

Matthew 7:15-29 The Message of the King: “A Tree and Its Fruit” March 22, 2015
Ezekiel 13
Psalm 62

[On Psalm 106 (Derek Rishmawy summarized Psalm 106 very well: “We messed up. We messed up. We messed up. We messed up. Please help.”)]

Jesus will warn his disciples about false prophets –
 “wolves in sheep’s clothing” –
 and then go on to compare the house built upon the rock
 with the house built upon the sand.
Ezekiel 13 uses the same image when speaking of prophets
 who uttered falsehood and saw lying visions.

The image here is that the people have built an inferior wall.
It is poorly constructed,
 but to cover the defects, the prophets come along and “plaster” it.
But the “plaster” they are using is no better than whitewash.
 There is a word play going on here
 between the words for “smear” and “vanity” –
 so one could paraphrase this that they are smearing the walls with “hogwash.”

The prophets should have exposed the weakness and frailty of the wall –
 but instead, they just covered it over with their hogwash,
 and the result is the destruction of Jerusalem
 and the death of the people and their prophets.

A true prophet will help you understand that all your self-centered dreams and plans are flimsy –
 they will not stand in the judgment day!

Listen to how God says it:

Therefore thus says the Lord God:

*I will make a stormy wind break out in my wrath,
 and there shall be a deluge of rain in my anger,
 and great hailstones in wrath to make a full end.
And I will break down the wall that you have smeared with whitewash,
 and bring it down to the ground, so that its foundation will be laid bare.
When it falls, you shall perish in the midst of it, and you shall know that I am the Lord.*

The walls of Jerusalem are flimsy –
 and they are covered with the hogwash of the false prophets.

But hogwash cannot withstand the outpouring of God’s wrath

Do you think that the false prophets *know* that they are false prophets?

I suspect that most of them sincerely believed that they were true prophets.

They knew the scriptures, and thought that they were proclaiming the word of God.
Sure, there were probably some who were frauds –
but I suspect that most of them were “well-meaning” but self-deceived.

Think about the false prophets today.

The mainline Presbyterian church has just declared
that they will conduct homosexual marriages.
We left the mainline church 40 years ago because they had rejected the word of the Lord.
So while we are saddened by their latest decision,
we are not surprised.

False prophets regularly *whitewash* the practices of their culture.
False prophets regularly declare “Peace, peace” when there is no peace.
As Daniel Block puts it:

“counterfeits characteristically proclaim messages that people want to hear,
especially when the truth is painful” (Block, 409)

Of course, that means that I am in danger of being a false prophet
if I simply pat you on the back for not being in the PCUSA!
You need to face the painful truth that *you* need to deny yourself, take up *your* cross,
and follow Jesus.

What will you do if a gay person comes to MCPC?
If we take our own confession seriously,
then we acknowledge that *all of us* are sinners.
We have *all* messed up.

If it is true that *only God can save*,
then we dare not say, “you need to shape up, so that God can save you.”
Rather, we need to show forth the same love that God showed us –
“that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

There is only one foundation that can stand in the day of judgment.
There is only one way that the wall can endure the fury of God’s wrath.

And that is the foundation that was laid in the cross of Jesus.

Psalm 62 understands this.

David says, “For God alone my soul waits in silence;
from him comes my salvation.
He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress;
I shall not be greatly shaken.”

My enemies may come against me – like a battering ram against a leaning wall.
But God is my rock and my salvation.

Sing Psalm 62
Read Matthew 7

Introduction: the *Authority of the King*

²⁸ *And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, ²⁹ for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.*

In the Sermon on the Mount we've been listening to the 'message of the king.'

We heard the Beatitudes –

where Jesus set forth the quality and character of the blessed life (5:1-12) –
which is the life that Jesus himself lived!

We heard about the Law –

where Jesus taught us how to think about the Law and good works (5:13-48).
Jesus is not merely a Rabbi who corrected our misunderstandings about the Law.
He is not merely a Moses – a messenger who delivers God's Law.

Remember how Jesus said it?

“You have heard that it was said...but *I say to you.*”

Jesus taught with authority.

He speaks to Israel in a way that only Israel's God had ever spoken!

Moses and the Prophets had always given Israel a high standard –

but always in the context of saying either “you have failed” or “you are going to fail”!

Jesus doesn't.

And Jesus makes clear that his standard reaches into the heart.

He is not merely concerned with outward behavior.

He shows us that *anger* is murder, *lust* is adultery.

And it's not enough simply to avoid doing bad things!

You have to love your enemies and do good to those who persecute you!

