

Beware of False Prophets

Martin Luther

Matthew 7:15–23 · Church Postil (Lenker edition)

15 Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. 16 Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? 17 Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a 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 Wherefore 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 which is in heaven. 22 Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? 23 And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity. Matthew 7:15-23

[1] Christ our Lord preached this part of the Gospel in concluding his long sermon on the mount. After teaching his disciples all things necessary for them to know, he concludes by warning them against false prophets, as all good ministers are accustomed to do in closing their sermons, exhorting the people to abide in the true doctrine, and to beware of false teachers. As Paul also did when he departed from Ephesus, saying among other things: "Take heed unto yourselves, and to all the flock, in which the Holy Ghost hath made you bishops, to feed the church of the Lord, which he hath 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 everyone night and day with tears." Acts 20:28-31

[2] Thus time and again, in all his Epistles, he adds an admonition, that they should beware of false teachers and false apostles, as Peter also warns us in his second Epistle, 2:1-3: "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 truth shall be evil spoken of. And in covetousness shall they with reigned words make merchandise of you: whose sentence now from of old lingereth not, and their damnation slumbereth not." So there shall at all times be false prophets and teachers.

[3] In this manner also Christ here proceeds. Having finished his sermon he warns and admonishes his disciples and the people, ever to hold fast to what he told them, and watch that they be not misled by false teachers, and says: "Beware of false prophets."

[4] In the first place we perceive from this that we must be prepared, because it will always happen, that after the true ministers come the false ones; yea, they will indeed even enter alongside of them and mingle with them. What other need was there that Christ should so faithfully warn us, saying: Beware, take care; if he had known that the doctrine would always remain pure? Therefore he warns us to be assured that we will have false prophets, and does this especially in closing this sermon. We have a similar example in the book of Judges 2:10, when they had died, whom God gave the people as teachers and judges, who knew what the will of God was, what was acceptable and not acceptable to him, then immediately the people of Israel began to turn from God and his Word. One worshiped this idol, another that, and they were divided into factions so that they fell from the true doctrine, and departed from the ways of their fathers.

[5] So it happened in the days of the Apostles. Then the church was still pure, but as soon as they died who held fast to the pure doctrine, then came the false prophets and the evil spirit, who desired to change everything, as the Epistles of St. Paul sufficiently show. And inasmuch as this is so, and as we can expect nothing else, Christ our Lord warns us here as a faithful shepherd and bishop should, that we beware, so that when the Gospel comes, that we hold firmly to it and not depart from it, though it cost our life and our treasures. For it cannot be otherwise, as the time passes than that there will be changes.

[6] Thus it will also happen with us. God be praised; we, as well as other cities, now have the Gospel in all its richness and purity, as men have never had it since the times of the Apostles. But as soon as we and others, who now assist in preaching it, are no longer with you, you will have other and false preachers, for they already begin to make their appearance. May the Lord consume them with the Spirit of his mouth. 2 Thessalonians 2:8. And blessed are they, who in accordance with our Gospel lesson will be diligently on their guard and will not believe every wind of doctrine, but will remain constantly firm in what they have learned. This Christ

teaches first by the word, "Beware," be warned, as though he would say: You certainly are now in possession of it.

[7] Here you may say: Why does the Lord do this? Why does he permit false prophets to come among the faithful, and follow the true ministers? Is he not strong and powerful enough to prevent it, so that the Gospel might remain pure and in all its force? Verily, he could indeed do this; but he does not, and for this reason, that he might prove those who are his, and punish the unthankful. For St. Paul says, 1 Corinthians 11:19: "For there must be also factions among you, that they that are approved may be made manifest among you;" that is, in order that those whose faith has been proved may become known, so that their spirit and word may appear and find a field of influence.

