

Sermon, Trinity 8, Aug. 11, 2019,
Holy Gospel, St. Matthew 7: 19-23, Immanuel

Today's Gospel text comes at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, which begins in chapter five of Saint Matthew with the Beatitudes-- the blessings--the proclamations of what the in-breaking Reign of God in Christ Jesus looks like. Life under the reign of God will be where those who mourn their sins will be forgiven them for Christ's sake, where those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled with the righteousness of God, where the meek and humble, who do not covet what others have, fame or wealth, will inherit the world. The sermon on the Mount begins with a promise and ends with a warning: Beware of false prophets, who will corrupt His Word. It will be hard to detect them by their outward appearance and acts. But you will be able to judge them by their fruit. "

What is this fruit by which we judge true prophets and false ones? The first thing that comes to mind is good works, I would imagine? But Jesus tells us that you won't be able to distinguish a true prophet from false prophets by good works, at least by good works alone. For, Jesus tells us, many false prophets will come and use His name to prophesy, to cast out demons, and to do many mighty works, many good works in human eyes. If we look at a pastor or a preacher and judge him to be a good shepherd because he uses the name of Jesus in his preaching, because he is an energetic and effective manager and promoter, a people person, because he is able to get people to reform their lives, because he casts out their demons, or turns people away from addictions and selfishness, we may be mistaken.

All these things are all good works, to be sure. But these aren't the fruit by which we are to distinguish the true shepherd from the false, the true sheep from the wolf in sheep's clothing, because a false shepherd is capable of doing these things, too. Neither are we to judge that a shepherd is a false one because he has fallen into a sin that is neither obstinate nor unrepentant. So again we ask, "what is the good fruit by which we can recognize a good shepherd from a false shepherd? We go to the text.

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.*" (Matthew 7: 21, ESV) God's **will** is the key. The one who does **God's will** will enter the Kingdom of God. The shepherd who does **God's will** is the true shepherd. So the obvious next questions are: what is God's will, and how do we know it, where can we find it?

Well, first of all, we know from Holy Scripture that God **wills** to have a relationship of trust with us, His children, as He did with Adam and Eve in the beginning, when they walked and talked with God daily as they went about their vocations of husband and wife, gardener and helper, when they submitted to God's will for them.

We know from Holy Scripture that God **wills** that we love our neighbor. He has written His law in our hearts and in the hearts of all humans so that we would not hurt each other or take what is not ours. But our knowledge of this natural law has been covered over and obscured by the darkness of sin, of wanting our will to be done, rather than God's.

We know from His Holy Word that He **does not will** to destroy us for our rebellion. We see this in His provision of clothing for Adam and Eve, in His sparing Noah and His family in the flood, in His liberation of His people from slavery, and countless other acts of mercy throughout holy scripture.

We know from the Bible that He has expressed clearly His will for how He wishes us to live in the Ten Commandments. His **will** is that we love and trust in Him above all things, and that we love our neighbors as ourselves. His **will** is that we see clearly that we cannot obey this law perfectly, and in repentance and faith look to the Savior He has promised from the very beginning.

Let us also look at the Lord's Prayer, from the same Sermon on the Mount. Jesus tells us that when we pray, we are to pray that God's will be done in our lives. Luther explains it this way in the Small Catechism: "God's will is done when He breaks and hinders every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature, which do not want us to hallow God's name or let His kingdom come; and when He strengthens and keeps us firm in His Word and faith until we die." (Small Catechism, The Lord's Prayer)

God **wills** us to keep firm in His Word and faith until we die, in order to break the plans of the devil, the world, and our own sinful nature. God's Word, and faith in His Word is the key here. A true shepherd has faith in God's word, and is not ashamed to proclaim it, even in the face of opposition from the disbelieving world-- even from his own flock.

God wants his Word to be taught in its truth and purity, for it is the means by which He has chosen to work salvation in His world. He shows us our sins in the Word of the Law, clearly shown us in the Ten Commandments, so that we can finally know our sinfulness and our inability to fulfill the law by our own strength and willpower. We may be able outwardly to fulfill the law, at least commandments four through ten, but Jesus cuts down our tree of self-justification by showing us in the Sermon on the Mount that whoever hates his brother has committed murder before God, whoever thinks a lustful thought about a woman has committed adultery before God. Jesus puts an end to all that waste of time and energy spent in self-justification. He frees us from the effort we spend defending our sinful thoughts, words and deeds. Instead, he says, confess your sins before your Father in Heaven, before your brother and sister, before your shepherd, your Pastor, and He will forgive you. Don't waste your time trying to make bad fruit look good with all kinds of excuses. God doesn't want excuses. He wants good fruit. He wants repentance and faith and a new life in His children, His sheep.

So the next question is: How do we produce the fruits of faith? God warns us, if we do not produce good fruit, He won't just toss out the bad fruit but cut the whole tree down and throw it into the fire.

Martin Luther lays out our predicament and its solution in his typically colorful way in His sermon on this text: "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."

"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."

We become an "apple tree" as Luther puts it, by being re-created. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." (2 Cor. 5:17, ESV). We are made new creations in the waters of Baptism, where we are adopted into God's family, grafted into the true vine that is Jesus Christ, the true Israel of God. We are no longer bad trees, but re-created as good trees, producing good fruit, the fruit of faith, of repentance and forgiveness of sins in Christ Jesus.

In this life, the old tree still clings to us and resists God's Word and remains with us until we die, and shed the bark and root of sin forever. In this life, the old tree is continually trying to send out shoots, but the Holy Spirit of God is busy pruning them through our life in His Word and Sacraments, in repentance and forgiveness. Jesus says in the fifteenth chapter of Saint John, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. ² Every branch in me that does not bear fruit ^uhe takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. (John 15: 1-2, ESV) God's Word, the two edged sword of the Spirit, is the pruning tool that cuts away the shoots of mistrust and unbelief, so that our life's energy may flow to produce the fruits of faith.

So that this sword of the Spirit, the Word of God, is taught and preached in its truth and purity, God calls pastors to feed His sheep. They will give an account before God on the last day of their care of the flock. If they have fed them impure food, if they have withheld the full counsel of God, they will have to account for it. Theirs is a heavy responsibility. Help them by following their spiritual guidance. As it says in Hebrews, chapter 13 concerning pastors, "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They

keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden. for that would be of no advantage to you.” In other words, your advantage is to listen and follow them, for God has put them there for your benefit.

It is God’s will that you listen to the voice of His true shepherds, speaking not their own opinions, but the Word of God. Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.” (John 10: 27-29, ESV)

Your Heavenly Father’s will is that His saving Word be taught in its truth and purity so that through faith in this word you may be made a new tree, growing stronger day by day in fear and trust of the Lord, bearing the fruit of faith and love, here in time, and there, in eternity. In Jesus+name.