

Three Marks of Religious Deceivers.

Text: Jer 23:21-32

Suggested Hymns:

197, 202, 330, 289, 423

- 1) They Are Not Sent By God,
But Come Of Their Own Accord
- 2) They Do Not Preach God's Word,
But Their Own Ideas
- 3) They Do Not Profit The People,
But Cause Them To Err

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Jeremiah 23:21-32, ²¹ ***“I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran. I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied. ²² But if they had stood in My counsel, And had caused My people to hear My words, Then they would have turned them from their evil way And from the evil of their doings.***

²³ ***“Am I a God near at hand,” says the LORD, “And not a God afar off? ²⁴ Can anyone hide himself in secret places, So I shall not see him?” says the LORD; “Do I not fill heaven and earth?” says the LORD.***

²⁵ ***“I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in My name, saying, ‘I have dreamed, I have dreamed!’ ²⁶ “How long will this be in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies? Indeed they are prophets of the deceit of their own heart, ²⁷ “who try to make My people forget My name by their dreams which everyone tells his neighbor, as their fathers forgot My name for Baal.***

²⁸ ***“The prophet who has a dream, let him tell a dream; And he who has My word, let him speak My word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat?” says the LORD. ²⁹ “Is not My word like a fire?” says the LORD, “And like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?***

³⁰ ***Therefore behold, I am against the prophets,” says the LORD, “who steal My words every one from his neighbor. ³¹ “Behold, I am against the prophets,” says the LORD, “who use their tongues and say, ‘He says.’ ³² “Behold, I am against those who prophesy false dreams,” says the LORD, “and tell them, and cause My people to err by their lies and by their recklessness. Yet I did not***

send them or command them; therefore they shall not profit this people at all,” says the LORD. (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Both you and I have two kinds of enemies — open foes and secret, deceitful adversaries. Just as Jesus was opposed by declared enemies¹ and secret traitors,² so we also are surrounded by both of these.

Among the most harmful, dangerous, and treacherous of these are the men who come to us telling us that they are messengers of God, but in fact they are the most vile deceivers. At times the Bible calls these men “false prophets,”³ at other times they are called “hirelings,”⁴ “idle talkers and deceivers,”⁵ and “heretics or divisive men.”⁶ One of the most apt names given to these treacherous people is “wolves in sheep’s clothing” as we heard in the Gospel Lesson before.⁷

Let us ask ourselves a question: *“Do you think that your Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, would warn you so earnestly against these men if you were not in danger of being deceived by them?”* I think not.

But you may now ask: *How shall I guard myself against these insidious foes?* This very question is answered in our text. Let us consider the *Three Marks of Religious Deceivers*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. They Are Not Sent By God, But Come Of Their Own Accord.

The first mark of a wolf in sheep’s clothing is the one mentioned in the first verse of our text, *I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran. I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied.*

But how do we know that a prophet is sent by God? At one time God often called a preacher of His Word directly, for example - Moses, Isaiah, and St. Paul.

But now God calls and sends pastors through the call extended to them by the church. That custom began already in the days of the apostles, for we read that the disciples chose Matthias to be numbered with the eleven apostles.⁸

We read also that the disciples at Antioch, guided by the Holy Spirit, ordained and chose and sent Barnabas and Saul to go forth and proclaim the Gospel in other places.⁹

Likewise Paul told Timothy to commit the doctrines which he had heard of Paul to faithful men who were able to teach others also.¹⁰ The same Apostle Paul writes to Titus that he, the apostle, had for this very cause left Titus in Crete that Titus should appoint elders in every city.¹¹

This practise we have followed in the Lutheran Church down to the present day. God wants to make known His will concerning His pastors and shepherds through the flock. That man, therefore, whom the Christians of a congregation have called to preach God's Word to us, he is the one whom God has sent to us with His Word.

On the other hand the false prophets, the deceivers in religion, are neither called by the congregation, nor are they sent with a message from God. As our text states, "*yet they ran.*" God did not speak to them, but yet they come and pretend to be God's messengers.

There were many of these in Old Testament times. Some of them even performed miracles.¹² Moses had to warn his people against them again and again. In later years they increased. They were especially common in Samaria.

At all times these hirelings have come to live upon the flock of Jesus. They never ask, *What does God want? Does God send me?* Their question is, *How may I reap riches, renown, honour, and power as a religious teacher and leader.*

Let us note that the Lord Jesus calls our attention to the fact that these men often appear among us in sheep's clothing; that is to say, they have all the appearance of belonging to the flock of Christ.

They run, they are full of zeal; they teach, they seem to have authority; the world hears them, they are popular. Who can deny that we have such in Christendom to this very day? Let us be warned. It is the voice of the Good Shepherd saying to us, *Beware!*

2. They Do Not Preach God's Word, But Their Own Ideas.

The second mark which our text points out as a characteristic of these religious deceivers is that they do not preach God's word, but their own dreams.

Some of these deceivers tell us outright that the Bible is an old book and that there are new revelations. They make no secret of it that they do not agree with all of the things in the Bible. Either they claim that they have received a new message from God, or that through scientific reasoning they have discovered the truth about this matter and have a new message for a new day.

These people try to substantiate their claim by telling us that mankind has made advances and that we can no longer accept in simple faith what our ancestors accepted thousands of years ago.

Let us remember, however, that there may be many changes and new discoveries, but there are some things which do not change. Our multiplication table has not changed one bit since the beginning of the world. When Adam lived, two times two was four, and two times two is four today, and two times two will always be four.

