

Instruction Concerning False Prophets

Eighth Sunday after Trinity (Third Sermon)

Sermon on Matthew 7:15-23

Author: Dr. Martin Luther (1483-1546) Year: 1527

Text

¹⁵*Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves.*
¹⁶*By their fruits ye shall know them. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?* ¹⁷*Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but the corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit.* ¹⁸*A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.* ¹⁹*Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.* ²⁰*Therefore by their fruits ye shall know them.* ²¹*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 who is in heaven.* ²²*Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy by thy name, and by thy name cast out demons, and by thy name do many mighty works?* ²³*And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.* (Matthew 7:15-23)

Sermon

¹ Christ our Lord preached this part of the Gospel in concluding his long sermon on the mount, When he had taught his disciples all they should know, he proceeds and warns them to be ever on their guard against false doctrine; as all good ministers try and should do at the close of their sermons, namely, warn the people to hold fast to the true doctrine and beware of false teaching.

Thus St. Paul also did, Acts 20:28-31, when he was about to depart from Ephesus, among other things, he said: *“Take heed unto yourselves, and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit hath made you bishops, to feed the church of the Lord which he purchased with his own blood. I know that after my departing grievous wolves shall enter in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Wherefore watch ye, remembering that by the space of three years I ceased not to admonish every one night and day with tears.”*

Thus here and there in all his Epistles Paul always adds an admonition, to guard themselves against other teachings. Just as St. Peter also gives an admonition in his second Epistle, 2 Peter 2:1f, when he says: *“But there arose false prophets also among the people, as among you also there shall be false teachers, who shall privily bring in destructive heresies, denying even the Master that bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their lascivious doings; by reason of whom the way of the truth shall be evil spoken of. And in coveteousness shall they with feigned*

words make merchandise of you; whose sentence now from of old lingereth not, and their destruction slumbereth not.”

² Christ here proceeds in like manner. When he finished his sermon he warns his disciples and the people and admonishes them ever to remain faithful to what he had told them, and to be very careful not to be misled by false teachers, and says:

“Beware of false prophets.”

³ First from this we are to understand that we are under obligation to reflect upon this fact and that it will always be that after the true preachers depart false teachers will come; yea, they will even enter along with and mingle with them. Otherwise, why were it necessary for Christ so faithfully to admonish us when he says: *“Beware,”* take care! if he had known that all his teachings would continue pure? Therefore he gives us this warning, that we may be certain of false prophets appearing after the true and pure doctrine is preached. For it has come to pass in all periods of the world’s history that after faithful and true ministers, prophets and rulers of God’s people labored, others followed who corrupted the pure doctrine, faith and worship; as the Book of Judges 2:10f, also describes. When those were gathered to their fathers whom God had given the people as teachers and judges, who knew the will of God, what was and what was not acceptable to him, immediately the people of Israel began to turn away from God and his Word. One worshiped this idol, another that, and they were divided into factions so that they fell from the true teachings and strayed from the ways of their fathers.

⁴ So it was also in the times of the Apostles. Then the doctrine was yet pure; but when they died who held to their true teachings, false apostles and factious leaders came. who perverted everything and desired radical changes in all things, as the Epistles of St. Paul sufficiently show. Now, inasmuch as this is so, and we cannot expect anything else, Christ our Lord warns us here in the spirit of a true shepherd and bishop, that we beware while we have the Gospel preached in its purity and simplicity, that we hold firmly to it and depart not from it, even at the risk of losing our life and possessions. For it cannot be otherwise than that God’s Word will not continue always pure and unadulterated in all generations.

⁵ Thus it will come to pass also among us. God be praised, we and others have the Gospel in greater purity and abundance than at any time since the days of the Apostles. But when we and those who now assist to promote it are gathered to our fathers, you will have false teachers enough, as many have already commenced and they already bestir themselves. And blessed are they who are diligently on their guard according to this Gospel and believe not every wind of doctrine, but remain steadfast in what they have learned. This Christ first teaches here with the words: *“Beware,”* be warned, as if to say: you will most certainly have to contend with false teachers.

⁶ Here you may ask: why does God permit false prophets to come among his pious people and be the successors of his true ministers? Is he not powerful and strong enough to prevent it, so that the Gospel may continue pure and in its power? Of course he is. But he permits it in order to prove and preserve his own people, and to punish the unthankful. It is as St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:19 says: *“For there must be also factions among you, that they that are approved may be made manifest among you.”* This means, that those whose faith is approved may become manifest, so that their spirit and word appear, and testify that they are true.

⁷ When God gives us his Word, his gifts and Spirit, it is not his will that we should be lazy, sleepy and idle. For if you have the true Word and its true meaning, the world will attack you on one side, and the devil will attempt to tear you from it on the other, not only by means of worldly tyrants who persecute the Word with the sword; but also by means of our own reason and the wisest people in the world. Thus God desires to develop you by his Word, and to give the Holy Spirit whom he has bestowed upon you something to do, so that you may learn that God's wisdom is wiser than the world's wisdom, that God's strength is stronger than the strength and power of the world, which you will not learn unless you pass through this conflict with false teachers.

