

July 21, 2024

Eighth Sunday after Trinity

Texts: Matthew 7:15-23; Romans 8:12-17

As Christians, is it more important to know the right thing, or to do the right thing? For Christian teachers and preachers, is it more important that they say the right thing, or set an example of the right thing?

This is actually a trick question, because the answer is both. This is what Jesus teaches us in our Gospel lesson, as well as St. Paul in the Epistle. Christianity isn't just knowing the right thing, nor is it just doing the right thing. It is faith, which knows what God has said in His Word and then lives according to it.

In the Gospel, Jesus first addresses those who would do works that appear good, but who lack true faith and the Word of God in their hearts. This can be difficult for Christians to spot, especially if they aren't grounded in God's Word themselves. Note what Jesus says about false prophets: They "come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves."

Very rare is the false teacher who comes openly admitting that what he's proclaiming is against the Bible. And when those come, they are quite easy to mark and avoid, as the Bible tells us to do.

More dangerous are those who would put on the appearance of being Christians, claiming that their teaching is just another interpretation of the Bible, that they worship the same God as we do, that the differences between them and other Christians are really rather minor things, nothing affecting salvation or anything.

One example of this would be the Mormons. Or, as their own "living prophet" recently stated that they must be known as, "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints." Aside from it seeming rather odd that the Lord Himself would send direct revelation from heaven concerning the specific name His people are to be known as – what else is noticeable about this change?

It's a name that sounds much more "Christian." It's a "Church" of who? Jesus Christ! Who are it's people? Saints! When are they living? The latter days! What could anyone object to about that? It's all from the Bible!

Here is where it is essential for Christians to know the Bible, the Word of God, so that they might not be led astray by those who even have the appearance of goodness. So, to go back to the example, if a group says that they believe in Jesus Christ, do they believe in what He has revealed about Himself through His Spirit in the Bible?

Do they believe that He is both fully God and fully man? Do they believe that He is the only-begotten Son of God, not just a son of God? Do they believe that His blood has paid the price for the sins of the whole world? Do they believe that He rose again in His body, ascended into heaven, and will be coming again in glory to judge the living and the dead?

You may have noticed the language of the Creed there, and that's not a coincidence. The great Creeds of the Christian faith – the Apostles', the Nicene, and the Athanasian – all take key points of the Bible and condense them to help Christians know what the Bible says in a nutshell. Far from being

something that we just recite blankly while thinking about other things, these are great tools given to us to help spot when the wolf's tail or whiskers are sticking out from beneath the sheep's wool.

This is important as well because, to go with the next thing Jesus speaks of, sometimes it would seem that certain groups do so much good, and so they must be good. Jesus says, "You will know them by their fruits... every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit." When groups claiming to be faithful Christians do outwardly good works, doesn't that mean they must truly be good Christians?

Again, this is where it is essential to know the Scriptures, so that we can see if the fruit is truly good or not. Lots of people, even people who openly don't believe in Jesus, do things that help their neighbor. This is what our Lutheran fathers called "civil righteousness." Such people are heeding the law written on their hearts, having their sins curbed and their actions directed toward worldly peace.

But are such works truly good and pleasing to God? By themselves, no. The Bible tells us, "for whatever is not from faith is sin." The only truly good works are those that flow from faith in Christ. Jesus illustrates this in the second half of our Gospel reading, where, at the judgment, the condemned cry out to Him, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?"

How does Jesus reply to this? Do He say that, because they'd done those outwardly good things and helped many people, that they get to come into heaven? No. Jesus answers them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!"

Again, this is important for us to remember, because we're tempted to look at the fruit by outward appearance and make our judgment. We figure that, if a church helps people out with their needs, if they clothe the naked and feed the hungry and give water to the thirsty and so forth, then they must be a good church.

Yet some churches who do these very things also deny that God is the Creator of all mankind and His order for us is best, or they teach that that Bible isn't fully His Word because it contains errors and human teachings that were true only for a time, or they even reject that Jesus is the only way to heaven, that other religions also lead to salvation.

The fruits might look good on the outside, but remember, how did the forbidden fruit in the Garden appear? It was pleasant to the eyes. And yet when eaten, it brought death upon mankind. Christians are often led away into false or unfaithful churches because of outward appearances, but then when they are fed by that group's teaching, their souls are harmed, sometimes even their saving faith poisoned and killed.

Thus Paul reminds us in our Epistle that we are to be led by the Spirit of God, and the Spirit inspired the Holy Scriptures for us and has preserved them to this day, that we might be fed with truth.

