

“The Judgment of the Sheep Over Their Shepherds”

Matthew 7:15-23

Eighth Sunday after Trinity

C.F.W. Walther (1811-1887)

Grace and peace be multiplied unto you through the knowledge of God, and of Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ Jesus.

God’s Church on earth has always been a militant Church. She has always been oppressed and persecuted by the world and its mighty; even within the Church herself men have continually arisen, who have spread false doctrine, obtained a following, and thus harassed the Church, causing division and offense. In the Church of Adam was self-righteous Cain; in the Church of Noah, Ham who despised his father; in the Church of Abraham, the mocker Ishmael; in the Church of the prophets many false prophets who preached and the Lord had not sent them, who falsely comforted the people and misled them into idolatry. Almost everywhere even in the apostolic Church where the Gospel was preached arose heretics who caused splits, yes, often destroyed whole flourishing congregations. St. Paul classes among those especially Alexander the silversmith, Hymenaeus, and Philetus. St. John names the entire sect of the Nicolaitans. Thus it has continued until this very day.

Wherever the pure Gospel has sounded gainsayers have been found. Satan could never allow the Church to possess its heavenly treasures in peace. The Church has therefore continually used the Word of God not only as its soul’s pasture but also as a weapon with which to battle unceasingly against false teachers. If the Church ceases struggling, it can no longer remain a Church, for as the spring sun awakens the noxious insects at the same time as the sprouting seed, so is Satan ever awakened at the blessed preaching of the Word of God. He tries to sow his tares among the wheat to smother the wheat.

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Do we ask: Why does God permit his flock not only to be pastured by his shepherds but also attacked by wolves, who disguise themselves as shepherds in order to seize the sheep on the sly and tear them? God could prevent this; why doesn't he do it? God's Word mentions two reasons particularly. God permits it partly to test his children, partly to punish unthankful hearers. St. Paul says to the Corinthians: "For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you." 1 Cor 11:19. If the treasure of the pure doctrine would not be attacked, it never would become really clear to what one should hold fast. But if false teachers appear, it will become clear who is faithful to the pure Word; the faith of the upright is then tested and proven. If the pure doctrine would never be attacked, Christians would soon become lazy, lax, and indifferent; but the more apparent the deviations of others from God's Word are, the more Christians are driven to search it earnestly and note every word attentively. The more false teachers attack an honest teacher, the more exactly he must search everything; the more he grows in divine knowledge and certainty. Heretics are nothing else than the whetstone of the Church, whereby she learns to use the Sword of the Spirit with increasing expertness. God's hand knows how to turn the evil into good.

Then, too, God often executes his severest judgments through false teachers. He may give a land or a Church faithful servants for a long time. If they think little of their pure preaching, if they don't thank God for it, if they think more highly of earthly treasures than the pure Word and Sacrament, if they are ashamed of the pure doctrine, if they want to do nothing to maintain the office of the pure ministry, if they hear God's Word with a sleepy heart and finally learn to despise it completely, God then allows such thankless scholars to lose the heavenly treasure. They who had despised the bread of the divine Word should now be fed with the stone of the powerless doctrine of men. Thus St. Paul says of the Christians of the last times: "Because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie." 2 Thess 2:10,11.

My dearly beloved hearers, do not despise being able to hear the pure Word of God each and every Sunday. I know I do not preach to you the

works of a pure teacher are like the fruits of a good tree. For "a good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit." V.18

Most do not believe the pure doctrine which is preached, but at all times at least a few will become fruitful trees of righteousness and bring forth the fruits of the Spirit, such as "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance." Gal 5:22,23. Where false prophets rule, they also often show much love but a sectarian love. They love only those who belong to their denomination. Those whose hearts are filled with the true Gospel of the love of God, love all those whom Jesus Christ loves; they love all men, even the erring and the fallen, as their fellow-redeemed.

Now my dear brothers and sisters in Christ: "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them." Vv.15,20. Amen.

IV.

With these words Christ seems to teach again, that one must recognize the true prophets by their good works, but it only seems so. In our text Christ is speaking of fruits which a teacher should produce; the first fruits are not fruits of life but fruits of doctrine. If a teacher does not bring the fruit of pure doctrine, he is a false prophet, even if he were a Paul or an angel from heaven. Nobody is sent by God but he who preaches to poor sinners that his Son Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation. For it is the will of the heavenly Father “that everyone which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life.” Jn 6:40. And St. John says: “Hereby know ye the spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God; and every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God.” 1. Jn 4:2,3. A called teacher who does this will of God by preaching his dear Son purely to the world and laying this foundation correctly is a true prophet, for of Christ “give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins.” Acts 10:43.

