

Sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Trinity; Matthew 7:15-231.

[CHRIST'S WARNING OF FALSE PROPHETS]

A Sermon by Martin Luther; Taken from His Church Postil, 1522

Part I. The Foundation and Reason of This Warning

1. As the Lord in the three previous chapters, the 5th, 6th, and 7th, explains the commandments of God, he finally concludes with these words, "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them," v. 12. This is a Christian doctrine, and the sum and total of Christianity. Immediately follows this Gospel lesson, in which the Lord exercises the office of a good shepherd and teacher, and warns us to beware of false prophets. As though he would say, Now you have heard the truth, from henceforth therefore beware of other doctrines. For it is certain that false teachers and false prophets will arise wherever this Word is preached.

2. We must boldly consider the two kinds of doctrine, the true and good, and the false and erroneous, and that they will always accompany each other, for thus it has been from the beginning, and thus it will continue to the end of the world. Hence it will not do for us to creep along in silence, and resort to a safe and secure manner of life. The evil teachings of men and the doctrines of devils, and all our enemies oppose us without ceasing, and hence we dare not think that the issue is settled. We are not yet across the river. Therefore the Lord diligently warns us and says: "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves."

II. The Warning Itself

3. We should well consider this passage, for Christ our Lord here commands and gives all Christians the power to be judges of all doctrine, and he gives them power to judge what is right and what is not right. It is now well on a thousand years that this passage has been perverted by false Christians, so that we have had no power to judge, but had to accept what the Pope and the councils determined, without any judgment of our own.

4. Now this Gospel here overthrows the very foundation of popery and of all councils, for we are not bound to keep what the Pope commands and men decree. Therefore I say again, firmly grasp what this Gospel teaches, for the authority has never been given either to the Pope or councils, or anyone else, to sit and determine what is faith. For Christ says: "Beware of false prophets." Either the Gospel lies, or the Pope and the councils do. Christ says we have the right to judge all doctrines, and whatever is proposed for us to keep or to reject. Here the Lord does not speak to the Pope, but to all Christians. And as the doctrine is proclaimed to all: "Whatsoever ye would that men should do

to you, do even so to them;" so likewise the words exclude no one: "Beware of false prophets." From which it clearly follows that I may indeed judge of the doctrine.

5. Hence I can say: Pope, you together with the councils have resolved, and now I have to decide whether I may accept it or not. Why? Because you will not stand and answer for me when I die, but I must see to it myself how I stand before God, so that I may be certain of my fate.

6. For you must be so certain in regard to the matter, that it is God's Word, as certain and more certain than you are that you are living, for on this alone your conscience must rest. Even though all men should come, yea, even the angels and all the world and pass a resolution, if you cannot grasp it and decide for yourself, you are lost; for you dare not base your decision on the Pope or anyone else; you must yourself be prepared so that you can say: this God says, and that he does not say; this is right, and that is wrong, otherwise it is not possible for you to stand.

7. For when you are about to die, and you rely on the Pope and the councils and say: The Pope said this, the councils have resolved that, the holy fathers Augustine and Ambrose have thus determined, then the devil can easily put a hole in your drum and insinuate: What if this were false? What if they had erred? And when such a temptation enters your mind, you are already overcome. For this reason you must act conscientiously, so that you can boldly and defiantly say: This is God's Word, on this I will risk body and life, and a thousand necks, if I had so many.

This St. Peter also means when he says in his first Epistle 4:11: "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God." And St. Paul says in 1 Cor. 2:3-5: "And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling; and my speech and my preaching was not with the enticing words of men's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power; that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God."

8. Then they began to say: Yes, but how can we know what is God's Word, and what is right or wrong? This we must learn from the Pope and the councils. Very well then, let them conclude and say what they please, yet I will reply, you cannot put your confidence in that nor thus satisfy your conscience, for you must determine this matter yourself, for your very life depends upon it. Therefore God must speak to your heart: This is God's Word; otherwise you are undecided.

