

Matthew 12:33-37

I. **Verse 33** – Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit.

In order to understand this verse, we need to place the emphasis on the word “and”: “Either make the tree good *and* its fruit good, *or* make the tree bad *and* its fruit bad.” In other words, if you’ve got a good tree, then you’re *guaranteed* to have good fruit. Don’t try telling me that you’re a good tree, but you’re bearing bad fruit! That’s impossible. On the other hand, if you’ve got a bad tree, then you’re *guaranteed* to have bad fruit. Let’s not pretend even for a moment that you can be a bad tree and yet bear good fruit! That’s also impossible. “For the *tree is known by its fruit.*” You can’t necessarily tell the badness or goodness of the tree just by looking at the tree. On the other hand, the badness or goodness of the fruit is immediately obvious to anyone who can see, and touch, and taste! So the *secret and hidden* quality of the tree is *revealed* in the very *obvious and visible* quality of the fruit. Now Jesus takes this general principle and applies it very specifically to the Pharisees and their *words* – especially the blasphemous words they just spoke in verse 24.

II. **Verses 34-35** – You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil.

Before we come to the main point, it was good for me to reflect a little on what Jesus called the Pharisees. I think it can be easy for us to miss the full force of “you brood of vipers” until we realize that this is the equivalent of saying, “You sons of venomous snakes.” These are *strong* words! And these words are coming from the mouth of *Jesus*, the same one who recently said: “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart.” Jesus *was* gentle and lowly in heart, and yet in this gentleness and lowliness, He had zero tolerance for those who blasphemed God and who oppressed people with hopeless burdens – shutting them out of the kingdom of heaven (cf. Mat. 23). Jesus was the perfect combination of gentleness and strength, of lowliness and courage, of tender compassion on the one hand, and a fearless, “in your face” kind of zeal on the other. How many times do we strike this perfect balance? How many times do we lean either to the side of a fearful cowardice in the face of mockery and opposition, or to the side of a harsh judgmentalism when we feel like we have the upper ground? Who can fathom even the simplest perfections of our Savior? The one who called the Pharisees “you brood of vipers” is also the one who said: “Whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire” (5:22). And so we see that when Jesus spoke angry words of rebuke and condemnation, He was never motivated by spite or sinful hatred – as we almost always are. In every way, Jesus was perfect. In every way, He commends Himself to us as the only Savior who is infinitely worthy of our love and our trust.

Returning now to the main point, Jesus asks: “You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil?” It’s impossible! A bad tree can only produce bad fruit. In the same way, an evil person can only ever speak what is evil. Why? Because it is out of the abundance (or overflow) of the *heart* that the *mouth* speaks. Even the “good” words of a bad tree are not *truly*

good, and so they are incapable of pleasing the Lord. The Pharisees could not possibly *speak* what was good about Jesus because their *hearts* were evil, and so what they *said* was that Jesus cast out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons (v. 24). They spoke out of the overflow of their hearts. And so the tree is known by its fruit.

And *yet* this is absolutely essential... notice that Jesus did not work backwards from the words to the heart. Jesus did not say: “Since you have spoken evil, therefore I conclude that you must not be good.” Instead, Jesus *begins* with the inner person of the heart: “*How* can you speak good *when you are evil*.” In other words, “Since you are evil, I *already knew* that you could speak only evil.” Jesus did not need the fruit to tell Him about the tree. Jesus did not need the Pharisees’ words to tell Him about their heart. He already knew what was in the hearts of all men (Jn. 2:24-25). And so for Jesus, the main point is not our *words*, but our *hearts*. And *yet* for all the rest of us who cannot see the heart (who have a hard enough time seeing our own hearts), we need only remember that the *mouth speaks out of* the abundance of the heart. And so on the last day, when God judges the hearts of all men, His judgment will be proved to be right, and just, and true by the words that we have spoken. On the last day, our words will be visible and irrefutable proof of who we really were on the inside. We’ll see this even more clearly in verses 36 & 37. But for right now Jesus goes on to say that “the good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil”. So on the one hand, it’s not only impossible for an evil person to speak what is good, it’s also impossible for a good person to speak what is evil – just like the tree and its fruit.

III. Verses 36-37 – I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.

Notice first of all that Jesus prefaces these verses in the same way that He prefaced His warning about the unforgivable sin (v. 31)... “*I tell you...*”. All of Jesus’ words are words of sober truth, but Jesus wants to make sure now that these words especially sink deep into our hearts and minds. Our Lord would make sure that we do not try to escape or minimize the true force of what He is saying.