However, if people are not helped through the pure preaching of Christ, they are false prophets, though they be ever so wise, ever so talented, and ever so holy. For Christ says: “Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then I will profess unto them, I never knew you; depart from me, ye that work iniquity.” Vv. 22,23. Whenever false teachers have arisen, they have always failed in this respect. They have not preached how only Christ was made of God unto wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. But wherever this article remains pure, all the articles which are ruinous must disappear as the fog before the sun. If it is shown you through the preaching of a teacher how you can come to Christ, remain with him, suffer with him, and die blessedly through him; you hear a true prophet, for if you receive Christ, you receive enough; and if you have Christ, you have everything.

A pious life without pure doctrine does not make a teacher a true prophet; yet what a wonderful confirmation and ornament of pure doctrine is the pious life of an orthodox teacher. The good works of a false teacher are like the fleeting monthly rose of the bramble. The good

thoughts of my heart, but God’s counsel for your salvation. I preach what is revealed in God’s Word and repeated, explained, and confessed in the Confessions of the orthodox Church. I know that if you will take to heart and guard what I preach to you, you will be saved.

In carrying out the duties of my office, I should not only powerfully admonish you through sound doctrine but also reprove the gainsayers. It is my duty not only to lead you on the pasture of the Gospel but also to warn you against false teachers. Permit me now to seize the opportunity which today’s Gospel offers me to do this.

The text: Matthew 7:15-23 — King James Version (in public domain)

Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. 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. Not every one that saith unto Me, “Lord, Lord,” shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of My Father which is in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, “Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Thy Name? and in Thy Name have cast out devils? and in Thy Name done many wonderful works?” And then will I profess unto them, “I never knew you: depart from Me, ye that work iniquity.”

After Christ had expounded the true doctrine in the preceding verses, he in the words of our text warned against false teachers and says to his hearers: “Beware!” With this word Christ takes the judgment from the teachers and gives it to the pupils; he takes it from the shepherds and gives it to the sheep. I now present for your devotion:

THE JUDGMENT OF THE SHEEP OVER THEIR SHEPHERDS

I will show you that

1. The Sheep Are The Judges,
2. They Should Know And Be Certain Of The True Doctrine,
3. They Dare Not Let Themselves Be Blinded
By A Good Outward Appearance, and
4. They Must Above All Look For Righteous Fruits.

I.

In his Sermon on the Mount where not only his disciples but also a great number of people were gathered, Christ says: “Beware of false prophets! Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.” Vv.15.20. From this admonition we see that the principle that the preachers are to teach but the hearers to listen; the shepherd to lead, the sheep to follow; the convention of ministers to decide, and the congregation to acquiesce is completely false. No, when Christ calls upon his hearers to beware of false prophets and know the true from the false prophets by their fruits, he seats all hearers on the throne of judgment, gives the balances of truth into their hands, and commands them to judge their teacher confidently.

Everything which is taught in the Church of Christ concerns our soul’s salvation. In these matters no one should rely upon man; no one should base his faith upon man; everyone is to live his own faith and be saved only by his faith. No person can die for us; no one can represent us before God; no person can stand for us in his judgment. Someday everyone will have to justify his own faith and life before God. He will not be able to fall back on some man and say: So and so taught me this, and I believed and followed him. No, in matters which concern your soul you should not see with the eyes of another, but your own. If you let yourself be deceived, you have deceived yourself; the responsibility is yours. God says that he will demand the blood of his misled sheep from the hands of a false teacher, but he also says that the misled will die because of his own sins.

In the kingdom of God we are all alike. Holy Baptism strips the purple from the king and the rags from the beggar and puts on both the same

reject his office; this remains valid even if a Pharisee or a Sadducee fills it. But do not let yourselves be deceived thereby; take care that the office of the preacher is not merely his sheep’s clothing. The call can be valid and the doctrine still be false. If those who are truly called are wolves, Christ commands us to flee from them.

