

Sermon by Ted Mosebach
First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
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Living the Faith

(Fourth in series, *Christian Wisdom for Life, Ten Easy Verses*)

Not everyone who says, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. -Matthew 7:21-

(Supporting Text – Matthew 7:15-20; 24-27)

False religion can be a very dangerous thing. Who might deny that? Many of the greatest problems of the most recent decade can be traced to atrocities committed in the name of religion. Our own country fought two wars in the past ten years in response to mass murder committed by people who thought God wanted them to do it. The wars themselves resulted in the deaths of over a hundred thousand more people, the vast majority innocent civilians. How much money is now spent on security throughout the world because of false religion, which money might otherwise be spent to feed and clothe and heal? Over all history, how many civil wars permitted, excused, or even motivated by false religion have split nations apart resulting finally in divided up blood soaked land, Sudan now among the most recent? True religion is always peaceful, never violent. Today, we might hardly make a mistake about it. False religion can be a very dangerous thing.

Yet the danger is not new. Jesus understood it long ago.

Beware of false prophets, he said, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree can not bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits.

Jesus said that two thousand years ago. There have always been people who have realized the power of religious commitment and sought to manipulate it for very unreligious ends. Some false prophets are wonderfully charismatic, others are masters of intoxicating rhetoric, while others have simply a strength of personality that might enable

them to sell wood stoves in Aruba. When people with those talents claim religion as their cause they can get others to camp out on a mountain to wait for the second coming, or give up all their money to the leader and even turn over their social security checks each month, or strap on a suicide vest and blow themselves up along with dozens of others. If there was ever a time when the bad fruit of false religion was more menacing, or when the good fruit of true religion was more needed in the world than today, I don't know when that time was.

And really, let's not complicate the difference between the good fruit of true religion and the bad fruit of false religion. In the final analysis, distinguishing good fruit from bad fruit and thus the people of true religion from people of false religion is as simple as separating sheep from goats. In the final analysis, Jesus said, *I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. (Matthew 25:35,36)* It really is not complicated. The good fruit of true religion is acts of compassion and mercy, or as the memory verse from last week put it, *to do justice and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8)* No matter what else a person says or does, if the defining characteristics of that person's life and his or her religious organization are not acts of compassionate love, then that person is not right with God and the organization is not truly religious; to use a biblical phrase, he or she is a false prophet who is promoting a false religion. It really is not complicated, but if ever there is time when the difference between true religion and false needs to be clear, it is now.

Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, Jesus said, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord did we not prophecy in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' Then I will say to them, I never knew you; go away from me you evil doers.

So it's not just words, is it? Christianity is not just a matter of contemplation and creedal affirmation. It is not just theology. It is a way of living. I still think there is such a thing as a Christian lifestyle although the term has been used more commonly over recent decades to refer to one's sexual orientation. That is a great loss for those of us who think that living a Christian lifestyle has nothing to do with sexual orientation although it does include how one expresses one's sexuality because that has to do with how one treats other people. How a person treats other people is always central to a Christian lifestyle. But wouldn't the following characteristics also define a Christian lifestyle: generosity— thinking of money as a means of helping others as well as bringing pleasure to oneself, but generosity also of forgiveness and all manner of kindness and thoughtfulness, and integrity— in business and personal transactions, in speaking with others as well as in self-reflection, able to admit personal wrong coupled with an unwillingness to quickly blame everyone else.

Everyone who hears these words of mine, Jesus continued, and acts on them (Isn't that great, acts on them? In other words creates his or her life around them.), is like a wise man who built his house on a rock. The rains came, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on the house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. When our lives are lived according to the principles of God's love, is there not over time a strength about them that when difficult times come, those actions prove to be for us like a rugged spiritual infrastructure of steel beam and cable, bending in the storm, but sustained by a deep foundation that doesn't let us collapse?

Let us know this. God is not fooled. God knows who's who and what's what. We can not fool God, we can only fool ourselves. *If you love me, Jesus said, you will keep my commandments. (John 14:15) Not everyone who says, I believe in God, not everyone who says, Allah Akbar; Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.*

Let us not be confused by people who would claim to be faithful to God but who live lives of hatred and violence. Their words have no value. True religion is really not all that complicated. But when you encounter a person whose life is built upon love freely given, who calls Jesus Lord and then shows God's love, then maybe they might also have something to say.