“I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak...” What is a careless word? The Greek word here is *argon*, and the ESV, the NASB, the NIV, the NRSV, and the NCV all translate the Greek word “*argon*” with the English word “careless”. This seems to imply the words that we speak without really thinking, and so the meaning would be that it is the words that we speak without thinking that give the most accurate window into our soul. It is our most unplanned words that give us the truest reflection of who we really are. I believe this is true, but I don’t think it’s the meaning of the word. Notice that we will *give account* for every “*argon*” word that we speak. But we know that we will not have to give account for the *good* words that we have spoken – *only* for the *evil* words. So it seems to me that these careless are actually evil and bad words. This fits with Jesus’ description of the Pharisees’ words (v. 24) as “*evil*” in verses 34-35. So should “*argon*” really be translated “careless”? The word “*argon*” is actually made up of two Greek words: “*a*” meaning “not”, and “*ergon*” meaning “work”, and so we get the idea of something that is non-working (cf. Vincent). This is why in the rest of the New Testament, “*argon*” is translated “idle”, “lazy”, or “*useless*” (1 Tim. 5:13; Tit.

1:12; James 2:20; 2 Pet. 1:8). Even here in Matthew chapter twelve, the NKJV, the NLT, the ASV, and the TEV all use the word “idle” or “useless”. So Vincent says that an idle and useless word is a word that “has no legitimate work, no office, no business, but is morally useless and unprofitable”. Jesus is not referring to small talk or playful banter. He is talking about words that are *morally* useless and sinful – words that *ought* to have been left unsaid. (And yet how can they be left unsaid when they are simply the inevitable overflow of the heart?) This obviously includes the words that the Pharisees spoke against Jesus, but now the field has been broadened to include words of complaining, judgmental words, slanderous words, words of gossip, lying and deceitful words, prideful words, words of lust, hateful and angry words, selfish words, and all words of doubt and unbelief. It is for *all* such morally useless words that we will give account on the Day of Judgment.

And then Jesus concludes with this sweeping statement: “For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.” Now once again, the ultimate point is not our *words*, but our *hearts*. God doesn’t need our words to tell Him about our hearts. And yet in order that His judgment might be proved to be true, and right, and just, He will judge us based on our words since the mouth only speaks out of the abundance of the heart. The *tree is known* by its *fruit*! This also explains why we can read things like the following (cf. Jn. 6:29):

- ✓ Romans 2:6-10, 13 – He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.
- ✓ Revelation 20:12-13 – And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done.

Conclusion

Jesus specifically tells us that it is by our words that we will be justified, and by our words that we will be condemned. But then won’t we *all* end up condemned? – For all of us here have spoken morally useless words – words that ought to have been left unsaid. And why have we spoken these words? Because there is still evil that remains in all of our hearts. Even as Christians, it can be so, so difficult for us to grasp the true evil of our hearts. This is because we have failed to see that our words are infallibly accurate windows into our hearts. And it is especially our private words and the words that we have given the least amount of thought to (our knee-jerk reactions) that reveal our hearts. But it is our knee-jerk reactions, and our words spoken in the heat of the moment that we are most likely to dismiss as though we really didn’t mean it – as though these words, at least, were not really an accurate reflection of our hearts! But Jesus is telling us that there is not a single word that we have ever spoken in our entire life that has ever been an accident. Every single thing that ever proceeds from our mouth is an infallible

window into our heart. The sinfulness of our words is never just in the words themselves – otherwise, our guilt would be far less and we could almost justify ourselves. The sinfulness of our words is not just in the words themselves, but in the heart they reveal. So when is the last time you spoke a griping or complaining word? Remember that you will give account for this word on the Day of Judgment. Not for the word in and of itself, but for what that word revealed about your heart. When was the last time that you spoke a deceitful, or prideful, or selfish, or slanderous, or angry word? Remember that we will give account for *all* such *words* on the Day of Judgment. Not for the words in and of themselves, but for what those words reveal about our hearts.

And so we come back to the question we asked a moment ago... Won't we all end up condemned? How, then, can *anyone* be justified by his words?!? Let me ask you... Do you ever speak words like these: "O God, I confess that Jesus alone is Lord and Savior, my only hope and righteousness. I am filthy and vile. There is no good in me. I need a Savior. I trust in Jesus alone." These are not words that can be spoken only once. They are words that we speak over and over again, *not* that we might be saved over and over again, but because they are the *natural overflow and fruit* of the *heart* that has truly trusted in Jesus. In the same way, we know that the Pharisees can be judged by their *words*, because their blasphemy was the natural overflow and fruit of a heart that had rejected Jesus. The point here is not earning our salvation by attaining perfection in our speech. Rather, it is first of all by the *continual* presence or absence of *these words* of repentance and faith that we will all be justified or condemned.

