

### ***The City that Kills the Prophets***

In the name of him in whom we are saved by grace alone through faith alone, dear friends in Christ: As I mentioned before the service, this morning's Gospel is not the traditional lesson for Reformation Sunday; but it does fall immediately after the readings we've been following in St. Matthew's Gospel for the past several weeks. And because it's a text that never shows up in the lectionary, and that just happens to fit the Reformation theme quite well, I thought this would be a good time to address it.

So let me remind you what's been going on as we've been working our way through Matthew's Gospel. It's the last week of Jesus' public ministry, which began with Palm Sunday when our Lord entered the city of Jerusalem with much fanfare. And now for the past couple of days he's been at the Temple duking it out with the religious leaders, namely the Scribes, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees, all of whom are against Jesus. They are envious of his popularity and opposed to his teachings, and so they have been arguing with him and trying to trip him up with trick questions in an effort to find grounds to have him charged with false doctrine. That way he'll lose his public support and they'll be able to have him condemned.

But things didn't work out that way. Every time they came at Jesus with a question, their plans backfired. Instead of tripping him up, they made themselves look bad. They only showed how little they knew and understood the Scriptures. And so last week we heard how they finally gave up trying to outwit Jesus. They realized that when debating theology with him it's better to be silent and appear to be fools than to open their mouths and prove it. Thus Jesus effectively silenced his foes; but that didn't make them any less angry or resentful. No, it was all the more reason for them to want to destroy him. And if that weren't enough, it's immediately after Jesus shames them into silence that he launches into the full-scale attack that we heard from the lectern just a bit ago.

Turning to the crowd of onlookers, Jesus denounces the religious leaders for the corrupt, hypocritical, theologically incompetent scoundrels that they are. He says they sit in the seat of Moses; that is, they are the guys properly in charge of the Temple. It's their job to oversee religious matters and lead the people in worship. And for that reason, out of respect for their offices, he tells his followers that they must listen to them. But don't do what they do. Nor, he says, should they believe their teachings because by their doctrines they are shutting the doors of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces and leading them straight to hell.

Jesus doesn't mince any words about this. He follows up by pronouncing a series of woes on the Scribes and Pharisees. *Woe* is a word that we don't use much in our day. It sounds kind of archaic to hear someone say, "Oh, woe is me!" And what does it mean, anyway? If we heard that most of us would suppose that the speaker has suffered some kind of tragedy and is upset or sorrowful about it. But that's not really the idea. *Woe* means destruction, doom, death, and condemnation. When Jesus pronounces woes on the religious leaders, he's not saying "You better watch out because bad things may be coming your way". No, he's saying "You guys are dead. The Lord is as angry as he can be, and he's about to rain total destruction down upon you."

Can you imagine how that sounded to the people who were listening? Think about it: these men Jesus was tearing down were the ones they had spent their whole lives looking up

to. They were the priests and the teachers of Israel. And you have to understand that the Temple mount in Jerusalem was the center of worship for the one true God. It's not like there were other options or other places you could go if you wanted to be a true believer. No. It was the only place on earth where the true and living God dwelt on earth among men. It was the only place where sacrifices could be offered, the only place Passover lambs could be slain, the only place where God declared the forgiveness of sins through the shedding of blood. And here the very men who were supposed to be doing these sacrifices and teaching us what they were all about are the ones Jesus is condemning as blind guides leading the unwary into the pit of hell. If you were listening to Jesus say these things, you'd be left wondering, "Who's right here? Is it this one man, Jesus, or is it all our religious leaders whom we've been trusting with our spiritual welfare all these years?" Well, we know how the majority of them answered that question. Just a couple of days later they joined their leaders in calling for Jesus' death. And by so doing they fulfilled the words of Jesus who called Jerusalem "the city that kills the prophets" – the prophets sent by God to proclaim his words and set things right in his Church.

And what were the religious leaders teaching that was so wrong – that got Jesus so upset? Simply this: Law rather than Gospel. From a divine point of view, the Temple in Jerusalem existed for just one reason. It was where sacrifices were to be offered so that through the shedding of blood God could declare the forgiveness of sins. The idea was this: we are sinners who deserve to die eternally. God would be perfectly justified in sending us to hell forever. It's where we belong. But in his great mercy and love he created a way for us to escape that fate. He said, "I tell you what: you bring in your lambs and goats other sacrificial animals, and I'll put your sins on them. They will die for you – in your place – and trusting in my mercy, I'll judge you as if you'd never sinned. I'll call you my perfect children, and you can live before me in a righteousness that is not your own but that is my gift to you."

That was the way it was supposed to be. But that's not what the religious leaders were teaching. They were saying instead that the only way to live before God was to keep all of his commandments – and they imagined that they were doing just that. Yes, they still offered the sacrifices; but not for themselves: they didn't need God's forgiveness (or so they thought). That was for you lesser people, who don't do such a good job of keeping God's commands. And even then, they robbed the sacrifices of the idea of God's grace. It wasn't that God mercifully put your sins on the animals and let them die for you; it was more like it was your sacrifice – the price you paid in offering the lamb – that's what earned God's favor. It wasn't you receiving the gift of God's forgiveness; it was you paying for God's forgiveness by the offering of a sacrifice. It wasn't about God's grace to declare you righteous; it was about what you did – your work – to make yourself righteous. But the Scriptures are clear about this: by the works of the Law no one is righteous in the sight of God. And anyone who imagines that he stands before the Lord based upon his own work and merit is under the wrath, curse, and condemnation of God.