[8] Since God gives us his Word, his Spirit and his gifts, he does not want us to be lazy, sleepy or idle. For if you have the true Word and the right understanding of it, the world will rise to oppose you. Then, on the other hand, the devil will labor to tear you from it, so that not only the tyrants of the world will persecute it with the sword, but also our own reason and the wisest heads in the world, in order that God may exercise you in his Word, and give work to the Spirit whom he has bestowed upon you, that you may learn that God's wisdom is more excellent than the wisdom of this world, and that God's strength is stronger than the strength and power of this world, which you will not be able to learn without a struggle like this.

[9] When God permits a faction to oppose thee, he would thereby stir thee up, saying: Defend yourself, grasp firm hold of the Word and test God's wisdom and the powers of his Word, and learn how great is the folly of this world. Thus the power and wisdom of God's Word will become manifest, that you may learn that it cannot be conquered by human power and wisdom; but that it will conquer all power, and put to shame all knowledge and wisdom, in order to awaken the truth and to show forth what is right, that the people may experience it. This is one reason God sends divisions and sects among us, who crowd in edgewise, as though they were useful and served to make the Word, the truth and spirit better and clearer; however in other respects, divisions and sects do harm.

[10] Another reason is to punish the unthankful, who will not accept the Word, lest they be converted and saved, as Christ says to the Jews in 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." And as St. Paul says, 2 Thessalonians 2:10-11: "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.”

[11] Thus severely God punishes this sin, which we regard so lightly, for he punishes it with blindness and error, which are the greatest sins on earth. Men regard it as a small matter, that we now again have the Gospel by God’s grace. For how many are there who ever thank God for it? We forget it, cast it to the winds and become lazy and careless. It is approved by none; no one tastes it; no one lifts up his hands in thankfulness to God for it. We are so very richly overloaded with the Gospel that we become satiated with it, and St. Paul has rightly prophesied, 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 draw away their ears from the truth, and turn aside unto fables.”

[12] Here and there throughout the whole Scriptures we see how greatly it offends God, who regards it as the greatest sin when his Word is despised; which is so dear and precious, that it cost him the blood of his own dear Son, and we cast it to the wind as though it were of little importance. For this reason he sends us the severest calamities, which cannot be compared to the present calamity now going on in the world, that during and after the peasants’ war so many have been slain, of which there seems to be no end, for who knows when it will cease? Yet all this is but playwork in comparison to the misfortune when men are hardened, blinded and misled by false prophets, by which heaven is closed against them and hell opens to receive them, and everlasting life is lost forever. What does it matter, as die we must at any rate, if we are killed by the sword? But that the soul should be forever given to the devil, this is an eternal calamity, an everlasting misfortune and torment.

[13] I would gladly prevent it, if I could, by preaching, praying and writing. Now God has begun to visit us with the temporal and bodily calamity of the sword, but a far greater plague will come when the Holy Gospel is taken away from Germany. Then false teachers will be sent and will come to us. One will teach this, the other that. Then the kingdom of heaven will be locked up, and the false preachers will not allow it to be opened. On this account it would indeed be well worthwhile for us to pray earnestly. But our hearts are cold, for our walls are not yet on fire. Nevertheless, the devil intends to drown all Germany in blood and take away the Gospel, unless he be prevented and hindered by the prayers of pious Christians.

[14] When the devil saw he could not accomplish anything by the Pope and his false apostles, he now begins to rage through the peasants and the rebels, and will entirely take the Gospel

from us and make us its enemies, and afterwards cut off our heads and cast our souls into hell. For this reason I give warning, that we should not think so little of this matter but open our eyes, not regarding it merely as the word of a man. It is a precious Word, and if we sleep and snore and do not keep awake to hear it, we need not be angry when he strikes us on the head by sending us false prophets, but remember that we have richly deserved it.

[15] Already there are but few who stand steadfastly. Sectarianism is rampant, and few there be who contend against it and preserve the true doctrine; their names could all be written on a little card. What shall come to pass when once it breaks out with force? Therefore let no one consider it child's play, for the Word is not an insignificant Word. It stands for something. The words of Christ leave an impression; they are meant for the whole world, when he says: Beware, be warned! that we receive the Word with fear and trembling hearts. So you have now heard why divisions and sects arise, namely, that those who are tempted and tried may become the more glorious, and that the others, the unthankful ones who despise the Word, may be punished. The Gospel lesson further says: "Who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves."

