

<sup>15</sup> *“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. <sup>16</sup> By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? <sup>17</sup> Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. <sup>18</sup> A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. <sup>19</sup> Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>20</sup> Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.*

<sup>21</sup> *“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. <sup>22</sup> Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ <sup>23</sup> Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’*

<sup>24</sup> *“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. <sup>25</sup> The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. <sup>26</sup> But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. <sup>27</sup> The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”*

<sup>28</sup> *When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, <sup>29</sup> because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law. (Matthew 7:15-29)*

### **Fruits are Signs of Faith**

I have a really bad record at marrying people. Sadly, a most of the couples I have married are divorced today. It’s so bad that I wouldn’t be surprised if young couples from our congregation told me, “Sorry, pastor, We’re getting married over there because we want our marriage to last.” Of course, the truth is, marriages make it or they don’t based on the effort of the two people who are married to each other. That’s why love is such an important part of marriage. Love is supposed to change us. Even children understand that a person can say “I love you” and then deny it by the way they treat the other person. Love that’s only spoken isn’t real. My point this morning is not to critique your marriages. Rather, it’s the fact that what’s in our hearts comes out in our lives. If I truly love my wife and my children, that should show itself – it should bear fruits. Jesus uses that image of bearing fruit to talk about faith, not love. But it’s the same principle. Faith is trusting that Jesus has taken my sin away and given me eternal life. Faith is what gets me into heaven. But if my faith is real, it has to change me. It has to bear fruit in my life. That’s Jesus’ point to us today: **fruits are signs of faith.**

#### **I.**

He begins with something we might not think of as a fruit of faith. Jesus said, **“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.”** Jesus was not talking to pastors when he said these words. He was talking to people like you, people who believe in their Savior and come to church. And he tells you to watch out for false prophets. What is a false prophet? Jesus describes them as someone who comes dressed in sheep’s clothing. What does that mean? It means they look and sound like us, the sheep. They know how to sound like a Christian pastor. They know the words we use and the traditions we follow. They often sound sincere, and in my experience, they’re often interesting and entertaining. But inwardly they are ravenous wolves. Wolves eat sheep. To a wolf, sheep are nothing more than a way to feel fat and happy for another day. That tells us something about one kind of false prophet: he or she does not come for the good of God’s people. One kind of false prophet is someone who views their ministry as a paycheck and who cares only about their standard of living and their retirement plan.

But that’s not the only kind of false prophet out there. A prophet is a preacher. A true prophet proclaims the good news of Jesus Christ, so he cares deeply about what God’s word says and what it means. He proclaims true doctrine. A true prophet walks in the footsteps of Jesus, who challenged self-righteous sinners, but comforted the hurting and the broken hearted and the guilty. God sends pastors and teachers to care for souls. To be there with Christian love and a listening ear when you need it. Even more, to be there with the law and the gospel when you need it. A true shepherd warns the sheep about sins that will destroy their souls. But above all, he’s there with the good news that Jesus lived and died and rose for us. He’s quick to assure broken hearted sinners that Jesus has wiped all their sins away. But a false prophet tells you what you want to hear. A

false prophet speaks according to the winds that are blowing in our society. A false prophet excuses sin instead of forgiving it and spends a lot of time giving advice, but no time giving Jesus. A false prophet makes you think that Jesus is just an example of the right way to live instead of the one who took your sins away.

Jesus said twice, **“By their fruit you will recognize them.”** He points out that good fruits don’t come from bad trees and bad fruits don’t come from good trees. You don’t pick apples from a thorn bush. So he gives us this test: by their fruits you will recognize them. I find his test to be terrifying. What about all the times that I’ve hurt people’s feelings? What about all the people who I failed to reach or who walked away thinking that all I care about is myself? Jesus is talking about those things, and every true Christian pastor has to fear this statement because every one of us is a bad tree. We were all born sinners and I sin every single day. But Jesus is not saying that our pastors and teachers will be sinless. He’s saying that we will see the fruit in their lives and their work. We will see that love and that pastoral care. We will see them bringing the gospel in every situation. Finally, what Jesus is saying is that we will see their faith. It shows through. The fruit that Jesus is talking about is the fruit of faith. Sincere faith makes sinful, bad trees like me and every pastor or teacher you’ve ever known into good trees, because faith is a miracle God works in us.