And by now it should be plain why this is such a good text for Reformation Sunday. By the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, history had repeated itself. The Church of Jesus Christ (in western Europe anyway) had gone from declaring God's gift of the Gospel – that sinners are declared righteous in his sight by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus, who is the Lamb of God who died as the sacrifice for the sins of the world—gone from that, to teaching salvation by a mixture of faith in Jesus and the many works people had to do to make themselves righteous, with a heavy emphasis on the latter. Make no mistake: The Gospel was there in the Church. They spoke about the atoning death of Jesus; but it was so obscured and clouded over with silly things the religious leaders were teaching had to be done to please God and to make up for sins that few people ever found it. They ended up trusting in themselves rather than in Christ – which is a

terrible place to be because you're always left wondering if you've done enough (and that, of course, is impossible).

And when, by God's grace, the truth of the Gospel was rediscovered initially by Martin Luther and later by other reformers, history continued to repeat itself. Once again the Church, the New Jerusalem, became the city that killed the prophets – the prophets sent by God to proclaim his Word and set things right again. As you may know, Luther himself was expelled from the Church, declared a heretic and an outlaw, and a huge price was placed on his head. The Church wanted him dead. And if he'd been captured, he would certainly have been burned at the stake. As it turns out, God graciously protected Luther and allowed him to continue his work of restoring the truths the Roman Church had thrown out or hidden. Many others, however, who placed their trust in the rediscovered Gospel, were martyred – many of them dying under some of the cruelest tortures you can imagine. And oddly enough the men who inflicted these tortures on them thought they were doing the Lord's work – just as did those who arranged to have Christ condemned and crucified.

Now, some of you may have a hard time believing it, but it isn't my purpose today to criticize the Roman Catholic Church and its teachings that unfortunately totally confuse Law and Gospel. I praise God that unlike some others, that church body still has the Gospel, even though it's hard to find it amid some of the other stuff they teach. But we've left that church – or to be more precise, they threw us out. Now we have our own Church, our own confessions that beautifully and accurately express the faith once delivered to the Apostles; and in that sense we are living in our own New Jerusalem.

And that's why we have to be on our guard; because Jerusalem is the city that kills the prophets. What do I mean? Just this: the worst threats to the truth of the Gospel don't come from outside the Church; they come from within it. They come from our own religious teachers. They come from people with the best of intentions. They come from people who we naturally expect are the good guys – people who are living outwardly righteous lives and who are saying things that make a lot of sense—that make sense especially to that part of our sinful natures that wants to justify itself.

Let me give you an example. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries there was a movement that grew up within the Lutheran Church called Pietism. It started as an effort to encourage people to be more godly in the way they lived their lives. You see, the Pietists were upset to see so many people claiming to be Christian and saying that they trusted in Jesus but who were behaving badly. The Pietists thought the institutional Lutheran Church wasn't doing enough to promote home Bible study and prayer and good works like helping the poor and needy. And so what they did was to set up these little home fellowship groups in which they would gather to do the things they thought the Church was neglecting. Well, that all sounds good, doesn't it? Sure.

But what happened? Soon they began to think of themselves as the true believers. Those folks who just went to church on Sunday, who confessed their sins and received God's forgiveness in the Absolution, who heard God's Word in the readings and listened to the pastor's sermon that explained what God said, and who ate Christ's body and drank his blood in the Sacrament of the Altar ... well, they were lesser Christians. They didn't meet in one of our home groups. That's where the real Christians were found – the good ones, who did good things, and who were super spiritual. To take it a step farther, before long they began to despise the things that went on in the organized church. Who needs Baptism? Who needs confession and absolution? Who needs a pastor to teach us? Who needs the Lord's Supper? All that is for those lesser Christians who aren't doing a good job living the faith anyway.

Obviously those things don't work – and we're doing so much better on our own without that stuff. We know because we are actually living the Christian life. We see it in the way we do good things all the time. Thus they became Pharisees, trusting not in Christ and God's mercy, but in their own imagined righteousness. And I probably don't need to tell you what happened when faithful people of God who did trust in Christ alone tried to correct their way of thinking. No, to the best of my knowledge they didn't actually kill any of those prophets; but I do know that some faithful pastors were driven out and imprisoned in Germany simply for proclaiming the truth of the Gospel. As a matter fact, our own Missouri Synod was formed initially by faithful Christians who fled from Germany precisely because they weren't allowed to be Lutherans in the land of Luther.

So, in summary, what I'm saying is that the Church tends to be its own worst enemy. And the reason for that is simple enough: it's made up of sinners, sinners who desperately want to believe that being in the Church somehow makes them better. And once they imagine that they are better, well, then they don't need the forgiveness purchased at so high a cost by the Lord Jesus as much anymore, do they?

Listen: the Church of Jesus Christ doesn't make sinners better. It doesn't reform them. That's impossible. What the true Church is supposed to be is the city that *kills* sinners like us. It's supposed to make us dead. It's supposed to proclaim God's Law in all its severity to pronounce woe upon woe on us so that we will give up our imagined goodness and self-righteousness and die. Then, and only then, can it make us alive by the proclamation of God's forgiveness in Christ who died that sinners might live – live by grace alone through faith alone in what Jesus alone has done for sinners.

In this Reformation age there are two kinds of churches: there are those that kill the prophets God sends and those that kill sinners. Now and always, may our gracious God and Father make us members of the latter kind, that sin in us may ever be dying and that Christ may ever be raising us to new life in him. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***