televisions, or whatever medium we make use of daily. We rejoice and find relaxation in simply being an observer who doesn’t have to actively engage our minds with what we are confronted. We want to be at the church that is in the new up and coming thing that our friends are talking about. We want to fit in and don’t want to have to evaluate what goes on around us. Perhaps, though, a great deal this has become such an issue even in the church is because we don’t know how to think or at least we haven’t been taught to think. Even education in our world today centers around being told what to think rather than how to think and then by what something is to be judged. We are shown images, though, about how we should be offended by certain things that go against the grain and rock the boat of the current wave in the culture. We need trigger warnings, then, before something would ever dare enter our view that may cause us to pause and ponder.

Outside the church you apply this thinking and mindset to how you look and interact with the world around you. Look at how an organization speaks about God, families, children, or things which are true, good, and beautiful. Are all these things mocked, redefined, downplayed, or simply rejected? That’s a sure sign of what is going on at the base and root of those trees. You judge them by their fruits.

Jesus is the vine, and you are the branches. Looking at your own life, in John 15 Jesus says, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”

Be warned this day. There’s no excuse to not hear and read God’s word. God admonishes you to do this. St. Paul did not shrink from proclaiming the whole counsel of God. Expect nothing less of your pastor too. Hold him accountable for the words that come out of his, my mouth. Listen to them and judge them according to Scriptures just as the Bereans did in the book of Acts when St. Paul preached to them. Hear God’s word. Listen and think. In so doing you are clothed by that same word with the whole armor of God as you have been given in the waters of your baptism. No false prophet can deceive when you have the sword of the Spirit, the Holy Scriptures, and you can defend the flaming arrows of the devil as they go bouncing off Christ who has over him and all his lies.

Likewise, daily commend yourself to God. Rather than simply be prey to wolves, be hearers and students, disciples, of the Holy Scriptures daily. Live out your baptism as you turn from sin and the deaf ears it has. In Romans 8, God says through St. Paul, “So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!”

8th Sunday after Trinity—July 21, 2024

This is who you are and who you are called to be. Like in the Introit you too can say with the sons of Korah, “We have thought on your steadfast love, O God, in the midst of your temple. As your name, O God, so your praise reaches to the ends of the earth. Your right hand is filled with righteousness. Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, his holy mountain. Within her citadels God has made himself known as a fortress. Let Mount Zion be glad! Let the daughters of Judah rejoice because of your judgments! This is God, our God forever and ever. He will guide us forever.”

Listen to all this today dear saints of God. Take it all to heart. Heed the warning and listen to the instruction God gives you. Most especially, take comfort and refuge in your Lord Jesus who has redeemed you and called you his own. Dear people of God, Jesus is no false prophet. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Jesus is your Redeemer. What are his fruits? Well, he healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, made the lame to walk, and raised the dead. But you see dear people of God Jesus himself is all those fruits as well as he himself is God in the flesh and laid down his life for the life of the world and raised it up again. He is who is says he is and just as he was promised of old. Now, you dear saints of God have those fruits of his life, death, and resurrection. Your sin is forgiven, you have eternal life, and he will raise you up on the last day. He is yours and you are his and he will do exactly as he has done and says he will do. He will guard and keep you in his care now and forever.

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