

The Greatest Sermon Ever Preached
The Sermon on the Mount Series (Part XIII)
“Good Fruit”

Liturgical Date: Maundy Thursday

Primary Text: St. Matthew 7:15-20 (not assigned Gospel text)

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for this evening, Maundy Thursday, is the Gospel Lesson from St. Matthew 7. Our sermon series “The Greatest Sermon Ever Preached: The Sermon on the Mount” continues tonight with the thirteenth installment. The title of the sermon is “Good Fruit”.

In the last sermon, from Palm Sunday, I preached about what is known as the “Golden Rule” from verse 12. Then, we heard that Jesus moves into the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount by drawing contrasts in four areas, illustrating the false versus the true. The first of these four areas saw the narrow or straight path that leads to the gate of eternal life. On the other hand, there was the broad or wide way that leads to the gate of destruction. This evening we see the second set of contrasts, the good tree that produces good fruit and the corrupt tree that brings forth bad, or evil, fruit.

As I begin the sermon this evening, I want to share with you an old German fairy tale. It was one of many compiled the Grimm brothers in the 19th Century, and it still widely known today. A little girl is sent by her mother to her grandmother’s house in the forest to deliver some cake and wine. The little girl grabs a basket and dons a red hooded cloak, a gift from her beloved grandmother, ready to make the journey.

And Little Red Riding Hood sets off. On the way, she meets a wolf, who is able to get her to tell him the location of grandmother's house. The wolf races ahead of Little Red Riding Hood, enters grandma's house by convincing her that he is Little Red Riding Hood, promptly swallows her whole, and dresses himself in her clothes and cap, then draws the curtains to make the room darker, and licks his lips as he awaits the arrival of Little Red Riding Hood. Upon arrival, the little girl senses something is off, but the wolf is wearing grandmother's clothes. She draws closer. "Oh grandmother, what big ears you have." "Better to hear you with, my dear." "But grandmother, what big eyes you have." "Better to see you with, my dear." "But grandmother, what big hands you have." "Better to hug you with, my dear." "Oh, but, grandmother, what a terrible big mouth you have." With this, the wolf in grandma's clothing says, "The better to eat you with!", and swallows up Little Red Riding Hood.

In our Gospel reading for tonight Jesus also warns of wolves in disguise. Verse 15, *"Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves."* Remember that Jesus has just taught about the roads, and that it is the straight and narrow that leads to the gate of eternal life. Most people don't travel that road, preferring the ease and company of the broad road of destruction. Furthermore, even for those on the narrow road, danger lurks. Our enemy, the devil, seeks to pluck disciples of Jesus off the narrow road. One of Satan's main methods in attempting to do that is deception.

The devil will send false prophets, false preachers to do this dirty work. In this, he seeks to attack the Church from within. And the history of the Church will bear it out that these are the most dangerous and frequent enemies. From Henry Halley, *"The most devastating obstacle to the progress of Christianity has been its*

corruption at the hands of those that claim that they have been sent by God, but who teach falsely.” False prophets and false christs have abounded. The overt enemies of Christianity are pretty easy to spot as they operate and employ their methods in direct opposition to Jesus. False religions and critics of the faith openly contradict and attack the Lord and His Gospel. The Muslim says you must accomplish the five pillars to hope to enter heaven. The Hindu says you must live a good life and work your way up through reincarnation. The atheist says that there is no God, so you must live for the now because it is all that there is. These are pretty easy to identify. But then there are those that come claiming to one of us sheep. They may look the part. Well dressed, successful, speaking some of the same lingo as Christians. On the surface it may look good, but they are really wolves. The Latter Day Saints, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and others look on the surface to be Christian-but really only offer a way of works and false doctrine that twists Scripture. Then there are those that have deceived many, claiming to speak for God, but really teaching a perverse doctrine that centers around them. These are people like Jim Jones and David Koresh who have led their followers to mass death. Unfortunately, the wolves in sheep’s clothing have deceived many. As Paul Kretzmann wrote, *“The false prophets deliberately falsify God’s Word, they substitute their own lies and the wisdom of fallible men for the eternal truth.”* In fact, the Bible is full of cautionary examples and verses about avoiding the false teachers. We see this in both the Old and the New Testament, and often times these false teachers are amongst God’s people, attempting to lead them astray. The Lutheran Confessions reference this passage of Scripture no less than 10 times in pointing out the false prophets of that time.

Deception is the name of the game for false prophets. Little Red Riding Hood would have never gotten close enough to the wolf to be eaten if the wolf was not dressed like her grandmother. But she did know something was off, didn't she? But she kept getting closer, and then it was too late. Thus, with us Christians we may sense something is off about a false teacher, but instead of running the other way, we can be sucked in. I say what I am about to say not as a blanket statement that all big, non-liturgical, or non-Lutheran Churches are bad. However, the scenario has played out many times. A person leaves their church, which may be faithful, but small, and jumps ship to the "big happening church in town." They have big facilities with big programs, a cool and dynamic pastor, and some rocking music. Again, not all, but many times these churches have little Bible reading or Bible directed preaching in their Services. Baptism and its work is not emphasized. Holy Communion rarely is celebrated, and when it is you are told is only a symbol-that Jesus is not truly present in the elements. Many things happened on Maundy Thursday, the night in which Jesus was betrayed. At that center of that night was Jesus instituting the Lord's Supper. In our Epistle Lesson from 1 Corinthians 11, we heard God tell us how important it is, what we receive in this sacred meal, and that it is very important that we receive it properly. The warning for ignoring this are sobering. And yet so many churches have deviated from focusing on Holy Communion and viewing it properly.

