

## "Words Not Deeds"

Text: Matthew 7: 15-23

8/6/2017

There used to be an old mantra used by those from the more protestant, shall we say fundamentalist tradition of Christianity, that went like this: "deeds, not creeds." It spoke of the importance of living the faith and not just speaking it. To be sure, there is an element of truth to that - it *is* important *to live* the faith; good works DO matter. But works do NOT matter as a means for salvation. When it comes to salvation in Christ, it is more a matter of *words*, NOT *DEEDS*. We see that from today's Gospel reading, to which we now turn our attention ...

As we do, we return to today's Gospel, where we hear again our Lord say:

"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits." (Matthew 7:15-16Q)

Now, what is Jesus talking about there? What does He mean when He refers to "fruits?" Usually when people hear those words they think of how a person lives - they think of *deeds*. I mean, later on in today's Gospel Jesus goes on to say:

"Not everyone who says to Me: 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the reign of heaven, *but he who DOES the will of My Father* Who is in heaven."(v.21)

There you have it: "he who *does* the will of (Jesus') Father" is the one who enters the reign of heaven. In light of those words, when Jesus says: "You will know them (i.e., false prophets) by their fruits," it's easy to assume that He's talking about how false prophets live - what they do.

BUT, Jesus is NOT talking there about how false prophets *live*. He's talking about how they *speak*. We see that from a couple of things: 1) Jesus says in today's Gospel that false prophets wear "sheep's clothing," which means that, to the outside world, they look pretty good - they're clothed in deeds that nobody questions. 2) Also, Jesus is speaking here about false *prophets*, and a prophet is known by what he *says*. A prophet *speaks* the words of God. Jesus says elsewhere in Matthew's Gospel that:

"Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks."(12:34)

So if someone claims to speak to you God's Word, and inside they're a ravenous wolf (to use Jesus' metaphor in today's Gospel -v. 15), you'll know it by what flows out to you from their heart -you'll know it by their *words*; they won't *speak* in the manner of the Good Shepherd of the sheep. When Jesus says that we will know them (again, false prophets) by their fruits, He's talking about words, not deeds. A true prophet is one who speaks only the words of Jesus.

And what are the words of Jesus? Well, in this section of His "Sermon on the Mount" Jesus speaks of mercy. He speaks of not judging your neighbor (7: 1-2); He speaks of helping your neighbor overcome his/her sin, and so avoiding God's judgment of your own sin (7: 1-8). Put simply Jesus speaks of loving our neighbor, as He says just a few verses before those of today's Gospel:

"In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets."(7: 12)

referring, of course, to Leviticus 19: 18, which says: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus' words are words of love; they're words of mercy and forgiveness. Yes, Jesus can also be judgmental. I mean, He speaks some pretty stringent words of Law in His "Sermon on the Mount," some of which we heard a couple of weeks ago when we looked at Matthew 5 and Jesus' teaching there on anger. But ultimately Jesus teaches in a way that draws people *to Himself*, a way that leads people to trust in *His* deeds - His saving deeds - for them.

We see that when we look closer at Jesus' words about doing the will of His Father in heaven -we quoted them earlier:

"Not everyone who says to Me: 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the reign of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father Who is in heaven."(v.21)

At first glance those words appear to put the emphasis on a person's works/deeds - their *doing* the will of the Father. But Jesus speaks of doing the will of the Father in two other places in Matthew's Gospel - in ch. 12 (where He speaks about the importance of following Him), and also in ch. 21 ( where He commends those who listened to the words of John the B, who of course called people to repent to prepare for the arrival of Jesus). When we put those two passages together we see that, for Jesus, doing the will of the Father means repenting of our sins; it means following the One John the Baptist prepared the way for by being a disciple of Jesus.

One does that by heeding the words of Jesus, words that are emphasized in this portion of the "Sermon on the Mount." In fact, the words right after those of today's Gospel are these:

"Every one then who hears these words of Mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock; ... "(v. 24)

Jesus' words are important, folks, because they teach of His deeds of death and resurrection for the world's salvation. A true prophet heeds those words: he repents of his sins and clings to the mercy of God in Christ; he trusts in the Word of God's Son instead of his own deeds -he trusts in the Word of God's forgiveness. A true prophet preaches and teaches only the words of the Lord Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for the sins of the world. Doing the will of the Father is about listening to and believing those words, not our deeds.

That's important, because it speaks to what makes living the Christian life so difficult: the fact that we're always focused on our deeds. We get caught-up in how bad we are, or at least in the awareness that we're not good enough. We deal with guilt and shame over the way we live our sinful lives; or we go the other direction and feel smug about the good lives we lead and we end up being self-righteous (like the Pharisees of Jesus' day). The Gospel, however, consists of the words of Jesus, words that take our focus off of our deeds and put it squarely on the deeds *of Jesus* - Who lived, died, and rose again/*or us*. That's the key to being able to enjoy the blessings of the reign of heaven: keeping the focus of our attention on the words of Jesus and NOT on our deeds of sin.

True prophets help us do that; false prophets do not. And so, today's Gospel speaks a warning about false prophets (pastors *I* preachers *I* teachers *I* anyone claiming to speak the Word of God). Beware, Jesus says, of what they *say*, because if they tell you things that are supposed to be from God *that do NOT point to the mercy of God's Son* OR if they tell you things that are supposed to be from God *that condone sin, not leading you to repentance*, then even though they may look like harmless sheep on the outside, inside they're ravenous wolves. It's really quite simple: if a person's words point you to your own deeds, and tell you that your deeds are good, they're not from God. It's not our deeds, but God's words that open up to us the reign of heaven.

And with that we conclude. We said a couple of weeks ago that the key to understanding the "Sermon on the Mount" is to read it through the lens of the Beatitudes, which stand at its beginning. Well, in the 1<sup>st</sup> Beatitude Jesus says this:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the reign of heaven."(5:3)

That describes a true prophet: true prophets are poor in spirit; they look to God's Spirit, present in His Word, to make them rich in Jesus. Jesus speaks today of those who are rich in Him when He says, again:

"Not everyone who says to Me: 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the reign of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father Who is in heaven."(v.21)

The will of the Father is to follow His Son: Jesus, believing that, because of His death and resurrection, your sins are forgiven, and God's mercy and grace and forgiveness / God's love is for you. That is *the* message of God's Word, the message all true prophets speak. God grant that we all heed that message in faith, and so cling to Jesus' words, not our deeds-

- In His † Name,

Amen!