Jesus says that you 'must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (5:48)

You look at the church around the world –

or for that matter, just look around this room!

We're a bunch of screw-ups!

We're just like our fathers in the wilderness!

What gives Jesus the idea that this time it will be different?

“the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority,
and not as their scribes.”

Jesus has the authority to guarantee that this time it will be different.

It will be different – not because we are any better than our fathers –
but because *he is*.

When Jesus preached this, they didn't understand what it meant.

But by the time Matthew *wrote this*, Jesus was sitting at the right hand of the Father.

The Sermon on the Mount *will* characterize the church of Jesus Christ
because Jesus is King and Head of his Church –
and by his Holy Spirit he will do what he has promised.

And so Jesus says that our priorities need to be oriented around the Kingdom of God.
We need to practice righteousness –
as we give to the needy, as we pray, and as we fast.
And we need to practice righteousness in such a way that we lay up treasures in heaven.
Don't worry.
Don't be anxious about daily life.
Your heavenly Father will take care of all that.
Seek first the kingdom of God and *his* righteousness –
his way of doing life together –
and then he'll make sure that "all these things" work out.

Our problem is that we confuse the kingdom with the benefits of the kingdom.

John Howard Yoder gives three areas
where we tend to confuse the benefits of the gospel with the gospel:

"If anyone repents, if anyone turns around to follow Jesus in his new way of life,
this will do something for the aimlessness of his life.
It will do something for his loneliness by giving him fellowship.
It will do something for his anxiety and guilt by giving him a good conscience.
So [those] whose 'evangelism' is to proclaim the offer of restored selfhood,
liberation from anxiety and guilt, are not wrong.
If anyone repents, it will do something for his intellectual confusion,
by giving him doctrinal meat to digest, a heritage to appreciate,
and a conscience about telling it all as it is:
So 'evangelicalism' with its concern for hallowed truth and reasoned communication
is not wrong; it is right.
If a man repents it will do something for his moral weakness
by giving him the focus for wholesome self-discipline,
it will keep him from immorality and get him to work on time.
So [those] who promise that God cares about helping me squeeze through
the tight spots of life are not wrong; they have their place.
BUT ALL THIS IS NOT THE GOSPEL.
This is just the bonus, the wrapping paper thrown in when you buy the meat,
the 'everything' which will be added...
if we seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness." (in Hauerwas, 46)

The gospel is the good news that God has come in the flesh.
The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.
The Kingdom of God has come because the *King* has come.
And through his death and resurrection, Jesus has triumphed over sin, death, and the devil

and has been seated at the right hand of God in glory.

The good news is *not* about you!

The good news is about Jesus!

Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount with a warning about false prophets.

1. Seeing Beyond the Surface: You Will Know Them by Their Fruits (v15-20)

¹⁵ *“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”*

This warning drives the whole conclusion of the sermon.

First, Jesus tells us how to recognize a false prophet.

Second, Jesus warns what will happen to false prophets (and their disciples).

Third, Jesus tells us how to make sure that we are true disciples!

It's important to distinguish between a big, nasty sheep
and a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Ezekiel 34 speaks of big, nasty sheep who bully the little sheep.

And that's bad.

But a good shepherd will judge between sheep and sheep
and will restore order.

A wolf, on the other hand, is *not a sheep*.

The only way for the shepherd to protect the sheep from a wolf
is to kill the wolf.

The task of the shepherd is to discipline the sheep and destroy the wolves.

But how do you know that someone is a wolf in sheep's clothing?

That's easy.

A sheep will never devour other sheep.

A sheep may butt with his head and muddy up the water for other sheep –
but a sheep will never devour other sheep.

Eventually a wolf will show his true colors.

He will start devouring the sheep.

We don't like hearing that.

We want a method that will enable us to predict who is a wolf!

But that's not what Jesus gives us.

I think of the poor college president who was so foolish as to say
that there was no way to prevent sexual assault on campus
because of “human nature.”

She was right – but saying it nearly got her fired!

We cannot create a system that will prevent all bad things from happening.
What we *can* do is learn to recognize them by their fruit.

Rather than stay with the wolf image,
Jesus switches quickly to *fruit*.
It's an easy switch – since both the shepherd image and the fruit image
were used by the prophets to speak of Israel.

¹⁶ *You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?* ¹⁷ *So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit.* ¹⁸ *A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit.* ¹⁹ *Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.* ²⁰ *Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.*

Notice that there are two different parts to the image.

