**St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)**
**Trinity 8 – July 26, 2026**
**Matthew 7:15-23 – Beware of False Prophets**
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Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ! Amen.

Today, the Lord Jesus exhorts us to beware of false prophets. False preachers. Wolves in sheep's clothing. Those who would lead the flock astray and devour the sheep. He says, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits."

Now, most people these days seem to think that, "You will know them by their fruits," means you should check if your pastor is a holy man, if he's an upright moral example, humble and honest. And only if he meets a certain moral standard, then listen to what he has to say.

But you will never find a pastor who has no sin. Except for one. There is only one true pastor, the Chief Shepherd. Jesus Christ alone is without sin. Yet he sends out undershepherds to preach the word in his name, however imperfect they may be.

Now, it's true. A pastor should be humble and honest and holy. He should be a good example to the flock, because he represents Christ. As the apostle Paul told the young pastor Timothy, "An overseer must be above reproach." Therefore, openly unrepentant men cannot be pastors, nor can those who bring public disgrace to the church and the name of Christ by their conduct.

Also, the Bible has many stern warnings for pastors, because they will be judged with greater strictness. Jesus said in the Gospel reading today, when he warned pastors everywhere, "On 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?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"

But Jesus isn't saying how you should judge pastors. He's saying how he will judge them, on the Last Day. Jesus is saying that he will condemn the false prophets because they all trusted in their works. They will appeal to the works they did in his name, how they prophesied, and cast out demons, and did many mighty deeds. But that will all be irrelevant. It won't matter.

If a pastor wants to be saved on Judgment Day, then he must come before Christ like everyone else. Not on the basis of his own good works, but on the basis of faith. I am surely a sinner, the very chief. And I surely have no hope apart from the blood of Jesus that he shed for me.

The point is: You are never going to find a pastor who bears the perfect fruit of holiness. That is not the standard. But what should you look for instead? What is the true fruit of a true prophet?

When Jesus says, "You will know them by their fruits," he is not talking about checking a pastor for his outward holiness, his external appearances. The fruits you should be looking for are not his sin or lack thereof. No, it may sound obvious, but the fruits of a prophet are his prophecies. What he says, what he preaches in the name of Christ.

This is the standard by which Jesus wants you to decide whether a pastor is worth listening to or not. You should judge him by what he says, the content of his words. Is what he preaches in the name of God in accord with God's Word, or not? Good fruit only comes from good trees, so does this pastor pluck fruit to give you from the good tree of the Bible, the word of Christ? Or does he pluck bad fruit of his own opinions from the bad tree of his own sin-stained heart?

In other words, what matters most – what you should really be checking for in a pastor – is his doctrine. What he believes, teaches, and confesses. Of course, if a pastor truly believes the Word of God, if he believes sound doctrine, then he will also strive to live a godly life. And if he isn't practicing what he preaches, then by all means talk to him about it, like you would with any other fellow Christian. But the primary fruit by which you judge him should be the doctrine that he preaches. Is he preaching the Bible faithfully, or not?

Does this man preach the whole counsel of God, the law and the gospel, properly applied? Does he call unrepentant sinners to repentance, and does he comfort repentant sinners with the love of Jesus? Does he tell them that Jesus died for them to set them free, that their sin is covered, if only they believe? Then he is a true prophet.

But if he preaches anything contrary, if he relaxes the least of the commandments, or if he refuses to comfort repentant sinners with the Gospel, then he is a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Now, let's consider some examples of wolves in sheep's clothing, so we can watch out for them. Some preachers – and this is very common in American Christianity – some preachers love to talk about practical wisdom. They give life advice about financial well-being, raising children, and human relationships. These things are all good, and they're in the Bible. But if that is the only thing they preach, then they are false preachers, withholding the Gospel. The heart of everything in God's Word is Jesus, God incarnate, and his atoning death to appease the wrath of God against sinners, and his triumphant resurrection, to bring us life in his name.

As another example, consider the pope and the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church. They claim to preach by the authority of Christ, yet they add requirements to God's grace. They say that in order to receive God's mercy, you must not only believe in Jesus, but you must also live a holy life. Thus they withhold the free gift of the Gospel from sinners who need to hear it.