- ✓ Romans 10:9-10 (cf. Jn. 6:29) – If you confess with your *mouth* that Jesus is Lord and believe in your *heart* that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the *heart* one believes and is justified, and with the *mouth* one confesses and is saved.

The mouth reveals the heart, and this is nowhere more true than when we are simply confessing with our mouth that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

- ✓ 1 Corinthians 12:3 – No one speaking in the Spirit of God ever *says* "Jesus is accursed!" and no one can *say* "Jesus is Lord" except in the Holy Spirit.

And then from these words of repentance and faith will flow many other words – words that would have been otherwise impossible *and/or* incapable of pleasing the Lord – words of truth, and obedience, and trust, and worship, and kindness, and love, and humility. On the other hand, we can know from our own experience that for all those who do not confess with their mouth that Jesus is Lord, there will certainly be no lack of idle and useless words to condemn them on the Day of Judgment. And so it is truly by our words that we will be either justified... or condemned. On the final Day of Judgment, it is our words that will reveal our hearts and demonstrate to everyone that God's verdict is just.

There are some people who suppose that they can bear bad fruit, but still be a good tree. They suppose that they can speak idle and useless words and yet not really be evil at heart. But Jesus says that either the tree and the fruit are *both* good, or the tree and the fruit are *both* bad, for the tree is known by its fruit. And so to the one who thinks that he can bear bad fruit, but still be a good tree, the Bible says:

- ✓ Galatians 6:7-10 – Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption [physical and spiritual death], but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.

Have you seen in your words the fruit of a true saving faith? Have I? Do you find yourself confessing to God that you are a sinner and casting yourself upon His grace and mercy in Jesus Christ? If not, then why not? Why not start today? It is the one who confesses with his *mouth* that Jesus is Lord and believes in his *heart* that God raised him from the dead who will be saved. For with the *heart* one believes and is justified, and with the *mouth* one confesses and is saved.

- ✓ Hebrews 13:15 – Through [Jesus] then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the *fruit of lips* that [*confess*] *his name*.

Let us diligently work to bear the fruit of words of truth, and obedience, and trust, words of thankfulness and contentment, words of kindness, and love, and humility. Why should we work so diligently to bear this fruit? The Apostle Peter answers:

- ✓ 2 Peter 1:10 – Therefore, brothers, be all the more *diligent* to make your calling and election *sure*, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall.

Assurance of salvation comes not from one isolated sinners prayer, but from the constant and continual *fruit of lips* that confess His name. May the joy of our salvation always be increasing as we diligently strive by God’s grace to bear always more, and more, and more good fruit – because this is how the tree is known... *only* by its fruit. By our words we will be justified, and by our words we will be condemned. **Therefore...**

- ✓ Ephesians 4:29 – Let no unwholesome word [or “evil talk”; NRSV] proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear.

Teaching our Children

Q. If you have a good tree, then what kind of fruit will you have?

A. Good fruit!

Q. If you have a bad tree, then what kind of fruit will you have?

A. Bad fruit!

Q. So how can you tell if a tree is good or bad?

A. You can’t necessarily tell if the tree is good or bad just by looking at the tree, but you can always tell by the kind of fruit that it gives (“the tree is *known* [identified] by its fruit”).

Q. If our words are our fruit, then what can they tell us?

A. Our *words* can tell us if our *hearts* are good or bad (“out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks”).

Q. Can our words ever be an “accident” that we didn’t really mean?

A. No, our words are *always* a perfect window into our *hearts*.

- ✓ In a redemptive way, help your children to see the true sinfulness and wickedness of their *hearts (and yours)* via their words (*and yours*).
- ✓ Read Matthew 12:36-37 (see page 2).
- Q.** Does God need the fruit in order to know the tree? Does God need to hear our words in order to know our hearts?
 - A. No. God already knows the hearts of all men, and it is the heart that matters most of all.
- Q.** If God knows the hearts of all men, and it is the heart that matters most of all, then why will God's judgment be based on our words?
 - A. God's judgment will be based on our words in order that *we might know* that His verdict about our hearts is right, and true, and just (our words will prove what we really were in our hearts).
- Q.** It is easy to see how a person can be condemned by his words, but how can a person possibly be *justified* by his words?
 - A. See first full paragraph on page 4 and Romans 10:9-10. Preach the Gospel to your children!
- Q.** If the tree is known by its fruit, then by God's grace, what should we always be striving to do?
 - A. ~ We should always be striving to bear more and more good fruit (the fruit of lips that confess Jesus' name).
 - ~ This will give us a wonderful and joyous assurance that our hearts have truly been changed through saving faith.
 - ~ See last three Scriptures on page 5