

Trinity 8
Matthew 7:15-23

My job is really amazing. In a nutshell, I get to give Jesus to you. But I can't do it any old way I like. Like the centurion, I'm a man under authority. Jesus has mandated how He is to be delivered. You know the means that Jesus has mandated: baptism, teaching and preaching, absolution, and the Lord's Supper. If I try to deliver Jesus to you in any other way or I mess with the ways He has mandated, then I become a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Jesus warns you today that there will be pastors who are wolves in sheep's clothing. You cannot trust someone just because they're a pastor. Jesus is the only man you can trust wholeheartedly. He laid down His life for you in His suffering and death by crucifixion. His Word is true. He cannot lie. He proved it by rising from the dead. He gives Himself to you in His Word and visible Word of Baptism and Supper.

Pastors are merely men, just like you. Even the most knowledgeable and faithful pastors are sinners. Sinners who are trained, examined, and set aside to deliver Christ to you in His Word and His Sacraments. (AC VII) When we teach the Gospel purely and administer the Sacraments correctly, we are being faithful to our Lord. When we deviate from the Word and miss administer the Sacraments, we become wolves in sheep's clothing.

Jesus says that if His Words abide in you, then He will abide in you. (Jn 15:1-11) That is why you must know His Word and test everything pastors say according to that Word. Paul praises the Bereans because they examined everything He said against Holy Scriptures. (Acts 17:11) You must have the same attitude amongst yourselves. You know what I'm going to shamelessly plug next, don't you? This is where Luther's Small Catechism is so handy. It has been called the Layman's Bible for a very good reason. It gives you the outline of all of Scripture. The rest of our Confessions in the Book of Concord are extremely helpful as well.

I regularly study the Scriptures and the Book of Concord so that I deliver to you as faithfully as I can God's pure unadulterated Word for the salvation of your souls. The Book of Concord is not an easy read, but it is not just a "pastor's" book. It is meant to be read by all Christians.

Not all Christians confess what's in the Book of Concord. The Book of Concord spells out what we believe, teach, and confess according to the Scriptures. But not all Christians believe, teach, and confess the same things. Some Christians teach that you must make a decision for Christ. Jesus says that nothing good dwells in man and that out of your natural heart comes all manner of sin and it defiles you. (Mt 15:18-20) How can someone defiled with the filth of sin make a decision for Christ? Jesus tells you through His servant Paul: "by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." (Eph 2:8-9) Some Christians believe that the Lord's Supper is a mere representation of Jesus' body and blood. Jesus says "this is My Body" and "this is My Blood for the forgiveness of your sins." (Mt 26, Mk 14, Lk 22, 1 Cor 11) If you listen to a pastor, or any Christian for that matter, who confesses decision theology or who confesses a non-sacramental theology, you are listening to a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Jesus says you will know the false pastor by their fruit. Jesus uses fruit in many different ways. I want to focus on one particular aspect of the fruit. Certainly, you should not listen to a pastor if he lives in a ridiculous mansion or lives an immoral life. But what is the fruit of his teaching?

Let me explain by way of example. Kenneth Copeland and Creflo Dollar are false teachers. If you know who they are it should be obvious to you that they preach a different gospel even though they have misled a lot of people. They are more like wolves in wolve's clothing. If you don't know who they are, thanks be to God!

If you know who they are and you don't recognize the falseness of their teaching, we need to meet for some instruction! Joel Osteen and Joyce Meyer preach the exact same false gospel as Kenneth Copeland and Creflo Dollar. Even though they seem much nicer than Kenneth Copeland and Creflo Dollar, they preach the exact same false Gospel. They teach a gospel of health, wealth, and prosperity. They cannot bear Jesus' words, "If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it." (Mt 16:24-25) If you fall for this false gospel of health, wealth, and prosperity, Jesus will say to you, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness." (v. 23)

Some think you can listen to these false teachers and sift out the nuggets from the bones. Paul warns Timothy and us, "the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions [like health, wealth, and prosperity], and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths." (2 Tim 4:3-4) False doctrine, no matter how well packaged, endangers your soul to eternal damnation.

Wolves in wolf's clothing are easier to spot. So who is a wolf in sheep's clothing? If I haven't stepped on your toes yet, I may now. Billy Graham is a perfect example of a wolf in sheep's clothing. Let me be clear. I don't consider Billy Graham as a heretic. What he preached is what we call heterodoxy, that is, he mixed truth with some false teaching. What did Billy Graham do after each of his Gospel presentations? He invited people up to make a decision for Christ. This is decision theology. The work of Christ on the cross means nothing unless I make a decision. The decision is the important work and not the work on the cross. The most important date for the decision theologian is the date of their so-called decision for Christ and not their Baptism! For them, Baptism is nothing more than an act of obedience.

You know from the Small Catechism the baptismal verses from Titus: “He saved us... by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by His grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. This is a trustworthy saying.” (3:5-8) Who is the actor here and who is being acted upon? If you are the actor, then you are still in your sin. If God is the actor, then you are an heir who has the hope of eternal life.

The fruit of Billy Graham’s preaching is works righteousness. This is not to say that all who listened to Billy Graham and made a decision are lost. Those who trust in Christ will be saved. Those who trust in their own works will be damned. Baptism saves because of the work of Christ and not because of the so-called obedience of the one being baptized. When someone trusts in Christ even though some of their theology is wrong, we call this a felicitous inconsistency. This is why we believe there are Christians in other denominations even when those denominations teach heterodoxy. There is much danger in listening to heterodox teaching which is why Jesus warns us today of listening to false preachers. As far as I know, Billy Graham was a very nice man. But he was a powerful preacher, which is why he is so dangerous. If you follow his teaching to its full extent, you will be damned. You will be like the wedding guest who came in his own garment and is cast into the outer darkness instead of wearing the baptismal garment which Christ freely gives through His atoning work on the cross. (Mt 22)

Why is God’s Word purely taught so important? First and foremost, the fruit of God’s pure Word is trust in Christ and His works. Another way we say it is that we are saved by Grace alone, through Faith alone, for the sake of Christ alone. This is the faith that saves.

Secondly, God’s Word is how you get to know Him. The creation declares the glory of the Lord, but His Scripture reveals to you who He is.

Through the creation you know that God is all powerful and a God of order, but only through His testimonies, that is His Word, do you know of a loving God who died for you and cares for you personally.

How do you get to know your spouse? Or kids? Or friends? You spend time with them in good times and bad times. You listen to them. Spend time in the Word. Get to know your loving Father in heaven more and more. Sing with the psalmist, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's." (Ps 103:2-5)

Jesus' Word is true. He cannot lie. And when you trust in His Word, he gives you the very thing that you need the most: Himself!

Amen.