⁸ Wherever he permits the devil to create factions, he would thus stir you up, and say: Defend yourself, lay hold of the Word, and learn to experience God's wisdom and power against the wisdom of the world and the lies of satan. Thus the strength and wisdom of God's Word will appear, that you may learn that it is not to be conquered with power and wisdom; but it conquers, and puts to shame all power, cunning and wisdom opposed to it. This is one reason why God permits factions and sects among us, who enter in as it were edgewise, as though they were beneficial and served to the end that the Word, the truth and Spirit prove themselves to be better and plainer; however aside from this factions and sects serve no good purpose.

⁹ The second reason is, that he may punish the unthankful, who will not accept the Word, that they may be converted and saved. As Christ also said to the Jews, John 5:43: *"I am come in my Father's name, and ye receive me not: if another shall come in his own name, him ye will receive."* Paul also says in 2 Thessalonians 2:10: *"Because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this cause God sendeth them a working of error, that they should believe a lie; that they all might be judged who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness."* Thus God severely punishes these sins with blindness and error, which are also the greatest and worst sins, although we regard them to be so insignificant.

¹⁰ We consider it a small matter, that the Gospel of God's grace is again restored to us. How many are there, who never even once thanked God for it? We forget it, cast it to the winds, become lazy and careless, no one welcomes it, no one relishes it, no one lifts up thankful hands to God for it. Yes, we are so richly overflowed with the Gospel that we have now become tired of it, and are almost turned against it, as Paul prophesied in 2 Timothy 4:3-4: *"For the time will come when they will not endure the sound doctrine; but, having itching ears, will heap to themselves teachers after their own lusts; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and turn aside unto fables."* Thus we see time and again throughout the whole Scriptures, how highly it offends God and that he considers it the greatest sin, when his Word is despised which is so dear and precious that it cost him the blood of his dear Son, while we so lightly cast it to the winds. For this reason he also visits us with the worst of all calamities, which is not to be compared with the other calamities in the world, so that the people become so hardened, blindfolded and misled by the false prophets, that heaven itself is closed against them and hell opens to receive them, and life eternal is lost forever. Even though you fall under the sword of the Turk or of tyrants, if you only die in the true knowledge of God's Word and in true faith, what is that but a blessed death, devoutly to be desired? But to deliver the soul forever to the devil, is eternal wrath, an everlasting calamity and hell itself.

¹¹ God has now begun to visit us with manifold temporal and bodily calamities. But a far worse calamity will await us, when the holy Gospel is banished from Germany, or other false teachers appear, when one teaches this, another that. Then heaven will be closed, and the false preachers will not permit it to be opened. Hence there is great need that we pray earnestly. But, alas, how very cold

our hearts are, and the reason of this is that our walls are not yet on fire, and we do not feel the loss. Nevertheless the devil has determined to drown all Germany in blood, and to take the Gospel from us, unless he be prevented beforehand and held in check by the prayers of pious Christians.

“Who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves.”

¹² No one sends them. They come of themselves. And this is the real nature of false prophets, that in order to preach they force themselves upon us. Some do this for a living, which I do not value very highly, for they will not have it quite as easy as they think. But those who force themselves upon us with the boast that they do it for the sake of Christian love, on account of the truth and that the Holy Spirit constrains them to do so; and that they seek nothing but the salvation of souls; of all such be on your guard, for the devil has most certainly sent them, and not God. For those whom God sends are called and constrained to enter upon their work. Nor do they boast much of themselves. But of whatever they do boast, they prove by their work. Therefore, the Lord would say, beware of those you see are neither sent nor called, but come of themselves at the devil’s call.

¹³ Yet they ever boast they have the Holy Spirit? Answer: whoever would convince you that he is moved by the Holy Spirit and does this from Christian motives, say to him: As you boast so much of the Spirit, give me proof of it. For you testify of yourself, and the Scriptures forbid me to believe anyone who only testifies of himself. For even Christ, the Son of the living God, would not bear witness of himself, as we read in the Gospel of John 5:31 and John 8:14. However, he furnished testimony by which men might know that he was sent from God, and that his Word and doctrine were true. As you then say you have the Holy Spirit, give us evidence of your Spirit, prove it with facts that we may believe you. For here a divine testimony is necessary to prove the presence of the Spirit of God, in order that there may be two witnesses, you and God. If you will not do this, then we can neither hear nor believe you.

¹⁴ For, if we grant it is true, that one is a true spirit and has the true Holy Spirit; even then you should not hear him. For God has commanded that you should observe his order, and ask for two witnesses, and demand the proof and record of his call. Therefore say: I will not listen to you on the ground of your pretenses and boasting, even though you should have the true Spirit, for God would thus test me, whether I wish to remain in the order he has established. Therefore God is satisfied and well pleased, if you do not receive such a spirit; for God thus acts with us to try us, to see whether we will continue in his Word; as a father who plays with his child, gives it an apple and takes it again.

¹⁵ Therefore, when a spirit comes self-called and brings something new, then know how to guard yourself and say: I do not ask what you preach, but whether you are sent, or you come of yourself? If you come of yourself, I will not hear you, even though you have the Holy Spirit; for the devil in the Gospel can also say: *“What have we to do with thee, thou ‘Jesus of Nazareth? I know thou art the Holy One of God.”* Mark 1:24.

So the vulgar crowd also say: Here is the real and true Word of God which this man preaches, let us hear him. Yes, look out beforehand whence he comes. The devil can preach too, but he does it for an occasion to win adherents; then he comes forth and sows his poison among the good grain, so that it becomes worse than at the beginning. Therefore Christ so diligently warns us against those who come of themselves.