True prophets should walk piously. They should be examples to the flock. Now if you see a preacher who outwardly is pious and holy, who is friendly toward everyone, gentle toward his offenders, generous toward the poor, helpful to the miserable and unfortunate, zealous in his office and call, honorable in his walk, unselfish in his efforts, you should, of course, not reject his work but look carefully to see whether it is not merely sheep’s clothing. The life of a teacher can be blameless and yet his doctrine false. What can the glittering light help if his preaching leads you from your simplicity in Christ? Ah, if countless inexperienced see the appearance of holiness, zeal, love, humility, they are already conquered; they suppose that his teaching must also be true. They see the sheep’s clothing, surrender themselves to the wolf hidden beneath it, and thus let their souls be destroyed.

Finally, true prophets are often equipped by God with great gifts of the Spirit. If you hear a preacher who has sparkling gifts, whose utterances often deeply affect the hardest hearts, who even can enflame the laziest and move them to great zeal, who can move people to tears by his overpowering eloquence; if he has deep insight into Christian doctrine, if he can cheer the discouraged, comfort the afflicted, and refute the unbelieving with striking arguments, if you see this, do not let yourselves be deceived thereby. Even false prophets often have great natural gifts. Take heed, lest these are the sheep’s clothing, which should deceive you.

You see, though a shepherd may appear to have God’s Word, office of the ministry, holiness of life, and, finally, gifts of the Spirit, Christians should not let themselves be blinded by these things. “Beware,” says Christ to them, “of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravaging wolves.” V.15. He adds: “Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.” V.20. This indicates the fourth point which we must ponder in considering the judgment of the sheep over the shepherd. They above all must look for the true fruits.

power of the Church, from the table of duties true Christian conduct in your calling and station.

Christ, however, warns his hearers that they should not let themselves be blinded by a good “front”; and that is the third point on which I now speak to you.

III.

Christ says: “Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.” V.15.

There are, especially in these last times, people who were baptized in Christ, but deny his divinity and reconciliation; they revile the Triune God and call the most holy Bible a book of fables. These are wolves in wolves’ clothing. If a person permits himself to be misled by them, when they slander all holy things, he must have lost the faith beforehand, willfully turning from God. A Christian certainly can guard himself from such prophets of Satan.

In reality, Christ does not speak of such in our text. If a Christian is on guard only against them, he is poorly protected; no, my dear Christian, if you wish to be secure, then remember that the most dangerous false prophets are those who appear harmless. If Satan wants to mislead the children of God, he transforms himself into an angel of light. If the wolf wants to enter the flock he dons the sheep’s skin.

Christ means to say that true prophets make use of God’s Word in all their teachings. If a person appears, who likewise uses God’s Word, who actually teaches the divine truth in many places, who pretends to preach nothing else but the pure doctrine of the Bible, do not for that reason trust him immediately. Perhaps it is only a sheep’s skin. All heretics without exception have used the Scriptures. Even when the prince of darkness wanted to tempt the Son of God, he said: “It is written;” the Lord answered him: “It is written again.” Mt 4:6,7. Therefore, if the Scriptures are quoted, take care! hold Scripture against Scripture; you will soon uncover the enemy.

So, true prophets do not set themselves up as teachers, but are publicly called to teach by the Christian congregation. If you hear a preacher claim that God has called him to his office, you, of course, should not

dress of Christ’s righteousness. In divine things not learnedness, nor holiness, nor sagacity and wisdom decide matters; yes, here it is often true: The more learned one is the more wrong he is. God considers human wisdom folly, human prudence nonsense, human righteousness sin. If a learned person wants to come into heaven he must descend from the heights of his human wisdom and become a child. God reveals his secrets only to babes, who humbly confess their natural blindness and darkness. In divine things no one is excluded from the duty of judging because all of Christ’s sheep are judges: The learned and unlearned, man and wife, hired man and hired girl, young and old. Each has his own soul, his own life, his own salvation at stake.

We find that even the holy infallible apostles praised the Bereans because they did not receive the apostles without testing them; they held the New Testament revelation against the Old and daily searched in the writings of the prophets. Even St. John says to his hearers: “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God.” 1 Jn 4:1. But it is more noteworthy, that the Apostle Paul himself says to the Corinthians, who had been brought to faith through him many years before: “I speak as to wise men; judge ye what I say.” 1 Cor 10:15. So you see it is God’s will that you do not accept a human book, or a human talk, or a human conclusion and instruction without testing it. You should let no man rule your conscience; one is your master, Christ. In this case the majority dare not decide. In that well-known ecumenical Church Council at Nicea 318 orthodox bishops were gathered from the whole world. 317 of them wanted to forbid the marriage of the clergy. Only one, himself unmarried, named Paphnutius, stood up against them all, proved the legitimacy of the marriage of the clergy from God’s Word, and because of this lone voice all 317 bishops took back their decision and the lone voice won.

