Matthew 7:15-27 (15a) Watch out for false prophets.

A few things really struck me this past week on my social media and news feeds. The first was a friend of my cousin and how their kayaks were stolen from their yard. The next was a post on how a whole bunch of stuff that had been donated to the residents of Midland and surrounding communities because of the flooding, had also been stolen. Now mind you, it is not the fact that stuff was stolen that caught my attention, it was the reaction of people to the thefts.

There were so many who just couldn’t believe what was reported. They were shocked, they were dismayed and more than once someone asked the question: “What’s wrong with people?” If there is anything that tells me the religious state of our people and nation it is that question. Honestly, you really don’t know what is wrong with people? You can’t figure out why, since the fall into sin, that people do wrong and commit evil no matter how many laws or regulations there might be? What is wrong is a problem called “sin.”

Of course you have to grasp that many churches today don’t teach the idea or concept of sin and certainly they do not teach the Biblical concept of sin that we are by nature sinful and actually inclined to evil. We have bought into the world philosophy that “most people are good and given the right circumstances will always do the right thing.” Yet that is not what God’s Word teaches. Just look at our Epistle reading for today found in Romans 3:22c-23: **“In fact, there is no difference, because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”** The only human being who was perfect his whole life was Jesus. The rest of us have sin, do sin, will sin and in most cases we will even claim on the scale of things that we are “pretty good.”

This lack of understanding about sin and the impact sin has on humankind is a part of the problem that our world has. The world thinks that if you have the right money, the right programs, the right counselors, the right education and the right amount of love, well then, everything will just be alright. But on the basis of God’s Word, I beg to differ.

When push comes to shove, the truth is that we are inclined to evil. How many laws are there against stealing? And yet there is always stealing. How many laws are there against numerous kinds of abuse? And yet there is always abuse out there and a lot more than you might think. How many laws are there against murder? And yet in many places, all over the world, murder has never, ever been stopped. And if you have been paying attention, the latest way the world has come up with to reduce crime is to change the laws that make things illegal. You can see that game being played out in society right now. All because humankind won’t grasp that there is sin and we are inclined to evil. And by the way, just in case you are wondering Genesis 6:5 states: **“The Lord saw that the wickedness of mankind was great on the earth, and that all the thoughts and plans they formed in their hearts were only evil every day.”** That’s the Lord revealing the truth. Now I know there would be those who argue, “Yeah, but that was before the flood.” Then please note that in Genesis 8 God reaffirms this truth of mankind after the flood too. Mankind has a problem, the problem we pointed out, found in Romans.

Jesus taught us about this problem because Jesus came to take care of the problem for our souls. Yet Jesus is aware of the fact that we are going to have to get through this “valley of the shadow of death” before we gain the wonder of his solution. It is for this reason that Jesus gives guidance and direction to help us navigate what this world will be. His words are awesome to contemplate and his words can give direction and guidance even in our everyday world. Our theme will be: **WATCH OUT!**

That is exactly how our text starts out. Jesus says, **“”Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. By their fruit you will know them.”** Let’s just contemplate what those words tell us.

First and foremost they tell us that we need to be on our guard. Fact is, there are going to be false prophets. These false prophets are described as “ravenous wolves.” In other words they are not here for your good, they come to take care of themselves and that will mean they have no care and concern for you. Nor are the false prophets going to show up with signs and banners declaring: “Hi, I am a False Prophet.” They will come disguised. They will pretend to be the sheep. They will pretend and act like they are here for noble purposes, doing whatever, saying whatever so that you let them in. And in the greatest of simplicity we are told: **”By their fruit you will know them.”**

Listen to all the words said in this regard: “**You do not gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles, do you? 17So then, every good tree produces good fruit, but a bad tree produces bad fruit. 18A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot produce good fruit. 19Every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20So then, by their fruit you will recognize them.”** I love how this starts. You don’t go looking for good fruit on a plant that doesn’t grow fruit! Isn’t that simple? In other words, pay attention to what they are and do. Pay attention to the results and directions they lead. Pay attention and you will be able to spot them because of the results of what they do. And dear Flock, when you are invited to the Wolves’ house for dinner and they are serving “lamb chops” how obvious can it get that they are not in this for you.

 I want you to know what is taught here applies to both our spiritual life and our general world. Spiritually, when you find pastors and teachers who teach contrary to God’s Word, who teach you that the Bible only “contains” God’s Word and that they, the experts will help you grasp what to believe and what not to believe, run. If you are not being taught that God’s Word is true, inspired, and without error in everything, run. Why would you belong to a church whose God is incapable of giving you a clear, precise and error free record of himself and his activities? Because I can guarantee that the first thing the wolf wants to do is to get you to no longer believe that God has given us guidance, directions and wisdom for this world. They no longer what you to believe that the wisdom and wonder of God is the Bible. The first thing the wolf will do is undermine the Bible and God’s truth. From there, I think you can just imagine the foolishness and evil that will be taught, all in the name of God and love.