¹⁶ Another call is when the congregation or civil authority calls one for the sake of the Church. This call proceeds out of the debt and duty of love; for when people need me for the ministry, provided I

am fit for it, and they require it of me, it is then my duty to obey, for God commands me to serve my neighbor. Therefore, this call requires no proof, because the people desire it, and the Word of God constrains me. This means “*brought*,” “*called*” and “*urged*.” But the other call, like that of Christ and the Apostles, comes immediately from God, and is called “*sent*,” because it is accompanied by the testimonies of the Holy Spirit. Others, though they boast of the Spirit or of the flesh, you are not to hear. As our fanatical, erratic spirits now boast, who have devoured the Holy Spirit feathers and all, and say: the Holy Spirit has spoken to them from heaven and revealed to them many wonderful things, and so forth. I cannot boast much of the Spirit; they become spiritual entirely too soon for me. I boast of the Spirit of love, otherwise I am a poor carnal sinner. However, I ought indeed to know something also of the Spirit, of whom they boast; but they are all too highly spiritualized for me.

¹⁷ What is meant when he says: They come in sheep’s clothing? These sheep’s clothing are, that they employ everything for an outward show that true Christians and true ministers teach. For we, who are the lambs of Christ, are covered with the sheep’s wool. These are not only works, an outward, hypocritical life they lead, in that they pray much and wear gray frocks, go about with bowed heads, fast much and lead a strict life; but the worst of all is that they make use of the Word of God and the holy Scriptures for selfish ends, which in the prophets are called God’s wool and linen. For preaching, likewise admonitions and Scripture passages, are the real clothing with which they desire to adorn and pride themselves, saying: Here is Christ, here is baptism, here is the name of God, here is he who interprets the Scriptures which are the Scriptures of God, and their whole pretense is nothing but God’s name, God’s Spirit and Christ’s Spirit.

¹⁸ This now is meant by coming in sheep’s clothing; namely, so to preach and so to make use of the Scriptures that it may be esteemed as the true doctrine. For he does not say: who come to you in a wolf’s hide, or with spears and showing their teeth. They do not preach any poisonous doctrine publicly or without the Scriptures, for then men might know them; as for instance they have preached Aristotle in their high schools, that there is neither civil authority nor the right of the emperor, wherein they said, there was no God in Christianity. On the contrary, they adorned themselves not only with works, but also with the holy Scriptures, by which God clothes and covers our souls; For if they would not act thus, the unthankful would not be so easily blindfolded or misled by them.

¹⁹ Hence the saying is true, the holy Scriptures are a book for heretics, that is, they are a book to which heretics most of all lay claim. For they misuse no other book so much, yea, they do not know any other worthy of praise, and no heresy was ever so wicked or gross, that did not attempt to strengthen itself and recommend itself by the use of the Scriptures. Just as a man might say: God is the God of all rogues and rascals, because the largest crowd in the world take his part. Not because their rascality comes from God or is acceptable to him, but because they thus take his holy name in vain. So then, the holy Scriptures must be a heretic’s book, not that the book is to blame, but because of these rogues who so shamefully misuse it. In like manner people are accustomed to say in the proverb: All misfortune begins in God’s name. This is also true. Well, you say, then I will be careful not to make use of God’s name. What is that you utter? How can you blame the name, that is given in order that I might be saved? He will indeed find and punish these rogues and rascals. Well, then, the Bible is a heretic’s book, but I will not throw it away on that account; on the contrary, I will study and read it much more, so that I may know how to avoid the misuse of it.

²⁰ Then let every one be prepared and armed, that he may not so easily allow himself to be misled by the brilliant pretensions of false teachers, although they at the time quote the Scriptures. For within certainly lie concealed ravenous wolves. And when you think they will feed and satisfy your soul,

then they rend you, murder and devour you. But no one will so readily judge or decide this matter, except with spiritual eyes. The common man and the rabble cannot, for the largest multitude despise the Gospel and are unthankful, while the smallest flock receive it and can appreciate it. And this is the greatest and severest contest, when one must contend with Scripture against Scripture, to strike one's sword away and get the advantage of him, to pluck his weapon out of his hand and slay him with his own sword, which no one can do except he who is enlightened by the Holy Spirit so that he sees this rogue.

²¹ I have often told you the surest doctrine and rule, with which to prove the spirits. It is that St. John gives in his first Epistle 1 John 4:1: "*Beloved, believe not every spirit, but prove the spirits, whether they are of God. Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh, is of God. And every spirit that confesseth not Jesus is not of God.*"

²² Also St. Paul in Romans 12:7 says: "*Whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of our faith.*" That is, all doctrines must harmonize and agree with faith, so that nothing be taught but faith. He who has not this faith cannot judge of any doctrine correctly, for here the carnal minded who are smart and worldly wise are incompetent, only pious spiritual hearts can do that.

Of course there are many who say: Christ is the son of God, born of a chaste virgin, died and rose again from the dead, and so forth. However, they do not believe that he is Christ, that is, that he was given for us, without any effort of ours, and has won for us the Spirit of God and makes us his children without any merit on our part, so that through him we might have a gracious God and eternal life. This is the faith that is called, to know Christ. This is the touchstone, the judgment-disk and the balance, by which all doctrine must be weighed, proved and judged. It is therefore not sufficient that a teacher or preacher should merely know the creed concerning Christ, that he is the Son of God, died and rose again from the dead and so forth. This of course is all sheep's clothing.