[16] No one sends them. They come of themselves. This is the true description of false prophets, that they force themselves into the ministry. Some, in order to find their bread and butter, which I do not consider of much importance, for even there they will not find a paradise. For those who intrude into this office with the pretension that they do so on account of Christian love, for the sake of the truth, and because the Holy Spirit urges them, and that they do it for the sake of love and the salvation of souls, and that they seek nothing else but their salvation; beware of all such people, for the devil has most certainly sent them, and not God. For those whom God sends are called or compelled to it. They do not boast greatly of themselves. Yet, when they do boast, they prove it by miracles. Hence beware, because the Lord says, they will come, not being sent or called, but they come and the devil calls them.

[17] But do they not boast they have the Holy Spirit? I answer: Whoever would persuade you that the Holy Spirit moves him, and that he does it from a Christian suggestion, say to him: As you boast so much of the Spirit, give me a proof. You bear witness of yourself, and the Scriptures have forbidden me to believe you on your own testimony alone, for even Christ, the living Son of God would not bear witness of himself, as we read in the Gospel of John 5:31f. But when he did so he also did miracles besides, so that men might know that his Word and doctrine were true. And inasmuch as you say you have the Holy Spirit, give me a proof of

your Spirit; prove it by real signs that a man may believe you, for here a divine witness is necessary to prove the Spirit of God, so that there may be two of you, yourself and God. This is a divine call, and unless it is forthcoming, cast the other away and let it go to pieces.

[18] And even though I grant that such a one is really a true spirit, and has the Holy Spirit; even then you must not hear him. Nor will God be greatly angered at you for this, as he has commanded you to keep his ordinances, to ask for two witnesses, and to call for a miracle. For if he sends you one with a true spirit, he does it to test you, to see whether you will keep his ordinances, receiving no one unless he gives you a proof beforehand. Therefore say: I do not want you, even though you have the right Spirit. For God desires thus to prove me, whether I will abide by his order. Hence he is also satisfied and well pleased, when you do not accept his Spirit. For he tests us by offering us the contrary, to see whether you on this account would depart from his Word. He acts like a father who plays with his child, whom he has given an apple and takes it away again, in order to see whether the child loves him or not.

[19] Then give heed here, whether he be right or wrong, and say: I will not go with you, I care not what you preach, I only ask whether you have been sent, or whether you came of yourself? If you came of yourself I will not hear you, even though you have the Holy Spirit. For the devil in the Gospel can also say: Let us alone; hold, "what have we to do with thee, Jesus, thou Nazarene? Art thou come to destroy us? I know thee who thou art, the Holy One of God." Mark 1:24. Thus the common crowd also cries out: Here is the true and faithful Word of God, which this man preaches, let us hear him. But see thou first whence he cometh. The devil also can preach, but he does it to provide himself an opportunity to win adherents. Then he comes forth and sows his poisonous seed, so that the condition becomes worse than in the beginning. Hence these are nothing but warnings, by which Christ warns us against those who come of themselves. Therefore wait, until they are sent or called. For he drives and urges those whom he wants, so that in short they must come whether they will or not.

[20] The other call is the request of the congregation or of the government to go. This is a call of love, which does not come down from heaven nor out of faith, but flows from love. For you and I owe it to each other to love our neighbor as ourselves. For when he needs my assistance and asks for it, I am in duty bound to come to his help, for the Word of God commands that I should serve my neighbor. Then this call does not require a miracle, because they themselves desire it, and the Word of God urges me thereto. This is to be in demand, to be called and to be driven. That which comes from heaven is called a sending, when the Holy Ghost comes

and performs miracles. To the others, whether they boast of the Spirit or the flesh, reply "I care nothing for that" As our fanatics at present boast, that they have devoured the Holy Spirit, feathers and all, and are thoroughly filled with the Spirit and say, that the Holy Ghost has spoken to them from heaven, and has revealed something special to them, and the like. I myself cannot boast very much of the Spirit. They become Spirit all too soon for me. I boast of the Spirit of love, otherwise I am nothing but a poor, carnal sinner. I too ought to know something of the Spirit of which they boast. But alas, they are all too highly spiritualized for me.

