

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER¹
The Eighth Sunday after Trinity²

Lessons:³

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-fourth Verse of the eleventh Chapter of the Proverbs.⁴

“There is that scattereth, and yet increaseth; and there is that withholdeth more than is meet, but it tendeth to poverty. The liberal soul shall be made fat: and he that watereth shall be watered also himself. He that withholdeth corn, the people shall curse him: but blessing shall be upon the head of him that selleth it. He that diligently seeketh good procureth favour: but he that seeketh mischief, it shall come unto him. He that trusteth in his riches shall fall: but the righteous shall flourish as a branch. He that troubleth his own house shall inherit the wind: and the fool shall be servant to the wise of heart. The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life; and he that winneth souls is wise. Behold, the righteous shall be recompensed in the earth: much more the wicked and the sinner.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the seventh Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew.⁵

“Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.

“Not every one that saith [SETH] unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: *“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”*⁶ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

The warning of Jesus in today’s Second Lesson is one of many Biblical texts about false prophets. We find this theme throughout all of Scripture, from Moses and the Law right through the Book of Revelation. We see it in the historical books, especially the contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal [BAY-ull]. We come across this theme in the books of the true Prophets. Isaiah said, *“To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.”*⁷ Jeremiah had his famous prophetic duel with Hananiah.⁸ Amos lived in conflict with the false prophets of Samaria.

In the New Testament, Paul had to warn the Church in Corinth of *“false apostles and deceitful workers,”* also calling them Satan’s ministers.⁹ He warned as well of false gospels, even if preached supposedly by an angel from Heaven.¹⁰ He warned of a time when people would heap up to themselves teachers, *“having itching ears.”*¹¹ So also, Saints Peter, James, Jude, and most strongly, John. For it was St. John who warned of false teachers he called *“antichrists,”* who teach by the spirit of error and of antichrist.¹² The clear indication is that the Apostles saw the work of demons at the root of it: *“Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall de-*

part from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils.”¹³ The Book of Revelation warns against joining the world in following the Beast and the False Prophet.

St. Paul gets to the heart of the matter with this simple summary of a false gospel and an imitation Trinity: “*But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if some one comes and preaches another Jesus than the one we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you submit to it readily enough.*”¹⁴

Due to some mistaken notion, in old Latin Bibles the First and Second Commandments were joined together, and the last Commandment broken into two parts (to make ten). However, the fact is, the First Commandment is not about idolatry. It is about false gods. It is, quite literally in modern English, “[You shall have] no other gods in My presence.” (“*Thou shalt have none other gods before Me.*”). The commandment against idolatry, that is against worshiping man-made images of gods, is the Second Commandment. The distinction does matter, because one can have and worship an entirely false notion of God, with or without an idol before which to bow down.

What is a false notion of God?

Lets us look again at the words of Jesus concerning false prophets: “*Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.*”

Fruits? Where else did Jesus use this image of the good tree and the evil tree, and the fruits of those trees? A little later,

in the twelfth chapter of Matthew, Jesus said, “*Either make the tree good, and his fruit good; or else make the tree corrupt, and his fruit corrupt: for the tree is known by his fruit. O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things? for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things. But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.*”¹⁵

A false notion of God is an image made by words and ideas.

It is a matter of self-discipline and honest character, as well as humility, for every teacher and preacher to refrain from offering opinions as the word of God. When St. Paul ventured to give his own advice, in one section an Epistle to the Church in Corinth, he made it clear that he was offering his personal advice and not the commandment of the Lord, then he returned to teaching them what the Lord had commanded.¹⁶ That is, he refused to elevate his own opinion to the same level as revelation. Not everyone has learned from the Apostle’s humility. Human imagination is boundless, and speculation is endless. But everything God has revealed can be stated with chapter and verse. Otherwise it cannot be required of anyone to believe as necessary to salvation and, indeed, may prove “repugnant to the word of God.”

To recognize false apostles, false prophets and false teachers, it is not necessary to study all the cults. When Secret Service agents and bank tellers are taught to recognize counterfeit money, they are not given samples of counterfeits to study. They study real money. So it is with the Gospel and all true doctrine. Don’t waste time studying error. Study the truth, and then when bad fruit presents itself in words, you will know the good fruit from the bad.

The only task before you in this matter is to know the Gospel accurately, to recognize the true Jesus and the Spirit you have received. Then, even under sheep’s clothing, you will recognize a wolf every time.

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The Rev’d Robert Hart¹⁷
July 29, 2012

¹ “Any set of Psalms and Lessons appointed for the evening of any day may be read at the morning service, and any set of morning Psalms and Lessons may be read in the evening.” *Concerning the Service of the Church*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Holy Communion on the Eighth Sunday after Trinity, 2012.

³ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxi (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁴ Proverbs 11:24-end (KJV).

⁵ St. Matthew 7:15-21 (KJV).

⁶ St. Matthew 7:15 (KJV).

⁷ Isaiah 8:20 (KJV).

⁸ Jeremiah 28.

⁹ II Corinthians 10 & 11.

¹⁰ Galatians 1:8, 9.

¹¹ II Timothy 2:4.

¹² I John 3 & 4.

¹³ I Timothy 4:1 (KJV).

¹⁴ II Corinthians 11:3, 4 (RSV).

¹⁵ St. Matthew 12:33-37 (KJV).

¹⁶ See I Corinthians 7.

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