And just so the fundamental revealed truths of God's Word are eternally the same. No philosophy, no reasoning, no science, can change these eternal truths.

Another class of deceivers claims to be in full agreement with the Bible; in fact, they claim to be teaching the Bible. But they pervert the Word of God, teaching immersionism, Romanism, or other rationalistic and fanatical teachings which they try to grace with Scriptural phrases and pious sounding vanities.

These people at times say much in honour of the Lord Jesus. They may call Him Lord; they may call Him a divine man; they may promise us great results from their preaching; and they may even perform lying miracles.

But let us beware! Let us keep in mind what God told His people Israel in the Old Testament, Deuteronomy chapter 13. Even though such men perform miracles, we should not follow their false teachings.

Part of this chapter reads, ¹ *"If there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, and he gives you a sign or a wonder,* ² *"and the sign or the wonder comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying, 'Let us go after other gods' -- which you have not known -- 'and let us serve them,'* ³ *"you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, for the LORD*

your God is testing you to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

⁴ “You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear Him, and keep His commandments and obey His voice, and you shall serve Him and hold fast to Him.

Also in our day the messenger of God is not to be tested by miracles, but, as our text states, *he who has My word, let him speak My word faithfully.* Let us always be ready to use the proper criterion, the measuring-rod of God, as we read in Isaiah 8:20, *²⁰ To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.*

Likewise we read in John 8:31-32, *³¹ Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, “If you [continue] in My word, you are My disciples indeed. ³² “And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”*

There are many deceivers of this kind in the world! Centuries ago our fathers uttered the complaint, as the hymnist writes¹³

Those haughty spirits, Lord, restrain
Who o’er Thy Church with might would reign
And always set forth something new,
Devised to change Thy doctrine true.”

How many “new” isms have come since that day! Let us pray daily that God would keep us in His Word and truth, so that we may always recognise and love the voice of our Good Shepherd alone.

But is it of such great importance that we avoid every religious error? Indeed it is. Our text points out a third mark of religious deceivers.

3. They Do Not Profit The People, But Cause Them To Err

Our text says, *³² “Behold, I am against those who prophesy false dreams,” says the LORD, “and tell them, and cause My people to err by their lies and by their recklessness. Yet I did not send them or command them; therefore they shall not profit this people at all,” says the LORD.*

God's Word is a word of salvation. Just as God Himself has provided for our body the proper food and drink, so in His Word He has given the proper food and drink to our souls.

There is no fanaticism, there is no deception, there is no superstition, in God's Word. In His holy Law, God makes known to us the exact nature of sin. He does not tell us exactly how to fold our hands, what kind of clothing to wear, whether to kneel or to stand up, but He does tell us to love God above all things and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

He denounces those people who *pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.*¹⁴ He condemns those who *cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence.*¹⁵

Can you see how Luther was made to err by false teachers when he was told that he must take the vows of the cloister, he must fast and bring the sacrifice of the Mass for his sins? That false teaching of the Law would have made of Luther a hypocrite, a fanatic, and perhaps driven him insane.

And no one knows what fearful error, what mischief, what harm, has come through the false teaching of the Law among men. Not only the Inquisition of Rome, but also the Puritans of England and other fanatics have brought shame, misery, and gloom upon mankind, in part, even eternal damnation, through their errors and tyranny.

Worst of all, however, is this, that the Gospel is not preached in its truth and purity. God wants us to become rich through the Gospel. In His Gospel He gives us the unsearchable riches of Christ, forgiveness of sins here and *an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you.*¹⁶

False teachers, religious deceivers, cheat us out of our inheritance and our spiritual riches. Therefore let us beware lest the glad tidings, which God intends for all people be perverted, adulterated, corrupted, by the foolish surmises, conjectures, and errors of these religious deceivers!

How happy was St. Paul in the truth of the Gospel when he exclaimed in Romans 8:31-39, *If God is for us, who can be against us?*³² *He who did not*

spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? ³³ Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.

³⁴ Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." ³⁷ Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.

³⁸ For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

How happy is the person who can with full confidence say¹⁷

Rock of ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee;
Let the water and the blood,
From Thy riven side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure:
Cleanse me from its guilt and power.

Not the labours of my hands
Can fulfil Thy law's demands;
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears for ever flow,
All for sin could not atone:
Thou must save, and Thou alone.

Let no one deceive you with vain words, my dear hearers. No, and even if *an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you*¹⁸ than the unsearchable riches of Christ, do not be deceived. Cling to your Saviour, ***Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown.***¹⁹ Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

- ¹ John 8:48
- ² Matthew 22:16, Luke 22:21-22
- ³ Matthew 7:15
- ⁴ John 10:12-13
- ⁵ Titus 1:10
- ⁶ Titus 3:10
- ⁷ Matthew 7:15-23
- ⁸ Acts 1:21-25
- ⁹ Acts 13:1-4
- ¹⁰ 2 Timothy 2:2
- ¹¹ Titus 1:5, see also Acts 14:23, 2 Tim 2:2
- ¹² Deuteronomy 13:1-3
- ¹³ LH 260, ALHB 273, ELHB 110 v6, TLH 292
- ¹⁴ Matthew 23:23
- ¹⁵ Matthew 23:25
- ¹⁶ 1 Peter 1:4
- ¹⁷ Hymn 330
- ¹⁸ Galatians 1:8
- ¹⁹ Revelation 3:11