[21] However, what is this Christ says: They come in sheep's clothing? These sheep's clothing are, that they make an external exhibition of all things the true Christians and ministers teach. For we, who are the lambs of Christ, wear the sheep's wool. This is not only the works, the showy hypocritical life they lead, praying a great deal and wearing gray gowns, walking with downcast countenances, carrying a pater noster about their necks, fasting often and going to church a great deal; but the worst of all is that they make use of God's Word and the Holy Scriptures, which in the prophets are called God's wool and linen. For preaching together with admonition and Scripture passages are the true clothing with which they would adorn and array themselves, saying: Here is Christ, here is Baptism, here is the name of God, here is he who quotes the Scriptures, which is the Word of God, and immediately they add to all this God's name, God's Spirit and Christ.

[22] This then, is coming in sheep's clothing, namely, so to preach and to quote the Scriptures that it may appear as the true doctrine; for it is not said that they come in wolves' clothing, or with teeth and spears. They do not publicly preach anything destructive or without Scripture, otherwise people might recognize them, as for instance when they preached Aristotle in the high schools, and common law or the law of the emperor and said, "There is no God in Christianity." Now, however, they do not only adorn themselves with external works, but also with the Holy Scriptures, with which God clothes and covers our souls; for if they would not do this, the unthankful would not be thus blinded, and we would not be so wretchedly deceived.

[23] Therefore it is true as men say, the holy Bible is a book for heretics, that is, it is a book that heretics dare to claim for themselves most of all. For there is no other book which they so wickedly misuse, than just this very book. And there never was a heresy so bad or gross, that they did not try to patch up or cover with the Scriptures. Just as men say, God is the God of

rogues, because they, who are the largest crowd in the world, claim for themselves the name of God, not that God is to blame, but the rogues, who thus take the holy name of God in vain. Thus the holy Bible must be a book for heretics, not that the holy Bible is to blame, but the rogues, who so shamefully misuse it. Should I for this reason neglect the Bible and not read it? By no means! As men are accustomed to say in the proverb: "In God's name all misfortune begins," which is true. Well then, I will not use the name of God at all, and guard myself against misfortune. But what talk is this? What blame can attach to a name, which is given us in order that we might be saved? God will surely punish such rogues and knaves. Thus the Bible is a book for heretics, but I will not for this reason cast it away, but so much the more study and learn it, because these rogues oppose it.

[24] Therefore let now every person be thus well prepared and thoroughly equipped, that he may not so easily be led astray by their showy life, although they even attempt to quote Scripture to you, for ravening wolves are most certainly back of it. And although they think they feed and satisfy you, they actually rend you, destroy and devour you. However, without spiritual eyes no one will be able so soon to decide or judge of this matter. The crowd and common people will not do it; the largest crowd despises the Gospel and are unthankful, while only the smallest flock accept it and can appreciate it. I have often said, and will always say it, that the greatest and most difficult contest is, for a person to contend with the Scriptures against the Scriptures; to strike aside another man's sword and wrench it out of his fist, to slay him with his own sword; to take from him his weapon, and with it strike him again. This no one can accomplish, except he who is enlightened by the Holy Spirit, so as to be able to recognize these rogues.

