

Trinity 8 (2024)

According to the United States Department of Treasury, between \$70 million and \$200 million in counterfeit bills are in circulation at any given time. Some of these fakes are easily spotted, others take more scrutiny.

Back in the '90s, I was involved in a counterfeiting operation. Before you jump to conclusions, let me explain . . . I rode with our local sheriff to a home in Mineral Bluff where a couple were printing fake notes. Of course, Secret Service men were with us and took charge of the investigation. My part in the operation was to take pictures since I had a camera.

One thing I found interesting at the crime scene was that the couple buried the fake notes in the ground for a certain period of time. Apparently, this step softened and slightly

yellowed the paper, thus making the notes appear more authentic and easier to pass.

But counterfeit currency is not the only fakes one needs to be on guard against. Jesus in today's Gospel warns His followers against two other 'counterfeits': **false prophets** and **false professors of religion**.

Both, on the surface, appear to be the genuine article but upon closer examination they are revealed to be what they are -- fakes.

The first is the man whose preaching is unsound; the other is the one who makes extravagant statements about his love for God but whose actions contradict his words.

Both sorts were around in Jesus' day and are still very much with us today. We, no less than Jesus' first hearers, need to be on guard.

Let's look at each, beginning with the first, **false prophets.**

A prophet is one who represents God to others; a false prophet is one who misrepresents God.

In Jesus' day there were members of the Jewish religious establishment who fit this category. They claimed to be eagerly looking for the arrival of the promised Messiah; yet when He showed up – when Jesus came -- they not only failed to believe themselves but attempted to keep others from believing.

Among other things, they misattributed his miracles of casting out evil spirits to Beelzebub, the chief of devils, a totally ridiculous suggestion, but that is how desperate they were to discredit him.

And, then as time went along, they plotted His death.

They dressed the part, played to role, but were in fact counterfeits.

But there were others as well who qualify as false prophets. Both before and after Jesus, there were a number of would-be messiahs. Their usual course of action was to raise an army and lead an insurrection against the Roman occupiers of Palestine. Almost without exception, these false messiahs ended up on a Roman cross and were soon forgotten.

In Matthew 24 Jesus says: **“For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.”**

In the verses that follow, He says, Don't believe them. Don't go out to see them.

One such military leader which came after Jesus, was a man by the name of Simon bar Kokhba. In 132 AD, he and his rebels managed to establish a Jewish state that last for about three years.

With his rise to power, coins actually began being minted with the year 1 indicating that the kingdom of God had begun.

Kokhba escaped crucifixion; but in 135 AD was killed by Roman troops.

And as we move along thought history, we find many other examples of those who might be labeled false prophets.

One such man was an Episcopal bishop who acquired considerable notoriety in the '90s. His name, John Shelby Spong. He was the Bishop of Newark.

He claimed he wanted to save Christianity from its mythological past and thus revitalize the church. As time went along, he denied most of the articles of the Creed and in the end gave up belief in a theistic being.

He wrote a number of books, and some were swept away by his heterodox views. His dream of revitalizing the Church, however, did not materialize.

One news commentator went on to say:
"Spong claimed he represented the future [of the Church] even as his diocese lost nearly half its membership,"

And, of course, today the airways and internet are full of celebrity preachers with slicked-back hair who talk a good line, who peddle a feel-good gospel, a gospel in which the cross is left behind. Often, they amass a great following. But popularity is not the test of authenticity in a prophet.

What was Jesus' test? /// It was and is: **“By their fruits ye shall know them.”**

Does their preaching foster the fruit of the spirit? Qualities like: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control?

Does it bring about a better understanding of the scriptures, thus enabling their followers to meet the challenges of the culture around them?

Will their adherents be able to meet future challenges . . . the challenge of Islam, for example.

Is their Christianity an inch deep and a mile wide?

Again, Jesus' warning in today's Gospel remains very relevant. Look-a-likes abound.

Stay on the safe path yourself. Flee from such teachers.

And, of course, Jesus' words in this passage stand as a warning to all entrusted with the oversight of God's people, me included. They remind us of the awesomeness of our task. They remind us to stay on course.

We move now to the second half of today's Gospel. In these verses Jesus turns from false prophets to **false professors of religion**, concluding with the well-known verse:

“Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven” (v. 21).

I like how William Barclay summarizes Jesus' message: **“Fine words can never be a substitute for fine deeds.”**

I once knew a woman who was full of fine words. She could not open her mouth without a religious epitaph or slogan coming out

If she “God bless you” once during a conversation, she did it a hundred times. That was her way, and it would have been fine if her walk had matched her talk, but it did not.

All the time she was blessing you, she was siphoning off money from the escrow account of her employer, a local attorney.

When she was found out, it was devastating to him and his practice, as well as to her. Not only did she lose her job and had to face legal charges, she lost her credibility as a Christian.

Thereafter, she was seen as a counterfeit.

Let me hasten to say, she was not beyond redemption. Hopefully, she repented and became a better person following this lapse.

That is the great thing about our God. He does not ‘cancel’. He stands ready to receive penitent sinners, to salvage and save.

“This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief,” says Paul in 1 Timothy 1:15.

This is the Gospel of Christ! Believe it. Make it your own. Let Him do a work of grace in your life.

At times, I dare say, we have all been guilty of talking the talk and not walking the walk.

Our studied aim, however, should not be staying in that place but growing into the likeness of Christ. I like the quote Alice Griggs, one of Gwen Skelton’s caregivers, put on Facebook yesterday: **“May Jesus be seen in me, in spite of me.”**

If this is our prayer, we are on the right track. We are no false professors, no counterfeit currency.

Throughout Trinity-tide, the season in which we now find ourselves, we have been looking at living the Good News . . . growing in grace, understanding and service.

The Christian journey begins with ticking the box labeled “I believe,” but it does not end there.

No, there are sins to be overcome. There are new skills to be learned. They are things for which we must be on the lookout, two of which are false prophets and false professors of religion, both counterfeits.

Jesus said, “Beware”. His words still stand. Keep your eyes open. Don’t let down your guard. Go on to the finish line.