²³ But observe the difficulty: when they say, Christ has died, was buried and rose again, and did the like for us, then they must also conclude that we do not deserve the forgiveness of sins and eternal life and God's grace by virtue of our own merit. This point the false spirits most certainly never touch or enforce, but avoid it, as they say the devil does incense or the cross. He allows them to preach of course, how Christ was born, died and rose again, ascended to heaven and sitteth at the right hand of his heavenly Father, yet they mingle other things with it, as thus and thus you must do, this or that you must leave undone, if you want to be saved and please God. This is the devil who administers his poison in a sugar coated form.

²⁴ The Pope also robes himself in such sheep's clothing, that Christ has indeed merited for us by his death and by shedding his blood, that we are saved and become God's children. He adds however to this: Whoever is not obedient to the Romish church is a child of eternal condemnation; but whoever obeys will thereby be saved and ascend straight to heaven. Does not the Pope insist on his own affairs as strongly as on the Gospel? But compare the two. If the death of Christ does it, then my works cannot do it. It would be quite a different thing if he would preach thus: You are to obey me out of Christian love, but not to be saved thereby, which takes place through the blood of Christ. But he will not bite this nut.

²⁵ Therefore learn well to be on your guard, and thoroughly examine all doctrines, whether they rightly teach and apply this chief and fundamental doctrine, that is, whether they preach Christ correctly and purely. For you will certainly find among all factions and sects, that they always either

omit this article entirely, or bring something with it to which they lead the people as though that were particularly necessary to salvation. Thus our fanatics and image-breakers also at first drew the crowd with them by the pretense that nothing was more necessary than to break images. Whoever breaks an image or destroys a table does a good work, and proves that he is a Christian. Soon the people as a mass rushed in crowds and all wanted to be Christians; just as though the Jews, Gentiles and Turks and the worst rogues could not do the same thing.

²⁶ Such fanatics do not shake our confidence in works, but rather strengthen it and rest in them. Where there are true teachers their preaching agrees with faith. If it be in the proportion of faith, then Christ will not be neglected or divided, but will remain entire in his knowledge as he is. And although the devil pretends to preach Christ through his apostles, do not believe him, for he would entrap you with his cunning and deceive you. Indeed this is warning enough, but it is in vain for those who will not hear. Yet it assists those who are to be changed for the better. Now follow the third test and way to know the spirits, which reads thus:

“By their fruits ye shall know them.”

²⁷ All our outward behavior and works are fruits. But in order to learn to know thoroughly the truly good works, one must have spiritual eyes. St. Paul mentions such works to the Galatians 5:22: *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control.”* These are the true fruits of the Spirit. But the works of the flesh are: *“fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousies, wraths, factions, divisions, parties, envyings, drunkenness, revelings and such like.”* Galatians 2:19-21.

²⁸ When you carefully distinguish the works of the flesh from the works of the Spirit, you will not find in all the works of the false prophets a single spark of the Spirit. In the first place you will certainly not find any true fruits of faith or works of love among them. But you will find, that they are very friendly among themselves and call each other brethren; but this is nothing but poison and the devil within them. For whatever does not belong to their faction they have no mercy, no patience or friendliness; but if they could, they would destroy them body and soul in an hour or a moment. Flesh and blood do not see the fruits, hence in the meantime they of course wear their gray frocks, are a quiet order and observe the same customs and principles.

²⁹ These are not works of love. On the contrary, works of love are those we do in behalf of the suffering and toward our enemies, also in showing mercy to sinners, in instructing and teaching the ignorant, and in serving the poor with our own body, goods and honor, as Christ relates in Matthew 25:25f. You will not find these works in any false prophet, he may indeed conduct himself like a Christian in his extraordinary behavior, like the bare-footed friars and Carthusians; but what benefit is that to me? Likewise, what benefit is it to a neighbor that others destroy monasteries and pictures. This is only a show and appears as if it were something, but there is no benefit in it whatever. Love, however, requires works that are beneficial to your fellow men.

³⁰ Again, you will further note how proud and impudent these spirits are, who only desire to be honored and worshipped; and are full of greed and know nothing of mercy. They not only refuse to give to anyone and to help the poor; but they also rejoice and are pleased to see that their neighbors do not prosper. If a person be found in disgrace they will not help with their own honor to rescue him from his disgrace; but plunge him still deeper into it and publish it abroad, sing a song about him and laugh at him in their glee. And when one falls into sin, their hearts have no sympathy for him; but they harden their hearts and are only tickled over their neighbor's downfall and adorn themselves by

it. And what more shall we say? These are rude, bitter hearts, full of poison, which have only a black, baneful tongue, and can hew everyone to pieces upon the slaughter block. They must turn men into demons, leave no one uncensored, judge, condemn and despise everyone, and regard everyone's disgrace with scorn. Christ therefore says of them:

“Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but the corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit,” etc.

³¹ Here note, he says: *“By their fruits ye shall know them.”* He does not say: By their fruits they become good or evil. For when was there ever a pear tree made out of a pear; or a cherry tree out of a cherry? However, it is natural, that the tree bears the fruit, an apple tree bears apples, and so on. The tree of course is known by its fruits, but it is not made by its fruits. Like Abraham when he offered his son Isaac was already God's worshiper. And yet God said to him, Genesis 22:12: *“For now I know that thou fearest God.”* He does not say: Now you have become godfearing. On the contrary, by your work it becomes known and public, that you fear God.