[25] You have often heard from me the safest doctrine and rule, by which to prove the spirits, as John tells us in his first Epistle 1 John 4:1-3. "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but prove the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit 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: and this is the spirit of the Antichrist." The other rule is given by Paul in Romans 12:6: "Whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of our faith." That is, all teaching must harmonize and agree with faith alone, so that nothing else be taught but faith. It follows that he, who has not faith, does not know Christ, and cannot judge of doctrine, for to do this the carnal minded are not required, who are worldly wise and smart, but pious, spiritual hearts. Many say: Christ is a man who is the Son of God, born of a pure, chaste virgin, became man, died, and rose again

from the dead, and so forth; all this is nothing. But that he is Christ, that is, that he was given for us, without any of our works; that he without any of our merit has earned for us God's Spirit, and made us children of God, so that we might have a gracious God, and with him become lords over all things in heaven and on earth, and have eternal life besides through Christ: this is the faith, and this means rightly to know Jesus Christ. This is the touchstone, the level and the scales, by which all doctrine must be weighed, tried and judged. The others also know what to call Christ, that he is the Son of God, died, rose again from the dead, with what follows. For this is the real sheep's clothing.

[26] But pay attention to their dilemma: If they say Christ died for us, was buried and rose again and the like, then they must also conclude: therefore our works are of no avail. This point they will not touch, but flee from it, like the devil flees from incense or the cross, as it is said; although he does not really run away from it so very much. He permits them to preach that Christ was born, died and rose again, and sitteth at the right hand of his heavenly Father; but when in addition they also preach: thus and thus you must do, this and that you must omit; this is the devil who mingles his poison with the truth. As the Pope writes and puts on the sheep's clothing in his bulls, namely, that Christ by his death and shedding his blood has merited for us that we are the children of God and are saved, and have eternal life; but to all this he adds: Whoever is not obedient to the Roman church, is a child of perdition; but he, who is obedient and does what the church of Rome commands and appoints, shall be saved, his soul shall rise straight up to heaven. Does not the Pope require his rules to be more strictly observed than the Gospel? Only compare them and see. If the death of Christ does this, then my works cannot do it. It would be quite another matter if he would preach: You must obey me out of Christian love, but not to be saved thereby, for this the blood of Christ alone can do. But this nut he never tries to crack.

[27] Therefore I warn you once again, to think of this when I am no longer with you in the flesh, and closely observe their doctrine whether they preach Christ correctly, that is, whether they boast of their own works before God: then you will be able to judge. I often said and repeat it, that you will find them always requiring some good little deed, not thereby to serve the people, but in order to merit salvation, that whoever does and keeps this shall be saved, but he who does not observe and do this, shall be damned. Thus they force you to trust in works, as the fanatics drove the mob to break up images by saying: Whoever breaks an image or tears down a painting does a good work, and proves himself a Christian. Soon the crowd rushed forth, thrust and broke to pieces by the wholesale, for they all wanted to be Christians, just as

though the Jews, the heathen and the Turks, and the worst rogues could not do the same things.

[28] Such fanatics do not destroy confidence in works, but rather give more value to works and permit confidence in them to be retained. Work there, work here, only cut out of it all confidence and trust, and do not put your trust in works as in a god, but let them only serve your neighbor, that confidence in your works may be in your neighbor, that is, that he feels certain you will do him every kindness, and that you have like confidence in him. Your confidence for your salvation must rest alone in Christ, for which you dare not trust in your works a hair's breadth. When they preach thus, it agrees with faith. If it is according to the proportion of faith, then Christ is not annihilated nor broken to pieces, but remains whole in knowledge as he really is. And although the devil also pretends that he preaches Christ through his own apostles, do not believe him, he only seeks to win your soul through deceit and cunning, and will deceive you. Well, let this warning be sufficient; but it does not help any [among those who will not hear it]; [he who shall be lost, will be lost]. Yet it aids those who are to be reformed. Here follows the third proof and way of knowing the spirits, and reads: "Ye shall know them by their fruits."

[29] These fruits are their works and behavior. Yet spiritual eyes are needed to see this, that one may learn well to know the really good works, which Paul mentions to the Galatians 5:22, where he says: "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 5:19-21.

