

Last week, I preached about how to listen to a sermon. God's Word is meant to teach, warn against error, and comfort us with patience and training. The goal of God's Word is to strengthen faith, giving us the assurance of forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation in Jesus Christ. As the Apostle John says near the end of his Gospel account, "These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and by believing have life in his name" (John 20:31). And as he writes in his first epistle, "I am writing you this so that you who believe in God's Son may know that you have everlasting life" (1 John 5:13). This is the ultimate purpose of sound teaching and preaching. Of course, it should also include training, instruction in doctrine and godly living, as well as warning against false teaching and sin. But the end goal of God's Word is always that you would have a firm confidence in God's saving promise through Jesus Christ.

So today, we hear from our Lord a warning. "Beware," he says, "of false prophets." A sermon that doesn't teach or apply clear, biblical doctrine is a waste of time. Too many preachers spend too much time telling cute stories without seriously teaching the truths of God's Word. But a false prophet is much worse than a poor preacher. A false prophet is one who comes to you in sheep's clothing while inwardly he is a savage wolf. This means that he will keep your attention. He will also use biblical themes, terms, and phrases. Yet, his goal is not to lead you to repentance and faith in the promise of your Savior. Instead, his goal is simply to serve himself.

Jesus teaches us how to recognize false prophets. You know them by their fruits. You know them by what they produce. What is their goal? Sometimes, this is pretty easy to spot. So called prosperity gospel preachers stand on stage with their expensive suits convincing foolish people that they will overcome their financial challenges if they have a strong enough faith. These charlatans make millions of dollars, own personal jets, and live in enormous houses. Their goal is clearly not to give you the assurance from God's Word that your sins have been atoned for and that you have peace with God. Sure, they might speak of having peace. They might slip in some shallow gospel message about Jesus being your Savior. But their goal, that is, what they want to produce, is simply earthly peace and a worldly treasure.

Other times, the false prophets are not as easy to spot. They use more biblical language, words like grace, patience, and faithfulness. But they ultimately teach you to find all these things in your own positive thoughts and feelings. They might even talk about sin and salvation from sin. But they leave you either trusting in your own works or secure in your own sin. They might teach that you can live a life without repentance, walking in the ways of this dying world, without giving any thought to God's judgment against sin and unbelief. Or they teach you to rely on your own pious actions. Some bind your conscience by forbidding certain types of food, as if Jesus did not make all things clean by his blood and righteousness. Others offer you a do-it-yourself theology, which leaves you uncertain of whether you have in fact done enough. Whether the false prophets are strict and old fashioned, or they are laid back and upbeat, you can know them by the same rotten fruit. Their goal is not for you to find peace in your conscience through the blood and righteousness of Christ. They don't teach you to build your house on the solid rock of Christ and his Word. Instead, they point you to your own efforts, your own emotions, your own reason, and your own strength.

Jesus says that a good tree bears good fruit, and a bad tree bears bad fruit. He is speaking of good and bad preachers of his Word. But he is also teaching us about the difference between faith and unbelief. We do not become good by doing good works. Only those who are first good can then produce good

works. God must first plant us in the streams of his living water. He first gives us faith by his Holy Spirit to trust in his Son. It is through that faith alone that we stand righteous before him, because he promises us the very righteousness of his Son. He has joined us as branches to Jesus Christ, the true Vine. And Jesus promises that if we abide in him and in his Word then we will bear good fruit.

False prophets bear rotten fruit, because their message can't produce and nurture faith. They twist God's Word and promote their own agendas. Instead of pointing you to Christ who fulfilled God's law on your behalf, they tell you that you are already enough. They tell you to believe in yourself, leading you to the light of your own reason rather than to the light of God's Son. But no one ever stood righteous before God by believing in someone else's vision or dream. You can't stand righteous before God or bear fruit that is pleasing to God by believing in yourself. Only the Word of Christ bears good fruit, because only the Word of Christ brings about true faith. True faith is that which rests in the sure promise of Christ who died for us and rose again to declare us righteous. Only that faith can be counted as righteousness before God. Only that faith can bear fruit. Any doctrine that denies or waters down that sure object of faith is nothing other than false doctrine. It won't leave you with any lasting peace or joy in God's salvation. So take warning.

