

On the Importance of the Catechism

Beware of False Prophets

Matthew 7:15

The Eighth Sunday after Trinity

July 25, 2010

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. (Matthew 7:15)

There shouldn't be any doubt in anyone's mind that Jesus takes doctrine very seriously. It matters what we teach. It matters what we believe. It matters what people say about God. It matters more than having a decent job, a nice home, a good reputation, or a healthy body.

The first request we make of God in the Lord's Prayer is that His name be hallowed. How is this done? "When the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity, and we as the children of God also lead a holy life according to it." The true teaching is not just a blessing among many blessings. No, the pure teaching of God's holy Word is the chief blessing God has to give to us in this life.

People argue that we shouldn't care as much about pure doctrine as we care about loving one another. The implication is that if you care much about the pure teaching you will care little about loving your neighbor. That's not true. Jesus says, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35). The love of God in Christ for us sinners is the center of God's truth. It is the very heart of the Christian doctrine. To care about pure doctrine is to care about God's grace for sinners. It is to care about the lost who don't know Christ. It is to care about those who have wandered away from Christ into error.

To say that we should care more about loving one another than we care about the pure teaching of God's Word is to say that our

love is more important than God's love. Don't be fooled by pious sounding words that extol Christian love at the expense of the pure doctrine. This is a con authored by the father of lies, the one who speaks through the false prophets. You cannot love your neighbor apart from Christ. Apart from Christ you don't know God's love. True Christian love agrees with the truth. It is never opposed to God's truth. To denigrate the pure doctrine is to despise the blood of Jesus, the love of God, and heaven itself. If the truth sets us free, to despise the truth is to embrace slavery for you and for everyone else. To put it plainly, those who despise the pure doctrine of God's word hate their neighbor despite their protests to the contrary.

Our Lord's warning about false prophets teaches us that the pure doctrine is a wonderful treasure that we should never despise. This warning also teaches us that the devil is alive and well here on earth and that he is acting through men who appear to be very pious and God-fearing. False prophets don't advertise in the Yellow Pages under the heading "False Prophets." They come to us wearing the clothing of sheep, that is, as pious, Bible-believing Christians. They speak smoothly. They profess their love for God and His holy Word. How, then, can we recognize them? If they look like Christians, how can we identify them? Quite simply, not by looking at them! One of the most common misunderstandings of this text is that the "fruit" that Jesus tells us will identify the false prophets is the outward life they are living. That's not so. The outward life they are living may well be the sheep's clothing that disguises their true designs. They will appear as sheep. What you see will be a sheep. But what you hear will be a wolf. So you don't go by what you see. You go by what you hear. What you see means nothing. What you hear means everything.

The fruit of a prophet is his prophecy. The fruit of a teacher is his teaching. So we judge prophets or teachers by their doctrine. How does it compare with the doctrine that Jesus has taught us? If it doesn't jibe with Jesus' teaching it must be rejected. But how is the average Christian to know how to beware of false prophets? How is the average Christian to judge what he hears to be sure that it is the truth of Jesus and not the lies of the devil? Is there a simple way to do this?

Yes, there is. There is a simple way to beware of false prophets as Jesus warns us to do. Memorize the Catechism and recite it every day. The Catechism is the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and what our Lord Jesus said about Baptism, the Keys and Confession, and the Lord's Supper. Luther's explanation of the Catechism asks and answers the question: "What does this mean?"

These chief parts of Christian doctrine are the greatest defense we have on this earth against the powers of the devil. Whenever the father of lies would have us go against God's will for our lives, we who have memorized the Catechism may respond with God's own words to us in the Ten Commandments. No better explanation of the Ten Commandments has been written than what Luther wrote in the Small Catechism. False prophets love to invent rules of conduct that we can obey. We obey the rules and imagine that we are free from sin. But the Catechism won't let us.

Consider, for example, the Eighth Commandment, which forbids us to bear false witness against our neighbor. Listen to Luther's biblical explanation of it: "We should fear and love God that we may not deceitfully belie, betray, slander, nor defame our neighbor, but defend him, speak well of him, and put the best construction on everything."

You say you spoke no lies about your neighbor? But have you talked about him in such a way as to hurt him? Have you repeated things about him that make him look bad? Have you defended him when others belittled him and invited you to join in making sport of putting him down? Have you thought evil of him in your heart and believed things that would make you appear to be smarter or kinder or fairer or wiser than he? Have you obeyed this commandment? Or are you guilty of sin? If so, you need a Savior. Stay with the Catechism.