[30] Now, take heed rightly to distinguish works from one another. In all their works you will not find a single spark of love. You will indeed find that they are friendly within their own sect, calling one another Christians and brethren; but there is nothing in them but the very poison of the devil. They have neither mercy nor patience, nor friendship for anyone who is not of their sect. For if they could destroy us body and soul in an hour or a moment they would do it. This fruit flesh and blood do not see, but in the meantime, they wear gray gowns and belong to a quiet order, and observe the same rule and habit.

[31] These are not works of love; for works of love are such as are exercised toward the needy, and toward our enemies, when we are merciful to sinners, instruct and teach the ignorant,

and serve the poor bodily with our goods and honor, as Christ teaches in Matthew 25:35f. You will not find these works in any false prophet. Anyone may indeed conduct himself like a spiritual man by his extraordinary behavior, like barefooted and Carthusian monks do. But what benefit is all this to me? And that others break down cloisters and images, what good does that do their neighbor? All this merely makes a show and when you view it superficially there seems something in it; but there is no benefit in it. Love, however, requires works that will do some good.

[32] Now watch and see if the false prophets give anything to the poor. To be sure, they accept gifts, being greedy and stingy. But I have not yet seen any who give cheerfully, for they only want to have, and that we should give to them. Dear me, ye golden friends, who would not like this? You speak much of good works and a good life, and do not know what it is, namely, to be of use and benefit to your neighbor. From these fruits you may know them. Again, they do not only not assist anyone, nor help the poor, but rejoice and are glad at their neighbor's misfortunes. When one is in disgrace they will not protect him with their honor, nor help him out of his trouble, but plunge him still deeper down, spread the news and sing doggerels about him and laugh at him secretly besides.

[33] Again, when one falls into sin, they have no tender heart for him; their heart being hardened they enjoy their neighbor's fall and use it to set off their own goodness. What shall we say to sum up this matter? They have rough, bitter, poisonous hearts; they have a black, poisonous tongue, and can cut up everybody on their slaughter bench, give everyone a black mark and leave no one without blame; they judge, condemn and decry everyone, and think little of anyone's injury. Alas, what pious spirits we have here!

[34] Therefore open your eyes and see whether they do the works that are beneficial to men, and you will find out that you cannot gather grapes from thorns or figs from thistles. A good grape on the vine does not devour itself nor us, but is eaten; it is useful only and harms no one. But no one enjoys the thorns; they prick, and scratch and injure everyone. Mark then, whether they do such works which benefit others. That they wear gray gowns and shirts of haircloth, that they lie on woolen cloth, creep into a corner; for all this let the devil thank them! If, however, they would lend me money in my distress and open their purses, and lend corn to those who have neither flour nor bread, into whose homes the sun enters before bread; here they are not found. Give me a coat, something to eat and drink; visit me when I am sick;

comfort me in my sins; this might help me. Yes, you may wait until you find such a person, or come again in the morning!

[35] But to stand in the choir and howl and chant vociferously, to enjoy good easy days without work, to sleep, to feast and get drunk, all this they are willing to do. Oh! my dear, who could not do this? It would be easy to put a cap even on a donkey, girdle him with a rope, shave him a tonsure and stand him in a corner and make him fast and feast to the glory of the saints, so that in all things he may behave similarly to you and all your false works! So likewise, when I fall into disgrace, and become guilty of murder or adultery, there is no grace for me, and no one is so merciful as to help me quiet and better my conscience, but they laugh at me, and all the world must know it, and have grand books written about it.

[36] So in their whole body and soul, you will be unable to find one single good work. They are hateful, envious, stingy; such fruits of the flesh will ye observe in them. Let them quote the Scriptures and pretend to be holy as much as they please, only observe whether their doctrine harmonizes with the proof of faith; and see to it that Christ be not dethroned, that his knowledge remain entire and undisturbed, and in the third place see whether they exercise good works toward their neighbor or not. This they will doubtless omit, for the devil can do no good work. This is what Christ the Lord means when he adds: "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."