³² Hence these are two different things; to be or become something, and that something be known or be made public. There are many things that are known to God alone; but when he makes them manifest, they become known also to men. And Christ says, the fruits serve to the end, that by them men may know the tree whether it be good or evil, as Abraham was known by his works that he feared God, and was good and righteous. Consequently, before the fruit becomes manifest it must grow out of the tree, that it may also thus become known what kind of a tree it is. However, to make a thing known is quite different from the existence of the thing itself. Consequently, the work I do, does not serve to the end that I may become good and just before God, but it only makes known and manifests the treasure and the heart, in which it is concealed. For this treasure hidden in the heart, God does not desire to leave neglected, but to make it known.

³³ So far works make us good, pure and holy externally before men; but not internally before God; for this Christ alone and faith must accomplish. Thus this matter is correctly and variously explained. But if one is so stiff-necked and stubborn, and will not allow himself to be instructed, we let him go his own way. For to such we cannot explain anything, and nothing can be preached to them. But we seek erring hearts who desire rightly to understand and to please God. These are teachable, and to these we preach. Hence Christ says further:

“Therefore by their fruits ye shall know them.”

³⁴ This he repeats to teach and warn us, that we may know how to guard ourselves against such characters, and take good care to rightly know them; not by their name and self-praise, which mean the pure truth, spirit and salvation of souls, but by their fruits. For they all to be sure come adorned with the name of Christ, the Church and God's Word, by which they blindfold the people with their continual noise and apparitions, so that the ignorant become terrified at such names, and cannot check or endure it. But Christ says, pay no attention to their pretensions and boasting. For this can deceive all, there is nothing common to them except the misuse of God's name, Spirit, truth and Church, so that Paul is forced to declare, Galatians 1:8: *“But though we (who in truth could boast that he was an Apostle sent by Christ), or an angel from heaven, should preach unto you any Gospel other than that which we preached unto you, let him be accursed.”*

³⁵ Now might not others misuse those precious names, or be unable to deceive and mislead, by what they present and boast of in the name of the Church? Since we are to believe no one who teaches

anything else, although he came with the credentials of an Apostle, yea, even if he were an angel from heaven, not to say anything of the Church, which has not yet the high understanding and clear intelligence, nor the perfect purity and holiness of the angels in heaven.

³⁶ Therefore, not to be misled by such glorious names and boasting, it is necessary that Christians, as I have said, should have and know the true doctrine of Christ in the first place; and then according to Christ's doctrine judge all other teaching, whether it agrees with and is built on the true foundation or not. For as he requires his Christians to beware of false teachers, and thus constitutes them judges, yea, commands them to prove and judge all doctrines, he also demands that they be wise and intelligent Christians, who know what the true doctrine is, and can distinguish between it and the false. For such testing and judging of doctrine must not be according to their own thoughts, or according to their own shrewdness or boast of the Spirit of holiness and the like. As the Pope with his councils falsely claims the only right to judge everything, and that everyone is bound to submit to his judgment, on the ground that they say they have the Holy Spirit, and cannot err. On the contrary we must have a sure, clear rule by which to judge, which is called the Word of Christ. This alone must be the great standard and test, as I have said often enough.

³⁷ But since the multitudes of hearers are not all so intelligent and informed as to be able to make a clear distinction, and as sect spirits conceal themselves for a time among the true sheep, cover themselves with their wool and pretend to hold with the true Christians, and teach nothing but God's Word, which the true Church teaches; therefore Christ here adds another thought, by which he teaches how we are to examine and know them, namely, by their fruits. And he warns us not to act hastily and accept whatever is offered us as God's Word; but we should first well consider, inquire and investigate whether it is according to God's true Word, as the Bereans did, Acts 17:11. Again, you are to inquire as to the kind of fruit such doctrine produces; for the fruits cannot long be concealed, but must show themselves and let themselves be seen, as Christ here says: "*Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?*" And: "*The corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit.*"

³⁸ But he does not speak here chiefly of fruits which are coarse and readily perceived, so that everyone, though not a Christian, can easily judge and know them, and even before the world are publicly condemned sins and vices; but especially of the fruits of false doctrine Christ here speaks, which do not publish before the world the public works of an evil or criminal life, but present a fine appearance, (otherwise no one would be deceived), and yet they are opposed to God's Word. Such fruits are not difficult for a Christian to know and to judge, when he diligently considers and judges them according to God's Word and command. For here reason alone is not sufficient to investigate these things; but a spiritual understanding is necessary, which is able to distinguish what is, and is not, in harmony with the sure and clear teachings of holy Writ, or else a man would be deceived by the beautiful show of reason and human wisdom, with which all sects chiefly adorn and sell themselves, so that the fruits and life built on false doctrine, are regarded as genuine holiness.

³⁹ So Popery and even Mohammed make a fine show with their mockery and worship, which they call a holy life, and hence conduct themselves in an exceptional way and manner, do not eat, drink or clothe themselves like other people, which they regard as great severity, earnestness and discipline, and call it the service of God and the way to heaven. With this name and pretended worship, holy life, great devotion and good intentions, reason is easily blinded and taken captive, so that it cannot judge such things as evil fruit. Hence more is needed here than the understanding and judgment of reason, namely, that a person hold and estimate all life that false spirits regard good to be against God's Word and command, which is the rule of all works and life that are good and pleasing to God.

