

As Jesus begins to draw His Sermon on the Mount to a close, He gives a warning to His hearers: Beware of false prophets. These are those who come claiming to be speaking from God, because that's what a prophet does, yet whose true nature is far from that of Christ's flock. No, these false prophets are like ravenous wolves, seeking only to fill their stomachs and do so through the destruction of God's people.

This warning of Christ pertains to the Church of all time. The Old Testament prophets such as Jeremiah were constantly dealing with those who spoke falsely in the Lord's name. Several of the books in the New Testament are letters written to help congregations resist the deceit of false prophets. In our day and age you can find someone willing to tell you whatever you want to hear, and say it in Jesus' name. Christ's warning must still ring in our ears: "Beware of false prophets."

That we might heed this warning, Jesus gives us two essential teachings: first, that we will recognize these false prophets by their fruit, and second, that this fruit is to be judged not by appearance but by God's own word.

Jesus says twice in our Gospel reading that you will know them – false prophets – by their fruits. And He gives a pretty straightforward illustration. "Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?" No, they aren't.

You can easily recognize a plant by the fruit it produces. It would take a good bit of expertise to tell certain plants apart in the off-season, say looking at different berry bushes and trying to decide if they are blackberry or raspberry bushes. But on the other hand, even a complete novice such as myself can look at a tree with apples growing on it and know that it's obviously an apple tree.

A fruit tree's purpose, given by God, is producing its particular fruit. Thus, you can recognize it by its fruit.

You can also tell something about the quality of the tree by the quality of the fruit on it. You may have a wonderful looking peach tree in your yard, full of green leaves, growing tall, but if there are no peaches to be found on it at harvest time, something is clearly wrong. Maybe it's sick, maybe certain treatments have caused it not to blossom, but whatever is going on, it's not a healthy, productive peach tree.

And on the other hand, there might be an apple tree that looks all gnarled and bent, but come the season, it produces a wonderful harvest of sweet, crisp apples. That's a good apple tree, even if it looks rather scraggly in the off-season.

This illustration carries over to prophets – those who would teach and preach God's word. "You will recognize them by their fruits." What is the fruit of a prophet? First and foremost, what he speaks! His teaching is his fruit.

Clear back in Deuteronomy, Moses commanded the people to judge a prophet based upon what he said. This command, given through Christ, holds still today. We aren't to judge a teacher based

upon his appearance, how big his church is, or how many best-selling books he has written, or how appealing he looks on the TV or internet. We are to judge by his fruit.

And likewise, we shouldn't be dismissive of a preacher based on his appearance, if he seems boring or dry, or if he's unknown outside of his own congregation, or if he seems totally behind on cultural trends and fads. We are to judge based on fruit.

Why fruit, you might ask? As Jesus again says, "Every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit." The quality of the visible fruit shows the invisible health of the tree.

We cannot judge the heart; only God can do that. But what lies in the heart will produce visible fruit. Christ says to the Pharisees, "How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." What lies inside a person will at some point come out in words or actions.

If there is faith in Christ in the heart, then it will – it must – overflow into good works, both actions of love to the neighbor and words which glorify God and direct to Christ. And conversely, a heart without faith will be unable to do this, especially to teach and preach rightly concerning Christ.

You can't directly know the heart of a prophet, a preacher, a pastor. But you can see and hear his fruit, his preaching and teaching, his manner of life. Thus, Jesus tells His flock that they will recognize false prophets by their fruit. That is the first key teaching in this reading.

The second flows from this: these fruits are to be judged not by appearance or human reason or any other worldly measurement, but by the Word of God. That's the point of the second part of the Gospel reading.

To judge a fruit, you need to know what makes that particular fruit good or bad. We often think this is completely in the realm of personal opinion or feeling. If you like your oranges a certain way and someone else likes them differently, to each his own. And certainly we humans can tell what makes good fruit without someone telling us. It insults our pride to say otherwise.

Yet Christ tells us that our outward judgments are not what counts. At the Last Day, many will find this out the hard way, as what they thought was good is revealed by Christ to be lawlessness. Jesus says of 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?'"

This easily translates to our day. "Did we not operate homeless shelters in your name, and provide for refugees in your name, and give meals to stranded travelers in your name?" To be sure, caring for travelers and refugees and the homeless are good things, just as driving out demons is a good thing. Yet done without faith, done without the true fear, love, and trust in God in the heart, these good works are of no eternal value. They are not actually good in God's eyes.

Thus Jesus replies to those who did such things, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness." More terrifying words cannot be heard from our Lord, and yet tragically many who claim to bear His name will hear them on the Last Day. "I never knew you; depart from me."

Thus we cannot judge fruit based on appearance or on our ideas of what makes up good and bad. So what are we to use? God's word!

Jesus says, "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." So it is doing the will of the Father that matters. And how do we know the will of the Father? God's word!

The Holy Scriptures are the revealed will of God, the Almighty speaking to us His people through the pens of the prophets, apostles, and evangelists. What our Lord would have us to know, especially concerning the things of eternity, right and wrong, how one enters the kingdom – these are given to us in the pages of the Bible. There we read, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." The word tells us what is a good work.

It's these Scriptures that "are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus," not human wisdom or reason. This is why in our Lutheran Confessions we say this: "We believe, teach, and confess that the only rule and norm according to which all teachings, together with all teachers, should be evaluated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testament alone."

You will know false prophets by their fruit, and you will know bad fruit from good by the word of God.

As the people of God, then, I implore you to hear that word of God. Read it, study it, dwell on it. In it, your God and Savior speaks to you. Through it, the Holy Spirit strengthens your faith.

If you are to be on guard against wolves in sheep's clothing, then you need to know what you're looking for. It's harder to see differences in the dark, which is why God gives you His word, which is, as He says, a lamp to your feet and a light to your path.

Take what you hear from teachers, pastors, even me, and examine it in the light of Holy Scripture. Follow the example of the faithful saints from Berea whom we read about in the book of Acts. They gladly heard Paul and Silas, and they examined the Scriptures to make sure that what Paul and Silas were saying was in agreement with the Scriptures.

If you're not sure about something you hear me say, come ask me about it. A good and true prophet welcomes the chance to discuss the word, and always seeks to clarify where he needs. And should he – I – be found to have spoken wrongly, a true prophet will repent, as repentance is one of the fruits of faith.

A faithful prophet, teacher, pastor does all this because, by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in him, he seeks to do the will of the Father in heaven. That will is not that a prophet get rich, or even be well-liked. Jeremiah was absolutely despised in his day.

No, Jesus tells us of the will of the Father. He says, "For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in Him should have eternal life, and I will raise Him up on the Last Day." The Father's will is that people believe in Jesus and by believing be granted eternal life. That is the purpose of a prophet, to speak God's word that the Holy Spirit would work through the word to grant and strengthen saving faith in Christ.

It's not for the prophet's sake, but for the sake of those who hear and for the glory of Jesus Christ. Where a prophet speaks faithfully, the fruit that he bears is made by God to be the fruit of the tree of life.

And so, brothers and sisters in Christ, seek this wholesome, saving fruit of God's word. Don't judge by appearances, for the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, the fruit that lead to death, was a delight to the eyes.

Judge by the word of God, that word which comes through the true prophets and apostles and evangelists. Hear the voice of your Good Shepherd, that you might recognize it when it comes to you through the mouth of a pastor or fellow Christian.

Treasure the words written for you in the Scriptures, for as the apostle and evangelist St. John writes, "these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name."

In the name of Jesus, amen.