Oh my friends, if you had recognized some time ago, that the office of judge belongs by right to you, you would not have fallen into such great and so many errors. Your preachers went the way of error, and in false trust in man you followed them without first examining them. How sad the results have been! Therefore, know and guard your rights; examine everything and keep what is good. This, however, leads me to the second point of our meditation. It is this: If the judgment over the shepherds belongs to the sheep, they have to know the true doctrine and be certain of it.

II.

A judge in a civil court dare not pass sentence according to his caprice. Not even a jury dare do this. They must decide right and wrong according to the law. Whoever makes his decision according to his own caprice is a tyrant; there the innocent find no refuge, the guilty no avenger. If that is true in a state, it is doubly true in the Church, where we do not deal with worldly or temporal, but spiritual divine things.

To judge doctrine, to test it, to accept or reject it, is a holy, inalienable, and inviolable right which the congregation as a whole and every member individually has. No one in the Church should rule with power, not even the congregation itself. Christ says: "The kings of the gentiles exercise lordship over them, and they that exercise authority upon them are called benefactors. But ye shall not be so; but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he that is chief, as he that doth serve." Lk 22:25,26. Even the congregation should not command, nor say: Thus we want it, thus we command, thus it should be, because we are more than you and have the power. No; no man but God, Jesus Christ, his holy Word alone should rule among us, as we read in Ps 82: "God standeth in the congregation of the mighty; he judgeth among the gods." V.1. Or as Peter says: "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God." 1 Pet 4:11. In the Church no one but Christ sits upon the throne. He is the head of the Church, the Chief Shepherd, the Lord, the Master, the Judge, and the entire Church sits at his feet and judges as a judge, according to the law-book of the heavenly almighty King.

According to love we are the debtor, the servant of one another. According to faith no one is the servant of another. In the realm of faith we are all servants of Christ alone, subject to the holy and unalterable rule and guide of his most holy Word. All, shepherd and flock, should bow before this Word; everyone should let himself be judged according to it. Everyone, teacher and hearer, will be judged according to it.

Now if the sheep must be the judges of their shepherd, you see that Christ earnestly admonishes every Christian to search the Scriptures daily, that he may know how to separate truth from falsehood, gold and silver from hay, straw, and stubble.

My friends, be sure to remember, that you are the judge in the congregation. Therefore become even better acquainted with the Law Book according to which you must judge! If you apply daily diligence in learning to know the pure doctrine ever better, you will be able to use the divine balances, the divine standard and test, ever better. Diligently search the Holy Scriptures and the books of orthodox teachers, especially the public confessions of the orthodox Lutheran Church. Do not despise searching them diligently, do not believe that you have no time for that, that you must attend to your earthly work. Your soul's salvation is at stake; you have no time for that?

If you wish to be true judges in the Church, not only must the pure doctrine of God's Word be more dear and precious to you than anything else in the world, but you must also be so certain of its teaching that you would rather die than depart even one letter from it; so certain that you do not ask whether the learned, the wise, the respected believe as you believe; your faith should not rest upon the esteem of men, be they ever so holy and wise, but alone on the infallible Word of God. With the disciples you must be able to say: "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God." Jn 6:68,69.

Why do so many Lutherans turn to the sects? Either they have never known the teaching of their Church, or if they have known it, they have not known it from God's Word but only repeated it after someone else. They let themselves be blown about by every wind of doctrine.

Perhaps many will now say: But I am so weak in knowledge; how can I test doctrine? Tools are available, my dear Christians. Take Luther's Small Catechism; there you have a wonderful extract of Christian doctrine and its chief parts. Whatever does not agree with this, you can confidently reject; you will not err. But if it concerns matters which are too difficult for you, because you cannot decide them according to your catechism, then think of Solomon's proverb: "Whoever searches difficult things, for him it is too difficult." Prov 25:27. Remember that what is absolutely necessary for you to know for your salvation and for the test of pure doctrine, you will find briefly and simply stated in your catechism. From the first chief part you learn to know true God-pleasing works, from the second true saving faith, from the third true prayer, from the fourth, fifth, and sixth the true sacraments and the