This rule shows the difference between the hypocritical works and fruits of false doctrine, and the good, honest works of the true doctrine. For it will readily appear that the works and life of hypocrites and false teachers do not agree and harmonize with God's work.

⁴⁰ Christ himself notes and censures the doctrine and life of the scribes and Pharisees because of their fruits, that they forsook God's commandment and put in its place their own works and worship; yea, they verily abolished the commandments of God by their traditions. Just so has Popery also done, which did not only abolish one, but almost all God's commandments, and instead not only taught and introduced something else, so that God's command was no longer esteemed, and their own works held much higher, and they taught and practiced in their lives just the contrary, as I have abundantly demonstrated elsewhere.

⁴¹ For this is certainly the character of all sect spirits; they cannot avoid it, they must produce something of their own and different from God's Word, and to boom it, so that it has a much greater reputation and appearance, and thus God's Word and command take a second place. This is already a sure sign that their doctrine is false. As the Pope with his own doctrine praises his own worship and holy life, that his spiritual order and monasticism are much higher and better than other lives and works in the common vocations, where they live according to God's Word. Again, they invent works which they call works of supererogation, superfluous works, which they pretend are much more costly and higher, than the works of the ten commandments of God.

Thus all other religious tendencies act, aside from the true doctrine of the Scriptures, as Mohammed of the Turks, the Talmud of the Jews, as also our Anabaptists, are almost the same; all forsake and abandon the true works and life God's Word requires and urges, and instead slaves after other hypocritical holiness with special works and writings, wearing grey frocks, looking sad, abstaining from wine, afflicting their body with remarkable fasting, repeating many and long prayers, and the like.

⁴² Therefore, I say, do not allow anyone to cause you to gape in astonishment, or to make a continual noise in your presence with the false appearance and erring trash of great and excellent works, holiness, etc.; but come hither with such fruits to the true light which is God's Word, from which we must learn and know what God requires and calls a true and good life, and according to it conclude both what is a good tree and good fruit, or what is the contrary. It avails nothing, what you may think is great, beautiful and precious. But if you would not err and be deceived, you must come to God's Word, that you may not fancy but hear and know what God says is right, good and pleasing to him.

⁴³ This is said in general of the fruits of false teaching, which indeed appear precious, and yet are evil at heart. Besides these, however, there are other fruits that are coarse and easier to recognize. And Christians have this advantage that they can also publicly and practically discern and overthrow them, as the real and legitimate fruits of the doctrine and lies of the devil.

⁴⁴ For every sect has always had one or more particular hobbies and articles which are manifestly wrong and can easily be discerned to be of the devil, who publicly teach, urge and defend them as right, certain and necessary to believe or to keep. For the spirit of lies cannot so conceal himself, but that he must at last put forth his claws, by which you can discern and observe the ravenous wolf. Of this you have an example and testimony in all the well known fanatics and false spirits; as in our time the Anabaptists, of whom it is manifest that they are wrong in their teaching concerning Christ, faith and the sacraments. They regard baptism as a common, naked, empty sign, despise the external spoken and written Word and Scripture, pretend to have special revelations independent of the

witness of God's Word. They disgrace and rend asunder holy wedlock, because they teach: a man may indeed leave his wife who is not of his faith, and take another, one or more. Again, they would make all property common, acknowledge no civil authority or government, nor approve of it, except what is of their special faith, etc.; as in former times the Manichean heretics also advocated the same theories.

⁴⁵ Therefore, it must follow that such people come forth with gross errors, by which their spirit is easily discovered. For as they taught that there can be no civil authority except that which is holy and Christian (this means that of their own faith), by which they have already withdrawn all obedience, and claim the right and power to oppose the government, and even to overthrow it with violence and put themselves in its place, as Thomas Muenzer and the Muenster prophets for this reason publicly undertook to do. And because they desire property to be generally and equally distributed; again, because they forsake their wives and take others; from this it also follows that they might grab into the goods and possessions of other people, steal and rob whatever they wish and can. Again, that as often as they desire they can abandon their wives, take others and abandon them in turn, and thus carry on among themselves all debauchery, shame and vice. Behold, here you observe both, in doctrine and in life, there is nothing but evil, rotten, bad fruit, which cannot be hid, but must finally become public, so that the tree may be known by it.

⁴⁶ Fruit like this you will surely find as the result of all doctrine and belief, not of the pure Word of God. I will not speak here of Mohammed's Koran, for he is entirely too gross with abominable, blasphemous and shameful lies, together with the permission of public murder, whoredom, debauchery, the dissolving of wedlock, without saying anything of all his other disgraceful abominations and deceptions. It would also take too long to relate the sorrowful fruits of all popery, but it is fully treated elsewhere.

⁴⁷ I will omit the papal doctrines which are somewhat subtle, that they do not correctly teach the ten commandments, and out of what these require they have formed their own decrees, which before God no one is in duty bound to do, except those who would be perfect and do something special and superfluous, etc. In like manner they have taught nothing correctly of the Gospel and faith in Christ, which first of all must be known and urged in the churches, how hearts may possess true and certain comfort; but directly contrary to the faith and comfort of Christ, they have so misled the people that, if they already believed in Christ and did everything, nevertheless, they should and must still doubt concerning grace. Again, I will not speak of what public, shameful, unchristian abomination and idolatry they carried on in their mass, the invocation of departed saints, indulgences, lies and frauds about purgatory; which are all evidently fruits by which the tree may indeed be known, for these are no sweet grapes or figs, but are mere sour, bitter late grapes, wild plums and berries.

