

The Eighth Sunday after Holy Trinity
Matthew 7:15-23

We are far too comfortable with our Christian brothers and sisters having doctrinal error in their life. In effect, we try to boil down what we believe to some lowest common denominator that we can be comfortable with. But Christianity, that is, Christ, cannot be reduced to the lowest common denominator. That's dangerous. And Christianity is never comfortable. Can you imagine Jesus saying this to you, **"I never knew you; depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness!"** (v. 23)

Jesus is talking to disciples in the Sermon on the Mount. He's not talking to or about unbelievers. He's warning His listeners, and you, that there are false teachers who are wolves in sheep's clothing. This means that there is false teaching out there and that you can be lured into believing false things. And these false beliefs can endanger your life eternally. Jesus will say to many, **"I never knew you; depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness!"**

Right before our Gospel reading, Jesus says, **"Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few."** (Matthew 7:13-14)

There is no least common denominator. In other words, doctrine matters. False doctrine is a sin and can lead to eternal damnation. True doctrine reveals Christ and will lead to eternal life! How much false doctrine will lead to damnation? That's hard to say this side of glory. Let's consider an example.

God says through His apostle Peter, **"Baptism...now saves you."** (1 Peter 3:21) "Baptism" is the noun. "Now" is an adverb describing how you are saved. Peter points back to how Noah was saved from God's condemnation through the ark, and "NOW" you are saved from God's condemnation through Baptism. "You" is the direct object. The object, especially the direct object, is the one being *acted upon*. If you seriously study the other baptismal texts in the Bible, you'll see that God is the actor. You can start with the Bible readings the Small Catechism points out: **Matthew 28:19, Mark 16:16, Titus 3:5-8, Romans 6:4**. Then you can move

on to texts like **John 3, 1 Peter 3, Acts 2, Ephesians 1**, and even many more. I'd say this is enough to get you started!

What about those who insist on a decision and point to baptism as a believer's act of obedience. What they are doing is saying that they need to do a work for God to have salvation. You must make a decision. You must not baptize infants because they cannot make a decision. They think they merit grace by their work of making a decision. It's as if they say, "Yeah, yeah, God! I know you did all this wonderful stuff to save me but I have to do my part." They don't see that they're turning God's grace into a work. This is what the Augsburg Confessions says about this:

"Therefore, whoever believes that he merits grace by works despises the merit and grace of Christ. In so doing, he is seeking a way to God without Christ, by human strength, although Christ Himself said, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life.'" (AC XX.10)

Decision theology is seeking a way to God apart from Christ. Many who hold to decision theology will hear on judgment day, "**I never knew you; depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness!**"

Now certainly we should warn our Christian brother or sister if they are caught in the deception of decision theology because it endangers their eternal salvation, but I'm more worried about you when you consume so-called Christian content that is full of false teaching. Christian radio is mostly full of decision theology. Yet, I know many of you listen to it. If you don't think praise music gets deep down inside of you, you're fooling yourselves. Even if praise music doesn't contain decision theology, which is rare, it's still meant to excite you and teaches you to depend on your emotions instead of Christ. Mark Lowry is a great example of this. He co-wrote "Mary, Did You Know?" He and his band were in a horrible bus accident. He struggled with feeling saved because he had always depended on his emotions. Sadly, in his words, he willed himself back into a feeling of being saved instead of seeing something wrong with his dependence on his emotions. How do you know you're saved? It better not be because you felt something or did something. That's dangerous. Yet that's what most praise music teaches you.

Christian bookstores are full of, not only decision theology, but a plethora of bad doctrine. Yet many of you buy books found in them. Some of you may be fans of Priscilla Shirer, and her doctrine will send you straight to hell. Besides the fact that she is violating Scripture by trying to be a teacher of it, her theology is a decision theology with charismatic tendencies. She thinks that God speaks to her outside of Scripture. The name of her so-called ministry is “Going Beyond Ministries.” She certainly goes beyond Jesus which is dangerous and will lead to eternal damnation. I shouldn’t have to say this, but if you have any Joyce Meyer’s stuff, throw it out. She is also a false teacher. Along with Beth Moore and Anne Graham Lotz.

And not just because they are women. Although, God is quite clear through His apostle Paul, **“I do not permit a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain silent.”** (1 Timothy 2:12) It should be obvious that God doesn’t permit a woman to preach or teach in the church. This also includes women reading the lessons in church, which, sadly, is a practice in many of our churches. Paul doesn’t use the “preaching” word in this verse. He uses the “teaching” word, which includes preaching. The reading of Scripture is a teaching function of the pastor and the Divine Service. We’ll get to the “exercise authority over a man” part of this verse at a later time.

And I’m not just down on women. You need to throw out your Billy Graham stuff as well. He teaches decision theology. In Jesus’ words, he is a wolf in sheep’s clothing. And he is a danger to your soul.

But God demands of all you that you be discerning. As an under-shepherd of Christ here in Rialto, it is my job to **“keep a close watch on [myself] and on the teaching.”** (1 Timothy 4:16) And **“to preach the word; [to] be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.”** (2 Timothy 4:2) God forbid I should teach you any false doctrine. That is dangerous for you and for me.

