

Followers—Expect Divisions

Jeremiah 23:16-29—The Truth Divides, But the True Unites

Raise your hand if you've ever used "Snopes." For those of you who've never heard of it, Snopes is an online fact-checking website, designed to confirm or deny rumors or "facts" that spread around the internet. Surprisingly, Snopes has been around since 1994, but its popularity has really blown up in the last decade. In 2017, the site averaged 20 million unique users every month, 70% of which were Americans.

I think that's a product of our culture. Social media sites like Facebook and Twitter allow misinformation or exaggerated reality to spread quickly and easily to thousands of people. And as fiction gets consumed as fact and shared with others to "prove" certain views or agendas, it gets hard to discern what is true. As Abraham Lincoln once said, "Don't trust everything you read on the internet."

The spread of such misinformation has had vast negative effects on some already volatile relationships. Lies spread about political parties, race relations, gun control, immigration, and religion cause divisions to grow increasingly more divisive. But sometimes, the truth divides too. That's what Jesus says in today's Gospel: ***"Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division."*** As we'll see this morning, ***The Truth Divides, But the Truth Unites.***

Fake news isn't just a modern problem though. It was an issue 2,600 years ago in Jeremiah's day too. Jeremiah spoke on God's behalf to the people of Judah for 40 years around 600 B.C. Over 100 years earlier, God had punished the Northern Tribes of Israel for idolatry and unbelief by sending the Assyrians to carry them off into exile. A century later, their brothers in the Kingdom of Judah hadn't learned from Israel's example.

So God sent Jeremiah to warn the people and leaders of Judah that if they refused to repent of their idolatry, injustice, and unbelief, he would send the Babylonians to carry them off into exile too. Unsurprisingly, his message didn't win Jeremiah a lot of friends. On numerous occasions, people plotted to kill him, and constantly tried to discredit or downplay his message.

Among Jeremiah's enemies was a group of prophets who claimed that God had also sent them dreams and visions. But instead of warning the people of coming judgment, these prophets told them, "Ignore Jeremiah! Keep living how you want. There's no judgment coming. Everything will be just fine!" With two vastly different opposing prophetic messages being proclaimed as "from God," how could the people know which was true, and which was a lie?

Which do you think the people of Judah wanted to hear? The call for reform and repentance? Or the message that affirmed their behavior? But what people want to hear isn't always what they need to hear. So out of these two opposing messages, the people needed to know whose message was really from God: the prophets who proclaimed, ***"It shall be well with you. No disaster shall come upon you,"*** or Jeremiah's warnings of judgment.

Jeremiah warned the people, ***"Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you." They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD.*** He adds, ***"How long will this continue in the hearts of these lying prophets, who prophesy the delusions of their own minds."***

One way to discern which message was true was by understanding where the prophecies came from. The affirming message of the other prophets came from their own minds and hearts, not God's mouth. As God reveals, he didn't commission these prophets to speak for him, but they came and spoke in his name anyways. But how can you tell? Who's to say Jeremiah didn't make up his message?

Think about this. A prophet trying to win over the people will tell them what they want to hear. Which message would have sounded better to people who were described as ***"those who despise [God]"*** and ***"all who follow the stubbornness of their hearts"***? Would a self-motivated prophet tell people who despised God that they needed to follow God's will? Wouldn't that prophet tell an audience enamored with their own stubborn, sinful hearts that their hearts were right on

track, and not completely off the rails? Prophets proclaiming messages from their own hearts and minds tell their audience what they want to hear. God's Word tells people what they need to hear.

Today, there are a lot of different religions, and many different denominations within Christianity that teach very different things. How can we decipher what is God's truth, and what comes from human hearts and minds?

Which messages fit what people want to hear, and which fit what people need to hear? It's pretty telling when doctrines suddenly shift to fit the prevailing winds of the current culture, isn't it? When your beliefs never stray away what you like, and never challenge your comfort zone, shouldn't that be a clue that the message originates in human hearts, and not God's mouth? As Pastor Timothy Keller writes, ***"If your God never disagrees with you, you might be worshipping an idealized version of yourself."***

But what's wrong with following human hearts and emotions? People say to "Follow your heart" all the time, right? But God told Jeremiah six chapters earlier, ***"The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?"*** Our hearts are corrupted and tainted by sin, and that makes our hearts deceitful and selfish. And when our hearts are deceitful and selfish, it's very easy for the message we proclaim, or the things we believe to be deceitful and selfish too.