This leads us to the next main point that Jesus makes and that I want to expound on this evening. How do we recognize the wolves in sheep's clothing? We have already established that it is not always easy to do so. In verses 16-20, Jesus gives us the answer. Verse 16 begins with this, "*Ye shall know them by their fruits.*" Then the illustration of the good tree and the corrupt tree are brought

forward. The good tree produces good fruit and the corrupt tree produces evil fruit. We look to the fruit that is produced. Verse 20, *“Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.”* In these 6 verses, Jesus uses the word “fruit” 7 times. That is obviously a key word to focus on in this text. Furthermore, in Matthew 12:33, Luke 6:43-44, and John 15:1-6 Jesus again speaks about the importance of fruit. That if one is truly of God, then they will produce good fruit.

This is an important point. The works of the Christian are good fruit because they are good fruit trees. The works of one that claims to follow Christ but is a wolf in sheep’s clothing will only produce evil, or bad fruit because they are not good fruit trees. Jesus asks yet another rhetorical question in verse 16, *“Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?”* Of course they don’t, because it is impossible for them to produce good fruit. Only a grape vine can produce grapes and a fig tree figs. This is the point that Jesus is making in verses 16-19. A Christian, by definition-although one who still sins, is a good tree because of the regeneration of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the fruits of the Spirit will be produced. On the other hand, a wolf is not a sheep. It can dress up like a sheep, but it is still a wolf. Thus, a tree that is not a fruit tree simply cannot produce fruit. Its end will be being cut down and cast into the fire (representing hell).

But it can still be hard to recognize the true from the false, you might be thinking. I mean, can’t false prophets and religions still do some good things? They can feed the hungry, care for the poor, give money to charity, right? Yes, they can-but without faith these works end up being self-serving in the end. As the Scripture says, *“anything that is not of faith is sin.”* We must be careful in our inspection of fruits. As with Little Red Riding Hood, she noticed something off about grandma’s ears, eyes, and hands-but she kept getting closer, then it was

too late. Martin Luther preached on this text, *“Only look at the world with sharp and alert eyes.”*

How do we do that? By prayerfully reading, studying, and knowing our Bibles-including coming to Bible study and listening to sermons. The more that we know the truth of God’s Word, the easier it becomes to recognize the wolves in sheep’s clothing. Know the truth and you will know the fruit. The “fruits” here are referring to more than just outward acts of what people would say are good. For example, someone donating a bunch of school supplies to help needy children is obviously a good work. The false could do that too. So, we must look deeper, with spiritually discerning eyes. I have already referenced the motivation behind a good action could be bad. But we really see the fruits manifest themselves when we look at the content of what a religious leader is preaching and teaching. When we know the Scripture, we can begin to recognize bad fruit. For example, a group says that they believe in the Bible, but they also have other writings that they claim are equal with Scripture or that when their leader speaks their authority is even over the Bible. This is bad fruit. Every teacher, whatever they claim, whatever denomination they represent, must be judged according to the Word of God.

As we have been hearing, Jesus is the fulfillment of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus’ ministry always produced good fruit. His words are always truth. From the true vine, the tree of life, good fruit always comes. And ultimately, the greatest fruit produced was forgiveness and eternal life. It is on this night we remember and celebrate that He instituted the Lord’s Supper. In this, we receive the good fruit. The wine is produced from grapes. And we receive this in the Sacrament of the Altar. And we also know, as was clearly proclaimed in 1

Corinthians 11 this evening, that we receive the true body and blood of Jesus in this meal. We receive it and our faith is strengthened, and our sins forgiven. The blood of Jesus was shed for our sins. A one-time sacrifice on the cross and at a same time a continual blessing every time we receive the Sacrament.

Back to Little Red Riding Hood for a moment. You may or may not know that the story does not end with Little Red Riding Hood being eaten. Full and happy, the wolf goes to sleep and begins snoring loudly. A huntsman is passing by the house and goes into check on grandma. He sees the wolf and exclaims, *“Do I find you here, you old sinner. I have long sought you.”* The huntsman then cuts open the stomach of the wolf, and grandmother and Little Red Riding Hood are brought out from that stomach of death and are alive. They are replaced in the wolf’s stomach with rocks, and the wolf goes off and later dies. Then what happens? The huntsman, grandmother, and Little Red Riding Hood then share a meal together of the cake and wine that Little Red Riding Hood was bringing to her grandmother.

When devoured by a wolf, there is still hope. We have fallen into its dark belly by our own fault. In this, Satan is happy and content. But we don’t have to stay there. God sent a huntsman to defeat death and that old sinner wolf, the devil. Through Jesus’ work, His death, and resurrection we are freed the belly of sin and live. The wolf is defeated, and on the Last Day will be completely destroyed in the lake of fire. Verse 19 says that the bad tree is thrown into the fire. And in our new life in Christ, He promises to come and dine with us, to share His fruit with us. We celebrate the Lord’s Supper as we commune with God and His people in victory. Amen.