[37] Here we must notice what he says: "By their fruits ye shall know them." He does not say: Ye shall make them out of their fruits. For whoever made a pear tree out of a pear, or a cherry tree out of a cherry? It is, however, the law of nature that the tree should make the fruit, an apple tree the apple, and so forth. The tree is known by its fruits, but is not made by its fruits. Just as Abraham when he offered his son Isaac was previously good and obedient, yet, it was said to him, Genesis 22:12: "Now I know that thou fearest God." He does not say: Now you have become God-fearing; but by this work it is revealed and made known that you fear God.

[38] Hence these are two distinct things, to be or become something, and that something be made known, or revealed. There are many things that are known to God alone, but when it is revealed it also becomes known to man. Here Christ teaches that the fruits shall serve the purpose to know the tree, whether the tree be good or evil. Abraham became known by his works, as one who feared God and was pious and righteous. Therefore, before the fruits come they must be good, since they do nothing else but show forth the nature of the tree. To reveal a

thing is by far a different matter from the existence of the thing itself. So my external works aid nothing to the end, that I am or become good, but make known and reveal the good treasure, and the heart in which it lies concealed. For this treasure that lies concealed in the heart, God desires to make known, and not to be left concealed.

[39] Thus in so far the works make us good, pure and holy externally before the people, but not internally before God. For this Christ and faith alone must do. Speaking in this manner, you will speak correctly and distinctly. However, if anyone is so stiff-necked and stubborn that he will not allow himself to be instructed, let him go, for we cannot give good advice to such people, nor is such preaching meant for them; but we seek hearts gone astray, who eagerly desire to be good and to understand it correctly; they also accept our instruction, and to them we preach. Hence he further says: "A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit; neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit."

[40] The work righteous are corrupt trees. But do they not perform many good works? Indeed, what is a good work? Here let me ask, whether their hands, pockets, cellars and farms are at the service of mankind to help them in body and soul? But they cannot. Again, a good tree bringeth not forth evil fruit, that is, a Christian, be he ever so weak and helpless, he will do his neighbor no harm. Do not understand me to say that he cannot fall; for David also was a good tree, and yet he fell, 2 Samuel 12, but he did not become a corrupt tree. As long as a Christian is true and remains in the faith, you must not expect he will do anything to harm his neighbor, but much rather to help him. And if at times things should occur as with David, you should not be offended at them, for God permits such mishaps to occur, that his saints at times stumble and suffer, by which their faith may be strengthened and increased, and that they may learn their own weakness. So far as the tree is good, so little is the harm it does; and the more evil the tree is, the greater harm it does. We are not yet wholly good, but we labor to the end that day by day we may become better. But our consolation is that which the Lord adds, saying: "Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire."

[41] Sects and factions will not last, if we are only able to await their destruction; but a faithful minister will be victorious and will endure. For the Word of God abideth forever. Isaiah 40:8. But what the devil sows runs like a mad dog, as David the prophet says in the first Psalm: "The ungodly shall not stand," they will be driven hither and thither, and will be dispersed like dust

on the threshing floor. Thus they now run and break forth, but at length they will be cut down and cast into the fire. Here he closes and says: “Therefore by their fruits ye shall know them.”

[42] This is one kind of knowledge, as I said. Paul speaks of a different kind in Romans 12:2; and John in his first Epistle, 1 John 4:1 — that we should criticize and judge their doctrine according to the knowledge of Christ, also whether their teaching is in harmony with faith. But their works and life, of which he here speaks, we must measure and judge according to love. But whoever has not the first kind of knowledge and judgment, will easily be deceived by works.

SOURCE

Martin Luther's Church Postil, the complete Lenker edition in one volume (Lutheran Library, CC BY 4.0), PDF pages 1279–1295.
Heading in that edition: “Eighth Sunday after Trinity. Second Sermon. Beware of False Prophets.”