As Jesus said, the truth of God's Word sometimes cause divisions. Because God's truth doesn't always line up with what people want to hear, they separate themselves from it, and from those who believe it. And because our hearts are selfish, we sometimes silence the truth, or want to change it to better fit with what our culture thinks is true-- so we can be united with the world, rather than divided from it.

Jeremiah could have proclaimed peace rather than a warning of doom, and the people would have loved him. They would have united around his message. But God knew they didn't need to be united in their sin. They needed the truth to cut them to their hearts.

In love for his fellow countrymen, Jeremiah proclaimed God's truth that his people needed to hear. Even if it caused divisions. Even if they hated him. Because their wickedness and idolatry wouldn't just lead to exile in Babylon. It would result in eternal slavery in Hell.

That's why we need to be so careful to ensure our teachings come from God's Word, and not from human emotions or reason. Some argue, "Are differences in doctrine really that big of a deal? If we all believe in God, doesn't all that other stuff just divide us?" Ultimately, God's Word says that faith in Jesus as our Savior saves for eternity. But every false teaching that isn't from God's Word threatens to lead us away from Christ!

Religions and denominations that emphasize doing enough works to earn God's favor point people away from Christ, and to themselves. A misunderstanding of Baptism changes a gracious gift through which, the Bible says, God washes away sin and creates saving faith, and makes it a mere outward symbol that we perform for God, not him for us. The lies of the false prophets cemented the people of Judah in their sin, and convinced them they had no need for repentance or forgiveness. Likewise, when churches follow society's heart, and teach and encourage people to carry out actions that the Bible calls sinful, they're convincing people they have no need for Jesus' grace and mercy! Every teaching that comes from human minds or hearts, and not from God's mouth, serves to lead people away from Christ.

And Satan loves that. His job gets way easier when he can wrap false teachings in a pastor's robe and proclaim them from pulpits and stages, so that God's people consume fiction as fact. Just as God warned Judah that the false prophets were ***"prophesying lies in God's name,"*** Satan still loves to wrap lies in God's name and market them as truth. In reality, it's not the truth that divides. False teachings divide, by leading people away from the truth.

So how can we discern God's truth, from Satan's lies? Snopes doesn't fact check sermons, after all! And that's OK, because we have something better. Something far better than the thoughts or feelings of humans. We have the very words of God's mouth.

As Jeremiah says, God's Word is like fire, and like a hammer. God's Word is like fire in two ways: 1.) It can be used to test. 2.) It can be used to refine. All over the country, scientists conduct fire tests. They literally light stuff on fire to test whether those items and materials meet the required fire standards. God's Word does the same thing. If you take a message and light it up with the fire of God's Word, it reveals whether that message is from God's Word, or from man's hearts. Fire can also be used to refine—to burn off impurities, leaving only good behind. In the same way, when you set a message “on fire with God's Word,” and impurities not from God's Word are destroyed.

Like a powerful sledgehammer can crush a rock to powder, God's Word can also crush the weak attempts of false prophets to lead people away from Jesus.

That means, don't just trust something is true because you heard a pastor say it. Always fact check it, not with Snopes, but with God's Word! Anything I claim is God's truth, I should be able to show you where in the Bible it says that! Know what else that means? It means you need to know your Bible too!

When people jump on board with false teachings or false prophets that suit the desires of their human hearts and minds, God's Word divides. But in the most beautiful way, God's truth also unites. God's truth unites all people together as one—no matter your race, gender, political affiliation, age, favorite football team, or whatever else might divide us, all of us are united. United as sinners in need of salvation. And united as sinners loved by Jesus. All of us are united as people that Jesus came to earth to save. That “**baptism Jesus had to be baptized with**” was the Hell he suffered and the death he died, in order to tear down the wall of sin that separated us from God, like a hammer smashing through bricks. To burn away all of the sin, wickedness, and avoidance of the truth in our lives, leaving only Jesus' perfection for us.

You might use Snopes to fact check the latest viral post on Facebook, or the latest CNN or Fox News headline. But when it comes to God's truth, you have all the truth you need. On earth, that truth might cause some divisions, but in Heaven, that truth unites us as one—for eternity.