9. But our bishops, Caiaphas, Pilate and Herod insist upon it and rage so terribly, that a person must think them insane. They bring forth St. Augustine's declaration: I would not believe the Gospel, if the honor of the church did not move me; and think they have already won. Then you answer: What does it concern us whether St. Augustine or Jerome, St. Peter or St. Paul, or even the archangel Gabriel from heaven, who is still greater, said it; yet it will profit me nothing, for I must have God's Word, I will only hear what God says.

10. And God commands this Word to be told you through men, and especially has he permitted it to be proclaimed and written for you by the Apostles; for St. Peter and St. Paul do not preach their own

word, but God's Word, as Paul himself testifies in 1 Thess. 2:13: "When ye received the Word of God which ye heard from us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the Word of God, which effectually worketh also in you who believe." Surely, a person can preach the Word to me, but no one is able to put it into my heart except God alone, who must speak to the heart, or all is vain; for when he is silent, the Word is not spoken. Hence no one shall draw me from the Word which God teaches me.

Of this I must be as certain as two and three make five, for this is so certain, that if all the councils would say otherwise, I know they lie. Again, that a yard is longer than a half a yard is certain, even though all the world denied it, I still know that it cannot be otherwise. Who shall determine this for me? No one but the truth alone, which is entirely and wholly certain, that no one can deny it.

11. Therefore you must come so far as to say: This is true, no man shall persuade me differently. When you hear: Thou shalt not kill; and again: Thou shalt do to others as you would have them to do you; then you must know in the face of all councils, that this is the teaching of Christ, although all men said otherwise. So also this doctrine: You cannot help yourself, but Christ is your Savior, who has obtained for you the forgiveness of your sins; this you must know and confess in your heart that it is true; and if you are not conscious of it, then you have no faith, and the Word only hangs about your ears and swims on your tongue like foam on the water, as Hosea the prophet says, 10:7, "As for Samaria, her king is cut off as the foam upon the waters." All this you must now believe, not as a word that Peter preached, but that God has commanded you to believe. All this I say therefore, in order that we may return to the Gospel and observe where the foundation has its source, that ye must be judges, and have the power to judge over all things that are offered you; hence I can and dare not build on any man, for I must answer for myself when death comes.

12. Consequently do not allow yourselves to be persuaded that you must believe what the Pope says or the councils decree. When you know God, then you have the proper rule of judgment, the measure and rule by which you can judge all doctrines of the fathers; namely, when you know that Christ is your Savior, who rules us sinners. So when one now comes and says: You must become a monk, and do so and so, if you want to be saved, for faith alone is not sufficient for salvation; then you can truly and assuredly say: You lie, your doctrine is false; for whoever believes in Christ shall be saved. Who teaches you this? Faith in your heart, which believes this alone and nothing else. Therefore no one can beware of false doctrine unless he be spiritual. For Paul says this in 1 Cor. 2:15: "But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man." So no one can judge false doctrine, but the spiritual man.

13. Hence it is very foolish for the councils to wish to determine and establish what a man must believe, when there is often not a single man present who ever tasted the least of the divine Spirit. So it was in the Council of Nice, when they undertook to enact laws for the spiritual orders that they should not marry, which was all false because it has no foundation in the Word of God. Then a single man arose, by the name of Paphnutius, and overthrew the whole affair and said: Not so, that is not Christian. Then the entire council, in which undoubtedly were many distinguished and learned individuals, were compelled to drop the resolution, and give way to this simple and honest man. For God is a great enemy to high titles and human wisdom, hence he allows them at times to be handled

roughly, and puts them to shame in their speculations, that the truth of the proverb may appear: The learned are the most perverted.