First, in verse 16, Jesus tells us that a tree will produce “according to its kind.”
A vine will produce grapes.
A fig tree will produce figs.

Just as trees produce fruit according to their nature,
so also people will produce fruit according to their nature.

But second, in verses 17-19, Jesus goes on to speak of the *health* of the tree.
A healthy tree – a “good” tree – produces good fruit.
A diseased tree – a “rotten” tree – produces bad fruit.

An apple tree will produce apples.
Of course, if an apple tree is diseased, then it will produce bad apples.
And there is no point in having a diseased apple tree,
so they will cut down the diseased tree and throw it in the fire.

Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.
Remember what Jesus is talking about.
Jesus is talking about recognizing *false prophets* –
preachers who will lead you astray.

You will know them by their fruits.
But what does Jesus mean by “good fruit.”
Obviously, you cannot rely on your own feelings here!
Remember, the false prophets regularly make you *feel good*.
They say “peace, peace” when there is no peace.
So if you judge a preacher
based on whether you come away feeling good about what he said,
then you are not listening to Jesus.

What kind of *fruit* should you be looking for?

Well, Jesus seems to recognize that this will be the next question.
Because he says:

2. What Kind of Fruit? Doing the Will of My Father (v21-23)

²¹ “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

What kind of fruit?

Does the prophet do the will of Jesus’ Father?

I’ve seen too many pastors who are so fixated on doctrine
that they do not pay attention to the way they live.

Jesus says that he does not know them:

²² *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?’* ²³ *And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’*

Now, remember that Jesus is not talking about people in general here.

He is not talking about “ordinary Christians.”

He is talking about pastors.

He is telling his disciples how to distinguish between false prophets and true prophets.

Do they *do* what Jesus said?

You might think that prophecy, casting out demons, and doing mighty works
are all “good fruit.”

Preaching sound doctrine is a good thing –

but good preaching without *doing the will of my Father* – is *not* Christian preaching.

Signs and wonders are all nice and good –

but without *doing the will of my Father* – it is not *Christian* signs and wonders.

You cannot claim the *name* of Jesus unless you live the way that Jesus said.

The Sermon on the Mount is a description of the life and character of Jesus.

Therefore, this must also characterize his disciples –

and especially those who would preach the good news!

It all comes together in the Great Commission:

“Make disciples of all nations,

baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,
and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”

But if the prophets do not do what Jesus says,

then they are workers of lawlessness (to use Jesus term in verse 23).

If you do not do the will of Jesus’ Father in heaven,

then Jesus will say,

“I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.”

But then, in verse 24, Jesus takes it another step.

So far, he has been saying that you need to do the will of “*my* heavenly Father.”

But now, in verse 24, he says that you need to do “these words of *mine*.”

This is not the language of Israel’s prophets.

This is the language of Israel’s God.

3. Built on the Rock: the Result of Hearing *and* Doing My Words (v24-27)

²⁴ “*Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.* ²⁵ *And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.* ²⁶ *And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand.* ²⁷ *And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.*”

We saw the similar picture in Ezekiel 13.

The main difference between Ezekiel 13 and Matthew 7

is that in Ezekiel 13,

there is no suggestion that the prophets could have saved the wall!

In Ezekiel, judgment is coming, and there is nothing that Israel can do to survive.

The wall is going to be destroyed – why are you whitewashing a doomed wall?!

But Jesus says that there *is* a way for your house to survive the coming flood.

Build your house on the rock.

Listen to my words and do them!

We sang earlier from Psalm 62 that God is my rock, my sure foundation.

When Jesus tells you to build your house on the rock –

he is telling you to build your life on *him*.

Jesus is the rock.

Whatever is built on *him* will endure.

He is the one who endured God’s wrath – who survived the storm and fury of God’s fire.

Therefore, because Jesus is the rock,

there is now a way to survive the coming storm.

Now, you might wonder,

“Are we still talking about true and false prophets?”

I would say “Sort of.”

Jesus is still dealing with the overall theme “Beware of false prophets,”

but he is now saying that if *you* (all of you)

would avoid the peril of false prophets – if you would avoid the ravaging wolves,

then you must hear the voice of Jesus and do what he says.

If you listen to Jesus and do what Jesus says,
then you will not follow the false prophets –
because while they may sound good,
they do not *do* what Jesus says.

The false prophets will tell you what you want to hear –
but a true prophet will speak – and live – the words of Christ.

How will you respond to Jesus?

You cannot respond to Jesus by saying,
“Very interesting. I’d like to hear more.”

Close with PHSS 225 “We Have Come to Zion’s Mount”