⁴⁸ But only observe the grossest doctrines they themselves cannot beautify with paint, how they proceed publicly and without shame against God's Word and command, when they, for instance, declare the children free from the authority and obedience of their parents as soon as they only think of becoming priests, monks or nuns; when they against the will of their parents confirm the marriage vow or again dissolve it. In like manner they forbid young people to marry, whom they have enticed to become priests or to enter a cloister, and compel them to live without hope of marriage, and thereby have filled the world with disgraceful, unutterable debauchery, shame and vice, and have plunged souls into the bonds and destruction of the devil; therefore St. Paul also in 1 Timothy 4:1-3 because of such fruit condemns those forbidding to marry, and calls it the doctrine of devils.

⁴⁹ What is still more shameful to hear in Christendom, they go to work and want to defend their shameless action with self-condemned consciences, and even at the present day they are bold to say that their public whoredom and scandalous life is not so bad that a poor priest should marry a wife so that he may not be compelled to live unchaste with an evil condemned conscience. Yes, all this they confirm besides by persecution, murder and bloodshed of poor, pious and harmless people, only because they marry, or celebrate the sacrament according to the institution of Christ, and do not all worship the lies and abominations of the Pope in opposition to God's Word. Besides, in all this they claim to be doing right, and want to pass as obedient members and leaders of the Christian Church. And those who censure or oppose them, they curse and condemn, and command to be destroyed with fire and sword as the worst heretics.

⁵⁰ Tell me, now, if these are not public, known fruits of the corrupt tree, which is the real Antichrist doctrine and government, the sediment of all the infernal poison of the devil? For what else can it be but the devil's herd, who condemn and murder the people in the name of the Church for no other reason, than because they preach or confess and obey God's Word? And yet they claim to be doing right! For God has not commanded to persecute and murder pious, harmless people; but to praise, honor and treat them well, especially those who keep God's Word and commandments. Without any doubt the Christian Church does and observes God's Word. Wherefore it is an easy matter for every Christian to know and to judge what kind of spirits they are, and no great skill nor further questions nor disputations are needed, if one only distinguishes the boasting or the name from the fruit.

⁵¹ We should answer for ourselves the cries and blasphemies of the Papists against our doctrine, which they desire to criticize as to its fruits from this Gospel and conclude: Because evil fruit is also seen among many of our people, therefore our doctrine is also false and wrong. But they call that evil fruit, because we will not, like they, obey the Pope, and observe all the diabolical nonsense of his decrees and the doctrines of monks, which are nothing but evil fruits of the rotten tree, mere human prattle, yes, the doctrine of devils, on account of which they persecute and would gladly murder us all; or wherever they can discover anything to show that among us also there are wicked rogues who do not live as they should, but rob, steal and commit adultery; or when some of our people who at first held to us and afterwards gave offense and produced factions and heresy.

⁵² True, Papists are unworthy of an answer from us on these things. For we have proved enough against them, that both their doctrine is wrong, and their life, which they regard as holiness, is only corrupt fruit, because it is against God's Word. Besides they claim to have defended their public idolatry, lies and disgraceful life as right and virtuous. Wherefore, by this Gospel they are already condemned as a corrupt, useless tree along with their fruit. And we should not suffer them, so publicly self-condemned, to judge our doctrine or its fruits, because they are not the judges who should or are able to do it. For wherever they as it were could censure us in the highest degree, they do no more than seek for the mote in our eyes, and do not want to see the beam in their own eyes.

⁵³ On the contrary we can easily prove before the whole world, that our doctrine is not our own forged trifles or dreams, but the Scriptures and the plain Word of God. We also teach not to accept, believe or observe anything else as necessary unto salvation. From this the good fruits are also manifest, which harmonize with the doctrine, with our baptism and faith. For we claim and know that in baptism we are cleansed by the blood of Christ and receive the forgiveness of sins and the grace of God. Through such faith we also experience comfort and joy of conscience against the terrors of sin and death, and, God be praised, we see with our own eyes many pious Christians joyfully leave this

world in this comfort and faith, and publicly bear witness to the same by their confession and death. This is surely a fruit of the Holy Spirit and of faith.

⁵⁴ Moreover, we teach how everyone should live and behave in his earthly calling, according to the Word and commandment of God, that he should avoid sin, obey God, be chaste and patient, serve his neighbor and do good. Such a doctrine can in itself bring forth no corrupt fruit, and no one can justly be offended at it, and some are even thereby compelled to live a better life. That all do not live in harmony with it, and many among us are yet wicked, unthankful and false Christians, cannot be attributed to the Gospel; for it does not indeed allow of wickedness, but censures and opposes it. But the real cause of it is the devil, for this he has always done to the true Church and God's children, and thus sows his tares among the good wheat.

