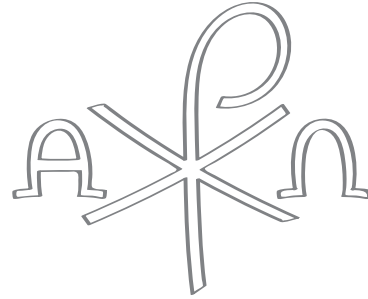


THE EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

Study Notes for the Christian Layperson

by: Rev. Derrick C. Brown



Matthew 7:15–23 ESV

Author and Date:

Matthew Levi the Apostle and Evangelist around AD 50. This is a portion of Jesus' great Sermon on the Mount.

¹⁵ “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

- This warning must be read and taken within its context. It is part of a sermon that Jesus preached to a large crowd of people. (Matthew 5:1–7:28). He wasn’t giving instructions only to a select few, an elite group of men on whom the Church would rely for instruction. He was talking to the whole Church. He was talking to every man, woman, and child who wears and bears the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – both upon their head and heart.
 - God has indeed established and instituted an Office in the Church for the teaching of His Holy Word and the administration of His Sacraments. The incumbents of this Office—usually referred to as the Office of the Ministry or the Pastoral Office—are charged to preach the gospel, administer the sacraments, teach the whole counsel of God, and watch over the flock committed to their care.
 - Still, a pastor can only serve what God has entrusted to Him to serve. He cannot believe for another. He cannot think for another. He cannot get inside of someone’s head and turn their thoughts from lies to the truth. The person who is most responsible for your spiritual care—that you receive the truth and are protected from lies that would destroy your faith—is you. Thus it is to you—the individual Christian, whomever you may be, that Jesus says, “Beware of false prophets.”
- “[When] a Christian is attentive, and has no more than the catechism, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, the Word of the Lord, Baptism and

the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, he can well defend and maintain himself against all heresies. For the Lord Christ here commands, and gives power to all Christians, to be judges over all doctrines, and enables them to understand what is right and wrong. For thou must be as sure as thou livest, that this is the word of God; yea, even more certain, or else it is not possible to holdout. But no man can judge false teaching but the spiritual man. (1 Cor. [2:15]): ‘He that is spiritual judgeth all things.’ ” (Martin Luther, *Explanatory Notes on the Gospels*, 25).

- Who are these false prophets, these wolves in sheep’s clothing of whom our Lord is referring to?
 - They are not those who blatantly deny that God is triune. While they are indeed false prophets and teachers, those who deny the triune nature of God are merely heretics seeking to overthrow the Christian Faith – for there is no salvation apart from faith in the Triune God.
 - Likewise, those who openly deny who Jesus is are not the false prophets of whom the Lord warns against. While those who reject what is plainly taught in God’s Word and confessed in the creeds – that Jesus is true God and true man, are indeed false prophets and teachers, yet again, such are merely heretics who seek to overthrow the Christian Faith – for to deny that Jesus is God is to deny God and His Word, and thus to call Him a liar. Of such, Christ Himself says elsewhere: “If you do not believe that I am, you will die in your sins.” (John 8:24 NKJV).
 - Those who profess to be Christians, such as Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christian Scientists, and Unitarian Universalists, yet believe, teach, and confess contrary to God’s Word, boldly and blatantly denying the Holy Trinity and the true deity

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of Christ, while such are indeed false teachers and prophets, they are not the savage wolves that Jesus warns of here. No, for these heretics, these followers of the devil are wolves in wolves' clothing. Their treachery is plain, and thus easily recognizable.

– Rather, the false prophets of whom the Lord Christ warns of are far more dangerous, for they appear to be harmless. False prophets don't advertise themselves as false prophets; they don't appear as wolves. They appear as sheep; they wear the clothing of sheep. They portray themselves as insiders who are defending the truth against error. They claim to come in the Lord's name, preaching and teaching the Lord's words.

¹⁶ You will recognize them by their fruits.

- A true prophet preaches repentance. A false prophet will teach people to justify, rationalize, and overlook sin.
- A true prophet preaches justification by grace through faith. A false prophet will teach that one needs to live a holy life, be a good person, and follow various rules and regulations established for such "right living", in order to be saved (or at least in order to prove one is saved).

Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

- Regarding "bad fruit", Luther has this to say: "This is primarily not said of outbreaking and palpable sins; but really of the fruits of false doctrine, which indeed have an attractive appearance, and yet, in truth, are not good." (*Ibid.*, 26).
- How can you be sure of who a true prophet is? Well, to begin with, there is really only one true Prophet, and that is Christ Himself. He alone speaks the words of God without flaw and without fail. He is the Word of God in the Flesh, and the fulfillment of all prophecy. His alone are the words of eternal life. (John 6:68b). Do not put your trust in another. Pastors are called and sent by God, but one's faith should never be in their pastor, but only in the Word of God which he is given to speak. Make sure that it is the Word of Christ that you are hearing, the Holy Scriptures that are being proclaimed, and not just some pious-sounding human wisdom. The solid rock upon which the Church is built are the

words of Jesus; everything else is sinking sand. When what is preached is not a vision of a preacher's own heart but that which comes from the mouth of the Lord, then you are hearing a true prophet.

²¹ Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

- "[To] do the will of God is not simply to keep the Ten Commandments, and merely render obedience to God. Forasmuch as we can not do this perfectly in this life, it is impossible, that we could boast that we had done the will of the Father; but this is doing the will of the Father, as Christ says, (John [6:40]): "This is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son and believeth on him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day." (*Ibid.*).

²² On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' ²³ And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

- Johann Spangenberg asks: "What will be the reward and end of the false prophets? Christ says, 'Every tree that does not bring forth good fruit will be cut down and cast into the fire.' In other words, He says, 'All those who forsake the faith and God's Word and build on their own godliness, works, and merits, and do nothing that God commanded, will be uprooted.'" They may think that they will carry out their deeds and preserve authority, but God prevents those lofty trees from growing in heaven. They reason as follows: 'Behold, we are the beautiful, fruitful trees planted in the Christian church. God must spare us and fence and hedge us about and give us the best care...' But they do not see what sentence Christ passes on them, namely, that the axe is already laid at the root of such unfruitful trees, that they will be cut down and cast into the fire; and, 'All plants that My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted' (Matt. 15 [13])." (Johann Spangenberg, *The Christian Year of Grace*, 274).



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