**The Eighth Sunday after Trinity**

**August 2, 2020**

**“False Prophets”**

**Matthew 7:15**

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.” Matthew 7:15

With these words Jesus teaches us that it is the duty of every Christian to judge the doctrine of the preachers. Every Christian should know the difference between true teaching and false teaching and avoid fellowship with false teachers. False teaching often appears harmless, but it is dangerous. This is why Jesus warns us all to beware of false prophets.

It is the duty of all Christians to judge the doctrine of the preachers. The early church knew this. Speaking of the Bereans, St. Luke writes in Acts 17:11,

These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.

They searched the Scriptures daily. They compared what they heard with what is written. What is written in the Bible is the only standard by which to judge what we hear from the preachers. This is what we confess about this in the Formula of Concord, the last of our Lutheran Confessions, written in 1577:

We believe, teach, and confess that the only rule and norm according to which all teachings, together with all teachers, should be evaluated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testament alone. For it is written in Psalm 119:105, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” St. Paul has written, “even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.” (Galatians 1:8)

The Holy Scriptures are the only standard by which to judge the teaching of our preachers. And we are to judge the teaching of the preachers! Jesus said so. “Beware of false prophets,” he said. Jesus says this to the preachers or pastors of his church. St. Paul wrote to the pastors in Ephesus as recorded in Acts 20:29-31,

For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.

Jesus is talking to the pastors when he says, “Beware of false prophets.” He’s not talking only to the pastors. He’s talking to every single individual Christian. Jesus says, “My sheep hear my voice.” They rely on that voice. The minister who preaches God’s word publicly is the servant of the sheep of the good shepherd. The sheep, the people, or the laity as we call them, have the right – in fact, the duty – to judge the preaching of their ministers. A ten year old child may require the pastor to show from the Holy Scriptures that what he is preaching is God’s word.

This is why we learn the Catechism when we are young and remain students of the Catechism all our lives. The Catechism is a summary of the teaching of the Bible. What does the Bible teach about God’s law, who God is and what he does for us, prayer, baptism, the keys, and the Lord’s Supper? The Catechism clearly teaches these six chief parts of Christian doctrine. This is the teaching of the Bible. If you know the Catechism you know what the Bible teaches. Everyone who has learned the Catechism is equipped to do what Jesus tells us to do: “Beware of false prophets.”

God cares for the souls of his Christians by means of the pure preaching of his holy word. How do you know that those entrusted with this preaching are preaching God’s word and not their own opinions? You cannot know unless you learn Christian doctrine for yourself. The preachers are duty bound to preach according to the Holy Scriptures. The hearers have the sacred obligation to see to it that nothing but the pure word of God sounds forth from the pulpits of their churches.

We have seen church bodies abandon the teaching of God’s word and adopt the false wisdom of the world. Churches that once taught the historicity of Genesis now teach that Adam and Eve are a myth and that we may have evolved from the animals. They once taught, as the Bible teaches, that God does not permit women to preach in the church, that God condemns homosexual desires and practices, that faith in Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation, and that the Bible cannot err on any matter. Now they ordain women as pastors, promote same sex marriage, claim that sincere followers of non-Christian religions may be saved without faith in Christ, and find errors all over the Bible. Why do churches go down this path? Who is to blame? It’s the preachers who preach false doctrine. And it’s the hearers who let them get away with it.

We tend to lay all of the blame for false teaching on the false teachers. The wolf is fierce and the sheep are helpless. We blame the preachers. We don’t blame the sheep. They’re victims. We certainly shouldn’t blame the victims! But why are they victims? They are victims of false teaching because they disobeyed their Lord Jesus when he told them to beware of false prophets! They got what they wanted. They preferred the false teaching to the pure teaching. St. Paul writes in 2 Timothy 4:3-4,

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers;and they turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.