Jesus goes on to say that on Judgment Day, many people will say to him **“Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?”** But he will say, **“I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!”** Notice, Jesus doesn’t even bother to check whether they really did drive out demons or perform miracles. Jesus doesn’t bother to look up how many times they said, “Lord! Lord!” – how many times they prayed or how sermons they preached or how pious they looked. He sends them to hell. So the fruits that he’s looking for are not success. They’re not miracles and signs. They’re not putting on a show of praying and invoking God’s name all the time. The fruits of faith are a simple, quiet trust in God. They are a willingness to stand with the broken and give true pastoral care. And they are a commitment to the truth of all that God’s Word says. By their fruits you will recognize them, because **the fruits are signs of faith. Look for fruits in your pastors and teachers.**

## II.

The words we have before us today are really the big finish to the sermon on the mount. Jesus was talking to a large gathering of believers and through them, he was calling all of us to live our faith. One way we do that is by watching out for false prophets. Jesus really puts the responsibility on you. If I fail to proclaim the word of God clearly, if I fail to guide your Christian life in these troubled times according to what God himself says, if I fail to provide the pastoral care you need, then I will have to answer to my Lord for that. And if you do nothing about it when it happens, so will you.

That’s how Jesus connects this big conclusion to all that went before. He says, **“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.”** Notice both parts of what Jesus says. You have to hear his words. If you don’t – if you don’t know what he says and what the truth is – you can’t possibly put that truth into practice. Doctrine matters. It’s God’s teaching and he calls us to demand true doctrine from our pastors and teachers. But Jesus’ real point here is the second part: he who hears Jesus’ words and *puts them into practice* builds his house on a rock. What would that look like? Starting where Jesus started, it would mean being on guard against false prophets. To do that, we have to know God’s word. The more deeply we drink of the gospel, the more clear it’s going to be when a pastor or teacher loses their way doctrinally or simply does not live their faith.

But there’s more to it than that. Building our house on the rock means a life that is oriented to Christ, not to the ideas of this world. It means that we, too, show those fruits of faith and we structure our lives to produce them. In other words, we do the hard things that God calls us to do. The list of those things, of course, is endless. It’s the way we treat our spouses and parents and children. It’s the way we avoid thoughtless and hurtful comments. In 2020, it’s our attitude toward wearing masks in church and in the grocery store and our attitude toward people who think differently than we do. It’s how we respond to issues of racism and prejudice in our society, and again, how we interact with those we disagree with. It’s whether we’re willing to hear things about our own need to repent and whether we’re willing to examine ourselves. And it’s coming here, week after week, to receive forgiveness for all those real sins we have to recognize in our lives, so that we can be at peace in our hearts. That peace is what we use to build new and holy lives.

If we don’t do those things, we’re building our lives on sand. Not because doing those things saves us. It doesn’t. Faith saves us. Christ saves us. But he also calls us to follow him. A sincere faith in him changes

our attitudes and our words and our actions. Faith isn't just something that surfaces here once a week. Faith is something that conditions our lives every single day. When we let other things, other ideas, other priorities shape our lives, then we are building our lives on sand.

And Jesus promises us that a life built on him can withstand any storm. It stands up under loss and pain. It stands up under upheaval in society and even revolution. It stands in the face natural disasters and plagues and poverty. Not because we find some reserve of inner strength to overcome those things, but because true faith clings to Jesus. And he never fails us. But a life that's built on the pursuit of money and comfort, or popularity, or even the pursuit of a perfect society, is a life built on sand. And that life will not be ready for the storms and the floods that every person in this sinful has to face. And our faith will fall. And the fall will be great. It will be tragic beyond words, because losing our faith can only lead to hell.

So where is our faith founded, my friends? Can any of us claim that Jesus always comes first in our hearts? How often don't we let the media or the times we live in drive our attitudes? In these last weeks and months, how many of us have let fear drive our choices? How many of us have let selfishness and what we want drive our actions? There is an idol worshipper in our hearts and he wants us to bow down to anything other than the one true God. And the last six months have given him free reign to worship our comfort and bellyache about how bad we've got it, to worship our political party and attack the other side, to worship our intellect and believe we have the answers to how people should deal with COVID or with racism, to worship ourselves and hate everyone who disagrees with us. All that is building our lives on the sand. And it can only lead to hell.

But Jesus came. He lived a life that was totally focused on God and his word. He lived a life of perfect love for his Father and for all the people around him. He did that because we needed a perfect life to erase all our failure, and he loved us, so that's what he gave us. And then he went to the cross and died for all our idol worship and sin. He died for all the times we said the right things but utterly failed to actually live by them. He died for all that's wrong with our faith, and he paid for it all. Then he rose and we are forgiven. He rose and we will live with him in heaven. Every time he tells us that, he renews our faith and our commitment to building our house on the rock. **Fruits are a sign of faith. Produce fruits because you stand on Jesus.**

As good Christians and good Lutherans, we know that works don't save us. The fruits of our faith do not get us into heaven. Being a good pastor doesn't save me. Being good members doesn't save you. Faith does. Trust in Jesus gets us into heaven. But Jesus' point today is that if you have that faith, there will be fruits. And all true fruits are proof that faith is living in your heart. Produce those fruits of faith. Amen.