But it is also your job to keep an eye on doctrine. Not only will the teachers of bad doctrine hear from Jesus, **“I never knew you; depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness!”** but also the hearers and believers of that bad doctrine. You cannot

use the excuse that you were deceived any more than Eve could in the Garden of Eden.

This means you must know the Bible, and at minimum, the Small Catechism. The Small Catechism is the perfect summary of what the Bible says. Which means, like the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed, it's a great measuring stick to tell whether the doctrine you're hearing is good or bad. The Small Catechism is so good because it's drawn directly from Scripture. Yet how many of us recite or meditate on the Small Catechism daily? Even worse, how many of us read and meditate on God's Word daily? If you don't know the Small Catechism or the Bible, how are you to know whether you're hearing good or bad doctrine?

And yes, God expects you to be active listeners during the sermon. First and foremost, you must discern whether what I am saying agrees with the Bible and Small Catechism. If there's something I say that you don't understand or you think goes against Scripture or our confessions, you need to come tell me. Please! I love it when you ask me questions. About anything, but especially about my sermon. First, it means that you're listening to it! Second, it means you care about God pleasing doctrine. Third, it means you care about me and about the other hearers.

So, yes, God expects you to work during the sermon. But second, you must apply discernment to everything in your life. Especially if it's theological in nature. And really, what isn't? But this is hard work. Even if you're used to it. It's similar to eating well. Something I struggle with myself. I find I do better if I think to myself before I eat, "Will this food I'm about to eat actually fuel my body, or will it induce my body to have even more fat?" Not a bad question with theological stuff. "Will this book/song/etc. I'm about to consume actually fuel my faith, or will it induce my soul to have even more baggage?" When I fall off the eating good things for me wagon, I don't give up but restart with the next meal. When you fall off the reading your Bible every day wagon, you don't need to give up, but restart it the next morning!

I'm sure you've noticed that I don't promote "Portals of Prayer" and do promote "The Treasury of Daily Prayer," also known as the daily lectionary. It's not that the "Portals of Prayer" is necessarily bad, but it's not the best you can do. If you look

at the portals of prayer, or any devotion book for that matter, you'll notice that the Scripture references are few and the words of men, and even women, God help us, are many. It's the reverse with the Treasury. The many words are devoted to Scripture. I want the bulk of your prayer life to be focused on the Word of God. This is not only because Jesus reveals Himself in His Scriptures, but He also delivers Himself to you in His Scriptures. On top of that, the Scriptures teach you what is true and what is false. It is true that God delivers salvation through the means of Baptism and false that men make decisions for their salvation. The Scriptures teach you what is beautiful and what is ugly. It's beautiful when someone has a childlike, simple, you might even say Small Catechism, kind of faith, rather than an ugly faith in the philosophies of men. So, the more Scripture you have in you, the better you'll be at discerning.

But let me clarify. We are to judge what someone says and someone does, but not the person themselves. As Jesus says, **"You will recognize them by their fruits."** (v. 16) Jesus primarily is talking about the fruit of teaching in our Gospel passage today. Actions, of course, are attached to teaching, but Jesus is primarily concerned with discernment today. I think it's obvious you wouldn't take marriage advice from someone that's been married five times. But, at the same time, if someone has only been married once, you still use discernment on what they say.

But we don't judge the person himself. Christ is their judge as He is your judge. This doesn't mean you cannot tell someone they're wrong. If you care about them, you certainly will tell someone when they're wrong. If you have a good relationship where they know you care about them, they might even be inclined to listen to you!

But, if you're like me, you worry about being wise enough. If my preparation for the holy ministry has taught me anything, it's taught me that there's a lot smarter and more capable men out there than me. You may feel the same way at times. That's okay. God uses the foolish in the sight of the world to confound the wise. But you have three incredible weapons.

First, you have the Holy Scriptures. They **"are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. All Scripture is breathed out by God**

and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” (2 Timothy 3:15-16) If you have the Scriptures, you have everything you need for this life and the next.

Second, you have the Holy Spirit. When Peter preaches on Pentecost and the hearers are convicted of their sin and convicted about who Jesus was, they wanted to know what to do to be saved. **“Peter said to them, ‘Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for he forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’”** (Acts 2:38) God keeps sending you His Holy Spirit when you are in His Word. If you have the Holy Spirit, what can separate you from the love of Christ?

Third, you have prayer. James says, **“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who give generously to all without reproach.”** (James 1:5) Jesus says, **“If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!”** (Luke 11:13) When you pray, your dear Father in heave ALWAYS answers!

The proverbs says this about the wisdom of Scripture: **“Wisdom cries aloud in the street, in the market she raises her voice; at the head of the noisy streets she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks: ‘How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge? If you turn at my reproof, behold, I will pour out my spirit to you; and I will make my words known to you...Whoever listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease, without dread of disaster.’”** (Proverbs 1:20-23, 33)

So let us continue to read and meditate upon Scripture so that we may discern life giving doctrine from death damning doctrine.

Let us continue to practice our discernment so that we get better and better at it.

Let us continue to talk with our neighbors, Christian or not, about the wonderful things God has done for us in Christ including Salvation, Baptism, Absolution, the Lord's Supper, and the Divine Service.

And your dear Father in heaven will continue to pour out His Holy Spirit upon you through His Word that indeed makes you wise unto salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Amen.