This is why it is important to have sound preaching, which covers the whole counsel of God. We need good preaching, which warns against the lies promoted in this dying world, calls on us to repentance, humility before God, fear of God, and faith in the sure promise of Christ our Lord and Savior. We need to be taught to pray as God's children, to love our neighbors, to forgive as we have been forgiven, and to treasure the promises of God above all earthly things. But as important as it is to have doctrinally sound sermons from the pulpit, it is also important for us to have God's Word echoing in our homes. We have a great treasure in the hymns that we sing here at church, because they teach the Christian faith so clearly. Nothing is stopping you from taking a hymnal home with you and singing these hymns around the dinner table. We also have the Small Catechism, a summary of Christian doctrine in six chief parts. As the head of the household should teach in a simple way to his household, the Small Catechism clearly explains the basic parts of Christian doctrine, like the law, the gospel, prayer, baptism, the keys of God's kingdom, and the Lord's Supper. Those who review God's Word at home in this way will find themselves well equipped to mark and avoid the many false teachings being promoted all around them.

When Jesus warns us against false prophets, he is directing us simply to live in his Word. Let his Word live in you richly as you sing psalms and hymns, taking the time to hear and discuss God's Word with your loved ones and fellow Christians. Because this is how he continues to fill us with his Holy Spirit. You don't need to look to your own activities and movements to find the Holy Spirit at work. Instead, listen to the words of your Lord revealed in the Scriptures. The Apostle Paul says that the Holy Spirit assures your spirit that you are God's child. The Holy Spirit does this through the sure promise of the gospel. When you are hearing, reading, learning, and inwardly digesting God's holy Word, then you can be sure that the Holy Spirit is at work. He is the one speaking through the prophets and apostles. He is the one humbling you as well as comforting you, as he delivers Christ and his saving works to you. He is the one giving and nurturing faith in your heart. He is the one who gives you fruit, like love, joy, peace, patience, and all good things. You can have certainty that you have the Holy Spirit, because you have God's Word. You have his promise in your baptism, in his word of pardon, and in the body and blood of Christ.

Jesus warns that many who say to him, “Lord, Lord” will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Here Jesus is referring to those who claim to be his ministers. They claim to prophesy in his name, drive out demons in his name, and do many miracles in his name. But he will cast them out and say, “I never knew you.” Why? Because they don’t do what his Father in heaven wants. And what does his Father in heaven want? He wants the free salvation of his Son to be proclaimed to poor sinners. He wants all to repent of their sins, despair of their own strength, and trust in the life, death, and resurrection of his Son. He wants you who tremble at his Word and are struck down by the weight of your own sin to find refuge in Christ’s forgiving blood and righteousness. He wants you, his sheep, to hear the voice of the good shepherd who laid his life down for you. He has planted you in the streams of his living water, and he wants you to be nurtured by that same water of life.

A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Jesus says this to warn us against false prophets. But he also says this to give assurance to you who believe in him. Because he knows that you still carry around your sinful nature. You still must face the temptations of this life. When you examine your life and find all kinds of rotten fruit, and your sin still haunts you, your Lord knows this. So don’t be discouraged. If you find rotten fruit in your life, then this simply means that you still have your sinful flesh. As Jesus has taught us, the flesh can’t produce anything good. As the Apostle Paul testifies, “In my flesh I find no good thing.” The bad tree of the sinful flesh cannot and will not ever bear good fruit. So don’t expect it to. God prunes us, cutting off the dead branches in our sinful flesh, as he warns us against sin and false doctrine. It never feels good when God cuts off the dead branches. But he does this, because he cares for us.

So don’t imagine that you are rejected by God just because you still notice the rotten fruit of sin in your life. This is all part of repentance. It’s all part of God teaching us to put to death our sinful desires. But he who teaches, warns, and guides you in this life of repentance is the same Lord who has planted you as his beloved tree, united to the trunk of his Son Jesus Christ. He who hung on the tree of the cross to take away all your sin and reconcile you with God is the same Lord who has called you to be his own. He has sown the seed of faith in your heart by his Holy Spirit. And though the fruit is often hidden under the dross of this earthly life, he promises by that same Spirit that you will reap the fruit of everlasting life. He who has begun this good work in you will bring it to perfection in the day of Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.