False doctrine is market driven. False teachers respond to market demands. Years ago there was a very popular pastor of a church out in California known as the Crystal Cathedral. When asked why he was so popular he said, “I tell people what they want to hear.” He replaced the gospel of Christ’s blood and righteousness that forgives and saves undeserving sinners from their sins with the gospel of self-esteem. The Crystal Cathedral was a flash in the pan. Who, under the age of fifty, has even heard of Robert Schuller? What happened to him will happen to Joel Osteen and then someone else will arise to replace Osteen. False prophets come and go, but their false teachings continue to be passed on. There will always be a market for them. Jesus is telling you to beware of them. You must judge the teaching of the preachers.

God wants us to avoid fellowship with false teachers. When he says, “beware,” he is not saying to listen to their programs, read their books, attend their services, and join together with them for worship. St. Paul writes in Romans 16:17,

Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them.

They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. They plunder the soul. They’re spiritual swindlers. They don’t give you the treasures of the kingdom. They rob you. They don’t gather the flock. They scatter it. They look like harmless sheep. So they are treated as harmless sheep and their errors are tolerated because not to tolerate their errors seems to be a bit intolerant and of course we Christians are to be tolerant of others. Isn’t that what love is all about?

True Christian love does not tolerate false teaching. Our work will always be imperfect. We need to forgive one another and ask for forgiveness. Our lives are far from perfect. We must daily beg for God’s forgiveness. God’s word, however, is perfect. We may tolerate no teaching that contradicts the Bible.

Why not? Because we want to be right and point the finger of accusation against those who disagree with us? Is it so that we can feel superior to those who attend churches that teach false doctrine? Is it out of arrogance and pride? God forbid!

We must insist on the pure teaching and reject and refute all false teaching because the devil himself is the author of all false teaching and he spits it out to do us spiritual harm. All of God’s teaching centers on the truth that we poor sinners are forgiven of all our sins, reckoned by God to be righteous, and saved from death and the devil, not because of anything good we have done or will do, but solely on account of God’s grace in Christ our Savior who is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. We receive this forgiveness, this salvation, this eternal life through faith alone in Christ. Every false teaching is an attack on this precious truth.

False prophets lead us away from reliance on the clear Scriptures. Some elevate tradition above the Bible. Others replace the clear Scriptures with their own feelings and religious experiences. Others insist that whenever the Bible disagrees with so called “science” it must be reinterpreted, that is, set aside. Others force the Bible to agree with the standards of human reasonableness. Whenever we are drawn away from relying on the Scriptures alone, we are helpless to combat lies that undermine faith.

False prophets turn the gospel into a deal. If you do your part God will do his part. This misdirects your faith away from Christ to yourself. They turn faith into a good work so instead of trusting in Christ alone we trust in our decision, our devotion, and our commitment.

This is what happens when the saving power of the sacraments is denied. False prophets teach that baptism is just an outward sign of an inward experience that doesn’t really give you forgiveness of sins even though the Bible clearly says that baptism washes away sins. False prophets teach that a pastor cannot absolve you of your sins because only God can forgive sins even though it was God in the flesh who gave to his church the authority to forgive sins. False prophets teach that the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper are just bread and wine, not the body and blood of Jesus given and shed for the forgiveness of our sins, thus depriving people of the forgiveness, comfort, and strength this holy sacrament provides.

We hallow God’s name when we oppose all false doctrine. In the Small Catechism we confess concerning the first petition of the Lord’s Prayer:

God’s name is kept holy when the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity and we, as the children of God, also lead a holy life according to it.

We hallow God’s name by keeping his gospel pure from all adulterations. God’s name is hallowed when sinners are justified by Christ’s blood. God’s name is hallowed when our faith finds its security, not in ourselves, but in our baptism where we were washed clean of our sins in Christ’s blood, in the Lord’s Supper where we receive forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation as we eat and drink the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus, and in the precious gospel we hear. God’s greatest glory is in his boundless love for us. So we hallow God’s name by exposing and refuting on the basis of the Bible every false doctrine that would separate us from God’s grace and lead us to doubt and despair. Beware of false prophets! This is how we hallow God’s name.