

BY WHAT AUTHORITY?

© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine

University Congregational Church

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Reading: Matthew 7: 15-29 (NIV)

Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles?

Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?" Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!"

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.

On September 14, 2001, just three days after the terrorist attacks in Washington, D.C. and New York, Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell suggested that America brought this on itself because of the ACLU, NOW, abortion providers, Pagans, feminists, gays and lesbians. On September 13, 2005, Robertson proposed that hurricane Katrina was an expression of God's wrath with the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences because it had chosen Ellen Degeneres to host of the Emmy Awards. Robertson said on his "700 Club," "Is it any surprise that the Almighty chose to strike at Miss Degeneres' hometown?" (New Orleans) He went on to say that the 9/11 terrorism attacks had also taken place before she had hosted the show in 2001. Said Robertson, "This is the second time in a row that God has invoked a disaster shortly before lesbian Ellen Degeneres hosted the Emmy Awards."

Last week, on January 13, Mr. Robertson claimed that the earthquake in Haiti was a result of a "pact" that the Haitian people had made with Satan in order to free Haiti from French imperial rule. Have you heard that Satan has

responded to Mr. Robertson on National Public Radio?

Satan's letter reads:

“Dear Pat Robertson,

I know that you know that all press is good press, so I appreciate the shout-out. And you make God look like a big mean bully who kicks people when they are down, so I'm all over that action.

But when you say that Haiti made a pact with me, it is totally humiliating. I may be evil incarnate, but I'm no welcher. The way you put it, making a deal with me leaves folks desperate and impoverished.

Sure, in the afterlife, but when I strike bargains with people, they get something here on earth – glamour, beauty, talent, wealth, fame, glory, a golden fiddle. Those Haitians have nothing, and I mean nothing. And that was before the earthquake. Haven't you seen “Crossroads” or “Damn Yankees?”

If I had a thing going with Haiti, there'd be banks, skyscrapers, SUVs, exclusive nightclubs, Botox – that kind of thing. An 80% poverty rate is so not my style. Nothing against it – I'm just saying: Not how I roll.

You're doing great work, Pat, and I don't want to clip your wings – just, come on, you're making me look bad. And not the good kind of bad. Keep blaming God. That's working. But leave me out of it please. Or we may need to renegotiate your own contract.

Best, Satan”

In fact, Lily Coyle of Minneapolis submitted the letter to NPR.

Two thousand years ago Jesus warned us about the false prophets. Throughout the history of the Christian church we have watched religious charlatans prance across the chancel and flower the pulpit. They are charlatans however popular they might be; however wealthy they might be; however large their audience might be. We have known for quite some time that Mr. Robertson is one of those charlatans. Now I am not condemning Robertson to hell-fire. But brother Pat, when you talk like that you are exhibiting all of the characteristics of homophobic white racist.

I have to tell you that there are times when I am uncomfortable with the title “Christian” because of what is said and done in the name of Christianity by xenophobes like Mr. Robertson and the late Mr. Falwell. Mimi keeps telling me that there are very few Christians out there that would call be a Christian by their definition. I sometimes think that “A Follower of Jesus” might be a better description of my faith. But that too can be laden with excessive cultural assumptions. How about “A Follower of

the Way?” That is what the early Christians were called.

“The Way” being, of course, the way of the cross; the way of love and service; the way of sacrifice and the laying down of one’s life for fellow human beings.

The Way of Jesus is the real test of Christian authority. This is what he was trying to tell folks about authentic faith. The fruits of authentic religion express genuine faith. Jesus said there are all kinds of people who think that religion is about words, sermons, prophecies, doctrines, creeds, bibles and doing things in God’s name. Jesus said that he really does not know what these folks are talking about.

The rock of faith is the doing of God’s will. The foundation of our lives is the practice of love and grace. People often say, “I am not sure what to believe” about any religious topic you might think about. Guess what, I am not sure about most religious topics. Most are speculative and my mind can change on just about any subject. But in the long run most religious opinions make no difference in the lives of people, especially those who are hungry, thirsty, naked, frightened, schizophrenic, homeless, imprisoned,

dying, and orphaned. The doctrine of the Trinity means nothing to a child in Haiti whose entire family lies crushed to death beneath the rubble of their home. Whether we take Holy Communion by intinction or out of little cups means nothing to the person whose cup is empty. How many angels can dance on the head of a pin is an unintelligible and insipid question for a nation trying to determine a moral and sustainable health care delivery system.

Well, it is certainly not my frustration or anger with Pat Robertson that could possibly judge him. But what might surprise Pat Robertson is this: It is not God's wrath that judges anybody; it is not God's anger that condemns anyone; it is not God's rage that damns a single soul. The worth of any human being is ultimately measured by the love of God. The full weight of human value is the scale of God's compassion. Anger, wrath, and rage only conclude in shame. Compassion and grace are the plumb lines of God's redemption.

You cannot read the gospels and come to any other conclusion. That is why significant passages from the

Sermon on the Mount warn us about condemning anyone to hell or presuming to judge them on God's behalf. That is why Jesus is always pointing us to serve the needs of other human beings. It is not our responsibility to condemn. It is our responsibility to serve.

Think, for example, of Vincent Van Gogh. We remember him as an artist and forget that he initially wanted to be a minister. In 1879, he was sent to the Belgian mining community of Borinage as something of a missionary. He very quickly discovered that the miners lived in very deplorable working conditions at wages that kept the miners in poverty. His small stipend was actually more than the miners and allowed him a moderate life-style. Vincent thought this unjust.

On a cold February evening he watched the miners plodding home. He saw an old man, wrapped only in a burlap sack stumbling across the fields. That night Van Gogh laid out all of the suits of clothes he owned onto his bed. He put aside one set of clothes for himself and gave the rest away. The next morning he gave a set of clothes to the

old man. He gave his overcoat to a pregnant woman whose husband had been killed in a mining accident.

Van Gogh was left with only one change of clothing. But he did not stop there. He placed himself on a severe food allowance and gave the balance of his money for food for the miners. He learned that children in one family had contracted typhoid fever. They slept on the floor. Van Gogh was sick himself but packed up his bed and gave it to the family.

A wealthy family in Borinage offered Van Gogh free room and board but he declined the offer. He thought the offer was a temptation that he must resist if he was to faithfully serve his community of poor miners. Vincent believed that they could only trust him if he became one of them. If they were to learn the love of God through him, he must love them enough to share his life with theirs.¹

I do not think that the people in this room could or should make that kind sacrifice in service to the poor. But I

¹ This story was submitted by an unknown author, found at Georgia Girl Inspiring Short Stories, <http://www.GAgirl.com/stories/actionsspeakloudest.html>.

can say this to people like Mr. Robertson. Let's get off the airwave of judgment and onto the highway of justice. Let's step down from the judgment seat and walk the righteous beat. Don't camp on the sands of prejudice; let's build on the rock of loving service.

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