The Apostles' Creed is the truth and so is the explanation of it in Luther's Small Catechism. It protects us from false prophets. Those who teach that we evolved from a lower animal form of life can be refuted by the simple words: "I believe that God has made me."

The Catechism protects us from those who deny that Jesus Christ is true God and true man. The Jehovah's Witnesses promote the lie that Jesus is the first creation of God and not really and truly God. The Catechism confesses the truth that Jesus Christ is "true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary." Jesus is Jehovah. Confess that to the Jehovah's Witness who knocks on your door. Say it nicely but say it clearly: "Jesus is Jehovah God." This biblical teaching is preserved for us in the Catechism.

The Catechism protects us from the false prophets who teach us to depend on ourselves for our own Christian faith, as if we become Christians by an act of our own will. Listen to these words from Luther's wonderful explanation of the Third Article of the Creed:

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him; but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.

When I was a boy I attended a Lutheran grade school so you would think I would have learned the Catechism. But this was during the sixties when it was no longer stylish in some circles to require children to memorize. The idea was that it mattered much more what we personally thought than that we had committed the Catechism to memory. So we weren't required to recite the Catechism. This was, I suppose, a kinder and gentler way of treating children.

But the false prophets didn't cooperate. They never became kind and gentle. They set out to destroy the faith of those who were not firmly grounded in the pure doctrine of God's Word. Unrepentant sin is deadly. So the false prophets—the ravenous wolves—lure people into a false security as they willfully and without repentance neglect God's Word, embrace sexual immorality, put the acquisition of things above devotion to God's truth, and in many other ways drive out of their lives the Holy Spirit who called them to faith.

Then these same false prophets call into question the saving mysteries revealed to us in Jesus. This keeps those who have lived without repentance from finding the forgiveness they so desperately need. People caught up in a life of defiance of God's Ten Commandments have forgotten the Creed and the gospel it confesses. They've forgotten the meaning of the Lord's Prayer so they don't know how to pray. They don't know what their baptism means, so it's lost any power in their lives. They don't know that they can run to church to hear words that will give them forgiveness. And you can be sure that the false prophets will piously assure them that no mere man wearing a robe can forgive them their sins! They surely won't think that they are worthy to eat and to drink the body and the blood of Jesus that Jesus shed for sinners like themselves and gives to us in the Lord's Supper. And so, as the sheep wallow in the mire of their own ignorance, the wolves attack, scatter, and destroy.

The pure teaching of Christ is the life-giving voice of the Holy Spirit. The Little Catechism, that so often sits on the shelf ignored and regarded as a mere memento of childhood, is a summary of the saving truth that keeps us alive and strong. It is our defense against the lies of every false prophet. When we need to know what God really demands of us, the Ten Commandments will always be a correct and true guide for what is right and what is wrong. When our sins convict our conscience and tell us that God is angry with us, the Creed will always reveal to our hearts a love deeper than our sin. Jesus, true God and true man, our very Lord, will always be the One who has redeemed us and set us free from sin, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood and His innocent suffering and death. The gospel summarized there in the Catechism is pure, wholesome, life-giving food. Just saying those words drives the devil away and shuts the lying mouths of the false prophets who would teach us to trust in something less than the most holy obedience and innocent death of Jesus.

Do you question that God hears you when you pray? Listen to your Catechism: "God would by these words tenderly invite us to believe that He is our true Father, and that we are His true children, so that we may with all boldness and confidence ask Him

as dear children ask their dear father.” Do you wonder if being baptized has any benefit at all? Listen to your Catechism: “It works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare.”

The most deadly lie of the false prophets is that you must atone for your own sins or that you should rely on something in you, your own decision, your own piety, your own obedience, your own good intentions, to find peace with God. In response to this lie, the Catechism reminds you of your Savior’s words of His last will and testament, “Given, and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins,” and reminds you that “in the Sacrament forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given us through these words.”

Brothers and sisters in Christ, beware of the false prophets who would tear you away from the Savior who bought you by His blood. Your Catechism is grounded in the Word of God. It will defend you. In heaven the truth will stand alone and all lies and false teaching will forever be silenced. But we’re not in heaven yet. We live in a dangerous world. Stay with your Catechism. God’s pure doctrine will keep you safe and secure. Amen.