14. Thus we are to remain free judges, to have the power to decide and judge, to accept or reject everything that Pope establishes and the councils determine. But when we accept anything, we should so accept it, that it harmonizes with our faith and the Scriptures; and not just because the Papists say it. This St. Paul teaches in Rom. 12:7, "Whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith." For all prophesy based on works, that does not lead to Christ alone as our only comfort, precious as it may be, is not according to the proportion of faith; as for instance to rely upon the revelations of hobgoblins, the mass, pilgrimages, fastings, and the merits of the saints.

Even here so many holy fathers have erred like Gregory, Augustine and others, in that they taken from us this right of judgment, for this torment and misery began far back in history, that we must believe the Pope and the councils. Hence you must be able to say: God said this, and that God has not said. As soon as you say: A man has said this, or the councils have determined that, then you are building on sand.

15. Hence there is no judge upon the earth in spiritual things concerning Christian doctrine, except the person who has in his heart the true faith, whether it be a man or woman, young or old, maid or servant, learned or unlearned. For God is no respecter of persons, since all are alike precious to him, who live according to this commandments, Acts 10:34, hence they alone have the right to judge.

16. But if one should come who knew the sense of the Word better than I, then I should close my mouth and keep still, and receive knowledge from him. This is what St. Paul desires in speaking to the Corinthians, 1 Cor. 14:29-30: "Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the others judge. If anything be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace." That is to say, if the hearer knows and understands more than the preacher, then the preacher should allow him the privilege to speak, and he should hold his peace. In the worldly government of course the rule holds, that the older is wiser than the younger, a learned man than a layman; but in spiritual things a child or a servant, a common woman or man can have the grace of God as well as an old person or a lord, a priest or the Pope. To sum up, let no learned person take from you the right to judge, for you have this right as well as he.

17. Now let me tell you who the false prophets of our times are. For no one can judge or know this unless he has the Spirit. But the brief summary is, though much may be said on the subject, it is the Pope with his entire government; for they all have taught what is opposed to God. A lengthy proof of this is not necessary, for you can observe this nearly everywhere you turn. Yet we will give a few examples. God commands in Exodus 20:12: The child shall honor father and mother and be subject unto them. But the Pope has approved the view that a monk or a nun is no longer under their father, and says: The child is now under spiritual dominion and in the service of God; God is more than father and mother; hence it is no longer bound to serve father and mother, and the father is bound to call it a nobleman by grace.

18. Well, when I ask, what is the service of God? they reply: Dear Sir: It is the ringing of bells; lighting of candles; putting on beautiful robes for the celebration of mass, and more such similar monkey tricks. Yes, indeed, you have surely hit the mark! But I say to honor father and mother and to keep God's commandments, that is to serve God. Therefore you must say here that Antichrist has taught such things, and boldly say and declare he lies. Do you not see here how God's commandment is opposed to the obedience of priors and abbots? God gave you father and mother that you should honor them, serve them and be subject to them. The Pope gives you another, whom you must honor more than the father God has given you. If this is keeping God's commandment, I do not know what it is.

19. And so it is further with the other commandments of God. Thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not hate or be angry. This God has commanded. But the Pope teaches thus: A man must defend the property of the clergy and the treasures of the church, and if he cannot do it, he shall call to his aid the sword of the civil government to protect the papal chair and St. Peter's inheritance. Behold, thus these commandments are opposed to each other, which I hope every one easily understands. So also in regard to the married state.

20. God commanded, Gen. 2:24, that man and wife should be one flesh, and that no man should put them asunder. Now the Pope has given many commandments contrary to this. For instance, when a woman takes a husband who is not baptized, the marriage is to be dissolved.

21. Then again when those in spiritual orders marry, they are to dissolve their marriage, according to the demands of their order. Again, if any one falls into the sin of incest and marries either her friend or any of his friends, the Pope commands that they must stay together, yet both must live chaste together. Here he lets the two sexes lie naked in bed together, and neither shall have the right to require of the other the duties of married life. This is nothing else than putting the straw and fire together, and then forbidding them to burn.

22. God says further: Thou shalt not steal. But who steals more than the Pope and his servants? They are the greatest thieves, because they appropriate unto themselves daily all the treasures of the world.