Other preachers today deny that the Bible really means what it says concerning sin, like homosexuality, or transgenderism. They claim to be very loving and accepting, but they deceive people into believing that what God has called sin is not sin. Thus they fail to call unrepentant sinners to repentance, so they may receive forgiveness in Christ

Other preachers deny what the Bible says about the sacraments. They say that baptism is only a personal act of commitment, not God's work of salvation, and they say that infants can't be baptized. Also, they say that when Jesus instituted his Holy Supper, he didn't really mean what he said about it. Instead, they teach that the bread and wine are not his true body and blood, they only symbolize and remind us about his death. Thus, they deny the Gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit in the church through the means of grace, to bring you the forgiveness of Jesus.

Others say that you don't need the church at all, or preaching, or the sacraments. They say you can find God on your own, through in your emotions. You can feel his presence in worship, you can feel him talking to you directly. But sadly, this kind of preaching turns people away from Jesus, away from the church, away from where he has promised to be found. Christ is found only in the external Word, and in the forgiveness of his objective means of grace.

On the other hand, quite often, the good fruit of faithful preaching can be hard to swallow. It might not taste sweet at first. It might not be uplifting, it might contain correction and reproof, not what you wanted to hear. But don't be offended. This is still God's Word for your good.

The prophet Jeremiah was a faithful prophet, yet what he preached was very unpleasant to hear. He warned that disaster was coming upon Jerusalem, that God had resolved to punish his people, because of their continual rebellion and idolatry. God was planning to send the army of Babylon to destroy the Jerusalem, and burn the temple to the ground, and discipline his people for their unrepentant sin, seventy years of exile.

Nobody wants to hear that. The people in Jeremiah's day much preferred to listen to false prophets, prophets like Hananiah, who said the opposite. These false prophets were very uplifting and optimistic. They said, "No disaster shall come upon you." But they were wolves in sheep's clothing.

So God sent Jeremiah to expose them. "'Thus says the Lord of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord. They say continually to those who despise the word of the Lord, 'It shall be well with you'; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, 'No disaster shall come upon you.'"

Really, God was doing a beautiful, merciful, loving thing by sending Jeremiah to his people to warn them about disaster. Although Jeremiah's sermons were hard to swallow, it was because God wanted them to listen, and repent, and be spared. God wants all people to turn and repent, so that he might forgive and heal them.

So Jesus warns you today: Beware of false prophets. Do not be taken in by those who speak what sounds pleasant and uplifting, but check their words carefully against the Word of God.

For false prophets are sure to come. The devil loves to dress himself up. He masquerades as an angel of light. And his false prophets love to quote the Bible. They are very attractive. They will dress up their words so beautifully and enticingly that you will think you never heard a better sermon in all your life. Also, they know how to lead a holy, externally praiseworthy life. They seem so honest and humble and winsome that you will think they must be from God.

But do not be deceived. Learn to recognize them by their fruit. Carefully study and learn God's Word, to be well prepared. Study the catechism. Don't be lazy hearers of the Word, but listen diligently, so you can carefully examine everything you hear. Know the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the

words of the Lord concerning Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar. Then you can check what you hear against the catechism and the doctrine you've learned.

If you are cautious and on guard and don't fall for everything, but constantly search the Word, then you will be safe. But those who are careless about the catechism and learning sound doctrine, who think they already know it all, such people are doomed. They're about to be torn in pieces by wolves.

As for me, your pastor, I want to be a faithful shepherd for you. I want to teach you sound doctrine, to protect you from the wolves. And I pray constantly and fervently that I may never mislead you, but that I may always speak the truth of God's Word rightly, and also live a holy life according to it. And I pray that I would merely be the mouthpiece, but that the Lord Jesus, the only true shepherd, would always remain the one who speaks.

For he alone speaks the perfect words of eternal life. Grace and truth are found on his lips alone. He is the one who brings back the straying, and binds up the injured, and nourishes the weak. I am merely his instrument. And yet, it is my privilege and joy to forgive and love and restore you, by his command and in his name, so that you might be one flock, under him, the one true Shepherd. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.