But recognize that these words can be applied to our general world too. The boss who is abusive and takes credit for your work is found here. The politician who gets elected to serve the people and ends up a multi-millionaire, has not served the people but self. Educators who are not teaching you how to think but rather are more interested in indoctrinating you to their worldview, they fit. In other words, while Jesus was certainly hammering at the false religious leaders of his day do note that his words can still help us figure out what is what in the everyday world. No matter who you are: pay attention, watch out!

Then let’s look at the next section. I will tell you that these words have always been fascinating and important to me because of what they teach. Jesus said, **“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. 22Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and drive out demons in your name and perform many miracles in your name?’ 23Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Depart from me, you evildoers.’”**

There are a number of things I have learned from these words. First, to appear Godly because you can do miracles or because you can really preach it up or because you are just so personable, why you just ooze care, that is not the measure of a true prophet. Note that here Jesus says they did preach, they drove out demons, and they performed many miracles ”in the name of Jesus!” But Jesus also says, **“I never knew you. Depart from me, you evildoers.”** They may have appeared good, godly, nice, funny, successful and any other label you want to give them but note that Jesus says they are not his children and not his prophets. Jesus calls them **“evildoers.”** Jesus sends them to hell!

Second, please note that the false prophets are so shallow, so fickle that they don’t even know they are not following the Lord. In other words, they are sincere. They come across as caring and helpful and all those things you think a good pastor is about. And they use their Bibles but they are so lost in their unbelief they don’t even know they don’t belong to Jesus! They are shocked when they get before the throne of Jesus! What does that say of you, if you can’t identify what they are? I think the phrase, **“The blind leading the blind,”** sticks out here.

Third, the measure of a true prophet is that they stick to God’s Word. They are not out to be popular or well liked. They are not out to coddle you and win you over because they are so nice and personable. They are men who most interested in what God’s Word says and making sure you know what God’s Word says. Galatians 1:10-12 teaches this same lesson. **“Am I now seeking the favor of people or of God? Or am I striving to please people? If I were still trying to gain the approval of people, I would not be a servant of Christ.”** The true servant of God is one whose first concern is always the truth and wonder of God.

Then comes that next section that we are all so familiar with, the houses built on rock or sand. The lesson is so down home, isn’t it? If your foundation is good, your house, your life will stand no matter what storms come its way. And make no mistake, this lesson is about what is at your core, what is your worldview, how do you perceive and grasp this world of ours from beginning to end. Because if there is one thing that this little story does make clear, it is that fact that the rains will come and the rivers will rise and the winds will blow. That’s the truth of this world. It is a tough place filled with dangers, toils, snares, floods and storms. Your foundation is what is going to make the difference.

But all too often we focus on the other parts of this little story and miss the most important part. Listen to what Jesus makes important. **“Everyone who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on bedrock.”** In contrast to that there is the other household: **“Everyone who hears these words of mine but does not do them will be like a foolish man who builds his house on sand.”** Now tell me, what is the difference that Jesus says is important?

That’s right, it is His Words. Jesus is telling us that what He taught, what he spoke, what he is about is the difference between the house standing and the house crashing down. In that same vein, one of my favorite passages has been what Jesus says in John 12:48 **“The one who rejects me and does not receive my words does have a judge. The word which I spoke is what will judge him on the Last Day.”** Our houses will stand or crash depending on what we believe. Jesus makes it clear we need to believe in him and his Word and it is clear his Word is the entire Bible!

And in a way, the lesson of this is similar to the lesson last week. I put the truths of Jesus to work in my life. If I catch covid-19 and suffer, thank you Jesus. If I die because of that disease, thank you Jesus! If life is good and wonderful and all my needs are met: thank you Jesus! If my life is one struggle after another, stresses and strains, ups and downs, blood, sweat and tears (we all have this): thank you Jesus! If I should lose loved ones or they should lose me: thank you Jesus! I believe no matter what the storm, no matter how deep the waters and severe the flooding, either on a spiritual level or a physical level, I have nothing to fear because of the marvel and wonder of Jesus.

I why not. Jesus came into this world to be my Savior from sin. Jesus teaches that his death, his resurrection is the heart of it all. Since God has so loved me that he sent his Son to be my Savior, what is there to fear? Yes, there will be storms, floods and wind but because of Jesus and his gift of redemption, in the end, I am with Him. I am in heaven. I am filled with peace and joy, wonder and marvel that will never end. That is the rock upon which I build. And that peace, that strength is not just for later but is also for now. Jesus and his message of salvation is the foundation that will endure.

Mind you, Jesus makes it clear. You have the bedrock when you hear and you do His word. To do his word is not a matter of works and goodness, of showing Jesus how much you love him and how much you are willing to do for him. To do His Word is a matter of believing. To believe that Jesus came to be perfect for you. To believe that Jesus suffered and died for you. To believe that Jesus rose from the dead and because He lives so will you. To believe that when your time has come, Jesus will come to take you to that mansion He has prepared just for you. That’s what it means to do. To hear. To believe. To have at your heart and core the wonder and joy of Jesus.

Dear people, this world is perilous. It is fraught with dangers and evils of every kind. Follow Jesus. Believe Jesus. Trust his Word. There is the key. Trust his Word and in that way you will have that foundation that withstands it all. Because then you have Jesus. God grant this. Amen.