But because of this the good seed and its fruit, that is, the Word of God and true Christians, do not become evil. Just as a good apple tree does not become evil, because the noxious insects and caterpillars destroy some of its fruit. Otherwise you would have to censure and condemn the doctrine of Christ and the Apostles, because even among them there was a Judas, and many of their disciples became false Apostles and factious spirits, as St. Paul before had prophesied, 2 Timothy 3:4, that among themselves there would arise false teachers; and St. John in his first Epistle, 1 John 2:19, confesses: *"They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us."*

⁵⁵ Therefore the Gospel is falsely blamed, because among some to whom it is preached factions and heresies arise, and many misuse it; and although we must endure such things among us, as even St. Paul was obliged to do in his churches, yet for all this we neither approve nor allow it; but punish and oppose it as much as possible, so as either to improve or put away from us everything that is against sound doctrine. This the Papists and other sects will not do, because they cannot. For their doctrine in itself is neither good nor honest, and for this reason can bring forth no good fruit.

"Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven: but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven."

⁵⁶ This is exactly what was just said, that it depends not upon boasting, and one should pay no attention to what men pretend with beautiful sacred names, of God, of Christ, of the kingdom of God, of the honor of God, the worship of God and the like. For all this is but to say: Lord, Lord! But you should give heed to what God himself says and requires. For whoever would enter the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God, must not only use the names and words, about which people can speak and boast; but he must also do what God wants done in his kingdom.

⁵⁷ If we are to do his will, we must first know for a certainty what it is, and how to do it. This our own wisdom and thoughts do not teach, or all men, heathen and Turks, could do it as well, and every fanatical spirit would come and pretend that whatever pleases him was God's will, just as the monks have hitherto taught us, it is God's will which brings you into the kingdom of heaven that you wear a grey cap, and worship St. Christopher, Franciscus, Barbaras or others.

⁵⁸ Therefore, we must in this case hear God's Word alone, which reveals and shows plainly unto us, what the will of God the Father is. First, that he has sent his only begotten Son into the world, to reconcile us sinners unto God by his death, and without our merits to purify and sanctify us through his blood, and this he has proclaimed to everyone by the Gospel, and requires you to believe and accept it. As Christ himself declares the same in plain words, John 6:40: *"And this is the will of my*

Father, that everyone that beholdeth the Son, and believeth on him, should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day.”

⁵⁹ In the next place, when we have received such grace and salvation, have been baptized into Christ and believe, his will is that we should afterwards live accordingly, obey God and do what is commanded us in the ten commandments, and everyone in his calling confess God’s Word, honor and support it, avoid and flee from sin, and be good, patient, chaste, modest, kind, faithful and true, etc.

⁶⁰ This he will not only have preached or spoken by the mouth, but done in the heart and in the deed. Consequently, whoever neglects this or teaches, believes and does the contrary, should also know that he has not done God’s will, and is judged already, that he does not belong to the kingdom of heaven, because he is without faith and love. And it will not help him to boast of Christ as though he served him so faithfully, preached so much and did great wonders. On the other hand, if you earnestly do this will of God, cheerfully hear and believe God’s Word and live in his obedience, to honor him and benefit your neighbor; and although you should fall but rise again, and not continue impenitent, to defend your sins, to boast against God’s Word or maliciously to persecute your neighbor, then you can bravely and joyfully say before God: Lord, Lord, and comfort yourself with the Kingdom of heaven which God has given you. Whether on this account the world reviles and condemns you or puts you under the ban in the name of the Christian Church, should not trouble you. For now you hear that God does not require or wish you to seek praise and a name when you say: Lord, Lord’, But you are to seek the deed and fruit of him, who does the will of God. Then be directed according to this rule, and measure all doctrine and life with it which comes to you in the name and praise of God, if you desire not to be deceived.

⁶¹ Various and many spirits have come to myself, so that I may here confess to my own experience, they really tempted me with great, excellent words, to lead me in a different course, and at times presented it so plausible that I was almost brought to a stand, and had I not been cautious, I would also have been misled. I could do nothing else in order to remain undeceived and remove such apparitions of the devil, than as the prophet David teaches, Psalm 119:105: *“Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and light unto my path.”* Then I went to this light which teaches me what the will of God is, and compared it to these talkers and spiritual boasters, whether it harmonizes with the clear doctrine of the ten commandments and faith in Christ. When I found this was not the case, I immediately cast it away, and bravely upon this admonition of Christ judged and condemned it as evil, useless fruit and a corrupt tree. Do thou likewise, and hold fast to the true standard by which all doctrine must be judged, which is God’s Word and command, then you can neither err nor fail, and can overthrow the boast and pretensions of all false spirits. For Christ by this sentence: Not he who saith: *“Lord, Lord,”* but he who does the will of my Father, directs and leads us alone to his Word, that we may know that those alone are good fruits who walk according to that Word.

History

The Elector of Saxony, Frederick the Wise (1463-1525), requested that Martin Luther write a collection of sermons for each Sunday of the year for the benefit of ministers and the common people—those that have the Spirit—to exhort them in sound doctrine but also to convict the gainsayers who oppose the Word and true faith.

This sermon originates from what is commonly called Luther's *Church Postil* collection. He wrote most of the sermons between 1521 and 1527, then supervised editorial assistance with Stephan Roth (1492-1546) until 1535 and Caspar Creuziger (1504-1548) until 1544. During that entire period over seventy-five editions of the collection were published. Many more editions were published after Luther's death in 1546. It was translated into English by John Humberger (1840-1906) and edited by John Nicholas Lenker (1858-1929) and published in 1904. Except for his catechisms, Luther's postils were his most influential writings for believers.

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