23. Again, look at the first commandment, which says that we should trust in God alone, and call upon him alone. But their entire doctrine is nothing else than to lead us to trust in human works, and to command us to call upon the saints. Do you not see that such people are the real false prophets, of whom we must beware? For they abolish the commandment which God has given. Now follows the other part of this Gospel where Christ speaks thus: "Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them."

24. As I said before, no one knows others by their fruits, except he who is spiritually born again.

Therefore, he who has not the Spirit, cannot have this knowledge. Let no one think that he can know this from the fruits unless he be spiritual. The fruit by which we are to know them is unbelief. One can know them to some extent by open sins, yet this judgment is deceptive, for Christians also fall.

25. Hence, the true fruit by which they are known is an inner fruit, here I must have the Holy Spirit and judge according to his guidance. The fleshly eye and reason are not sufficient. You may see two persons go the Lord's Supper, the one is a believer, the other not, and yet their external work is the same. What then makes the difference? Faith in the heart and unbelief, because the one regards it as a good work, the other not. In short, from external works you can decide nothing. Tauler also acknowledged that believers and unbelievers were often so similar in external appearance, that no one could distinguish them, no is reason able to judge unless we have the Spirit of God. Yea, the unbelievers often appear far more excellent in their works than believers, as it is written in Job 39:13: "Givest thou the goodly wings unto the peacocks? or wings and feathers unto the ostrich?" Yet the peacock can fly and the ostrich cannot. So also the believer and unbeliever are indeed similar to each other in their external appearance, but in their hearts they are quite different.

[Note: In a later sermon on this text, Luther wisely changed his interpretation of "By their fruits you shall know them." In this sermon he says in paragraph #24, "The fruit by which we are to know them is unbelief" and in paragraph #25, "In short, from external works you can decide nothing." But in the latter sermon (early 1530's) he says, "So stick to the principle that bearing good fruit refers to the kind of life and good works that are in agreement with the Word and the commandment of God" (Luther's Works 21:261). This is a good change because faith or unbelief are invisible and cannot be observed whereas Christ's words, "You shall know them by their fruits" assume that we can tell who the false prophets are by observing something visible. Faith in the heart cannot be seen by us, but behavior, good works, and one's public confession of faith (my addition) can be seen, observed and evaluated . .

26. However, by the fruits of the Spirit true prophets are known, which fruits St. Paul mentions to the Galatians, 5:20: "Love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance." Yet these fruits no one can see or know without the Holy Spirit. For this reason the decision and judgment of spiritual things should not be based on external things, as on the work and person, but on the inner condition of the heart. One knows another indeed by his fruits, but only in the Spirit. The fruits and good works do not make any one good or pious; but he must first be good and pious at heart. As the apples do not make the tree, for the tree must first be there before the fruit.

27. If I understand this, then I notice there is no work so bad that it will necessarily condemn a man, nor none so good that it will save him. But faith alone saves us and unbelief alone condemns us. For one to commit adultery, the deed does not condemn him, for the adultery only shows that he has fallen from the faith, this condemns him, otherwise it would not be possible. Nor does anything make one good in faith, but nothing makes one wicked but unbelief. Therefore our Lord also says, that the tree shall be cut down. He does not say that the fruit shall be cut down. Thus the works of love do not make me good, but faith alone, in which I do these works and bear this fruit.

28. Thus we must begin with faith. But the Pope begins with works, and commands persons to do good works that they may become good. Just as if I should say to the tree: If you want to be a good tree, then begin and bear apples. Just as though I could bear apples before I was an apple tree. But I must say: If you want to bear apples, then begin and be an apple tree. Hence the tree must be there before it can produce fruit.

29. From all this it follows now that there is no sin on earth except unbelief, as Christ says in John 16:8-9: "And the Holy Ghost, when he is come, will convict the world in respect of sin, because they believe not on me."

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