This being led by the Spirit through the Word gets to the other error, the other ditch we might crash into. This would be the error of knowing the Bible as an intellectual exercise, but not believing it and therefore living according to it.

Note that Jesus says, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.” We can be tempted to take the words of Scripture “whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” out of context and think that, if those sounds come out of your mouth, like a trained parrot, you’ll be in heaven. If you know the basics in your head, such as “Jesus is Lord,” then what does it matter what you do with your life?

We can be tempted toward this error of intellectualizing the faith, especially when it comes to passing it on to our children. Many times people think that, if I just drop my kids off for Sunday School and then pick them up after, they’ll be Christians, because they’ll learn the sufficient number of Bible stories or whatever to get into heaven. And while God’s Word is powerful, also powerful is the example of the parent dropping them off. Kids aren’t stupid, and so when they see that mom and especially dad don’t go to church, they learn that whatever they’re taught here isn’t really that important, because if it was, mom and dad would stick around.

As Lutherans, we can be especially prone to this error with confirmation. We’re tempted to treat confirmation like high school: learn enough to pass, and then get your diploma, and you don’t have to worry about it again. Yes, maybe we can recite some of the Ten Commandments if given enough prompting, but can we really say we believe them – as we solemnly vow in Confirmation – if we don’t live according to them? Think of the words written by James in his Epistle: “You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!” Being a Christian is more than just having facts tucked away in your brain.

Thus, Paul doesn’t write to the Romans and say that it’s good enough if you know stuff about Jesus. No, He says that we are to put to death the deeds of the body, to suffer with Christ when He sends us crosses. Once we’re baptized and become Christians, we aren’t just coasting until either we die or Jesus comes back. No, we are to follow in the example of Christ and His people of old. We seek to live lives that glorify Him and serve our neighbor, showing His love and forgiveness to those around us, walking in the paths He directs us to, drowning our sinful flesh and strengthening the new man of faith within us.

These are hard things to do. The Christian life is not an easy one. And that turns a lot of people off, especially in a culture that’s all about the quick fix, constantly concerned with feeling happy and good. But though it might be hard, being a Christian, believing in and living according to the Word, is a life of confidence.

We have confidence in the Bible, the Word of God. Here we have God the Holy Spirit speaking to us through the prophets, apostles, and evangelists. We are given to know truth, because the God who is truth reveals truth to us. In a world awash with relativism and doubt, we have a rock upon which we can build, one that is unshakable, no matter how much the world and its prince rage against it.

Heaven and earth will pass away, but the word of the Lord will never pass away. As the Holy Spirit uses the Word to grow our fear, love, and trust in Him, we are then also given confidence as we live our lives.

To begin with, we have the confidence that comes with being children of God and heirs with Christ of eternal life. We don’t have to worry about doing everything perfectly in order to make it to

the highest tier of heaven. Jesus Christ has paid for our sins on the cross and washed us clean when we were baptized into the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

We don't have to worry about making ourselves into a good tree; we are in Christ, new creations, made holy as He is holy. We, therefore, simply seek to bear the fruit that flows out of a heart which clings to the Word of God.

To walk in the ways of the Lord, to obey His Commandments, to live by His just decrees, these are blessings for us, for in keeping them we have confidence that we are living as our Lord knows is best for us. That's one of the reasons why He's given them to us, to guide us in the best possible life. Not best because it's full of pleasure and riches and superficial happiness, but best because it is a life lived according to His order, a life for which we were made, a life with eternal significance.

There is hardship and suffering, and we are easily tempted to turn off of the narrow, difficult path to the broad and easy one. It would be easy to just make faith in Jesus something you know in your brain but never have to live out in your words and deeds. It would be easy to find a group that is well-thought of by our society for doing good things and never speaking God's Word against the popular sins of the day.

But our path is one that combines both the Word in the mind and the life. And where does this path lead? Right after where our Epistle ends, Paul writes: "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us." The suffering may be great, but the glory will be infinitely greater. When we fully inherit the kingdom prepared for us from the foundation of the world, all sorrows will be forgotten, all conflicts erased, all troubles made to cease. The wolves will be forever banished, with only the Good Shepherd eternally in the midst of His sheep. That is the life we are living for.

In this life, we bear those fruits that show forth glimpses of God's glory to those around us. And we cling to the Word in our hearts, for one with such a heart will never be commanded by Christ to depart.

In the name of Jesus, amen.