

Introduction

Edgar Allen Poe’s classic story, *The Tell-Tale Heart*, is told by a murderer. He murders an old man and hides his body under the floor planks in his bedroom. A neighbor reports a scream heard coming from the house. So the police come to apprise the situation. The murderer answers the door and assures the police that the old man is out of town and that it was he who screamed in his sleep. He shows them into the old man’s room, and they begin to shoot the breeze. Meanwhile the murderer cannot shake the sound of his victim’s beating heart. It grows louder and louder in his mind. He is convinced everyone can hear it even though they cannot. Finally, the murderer’s guilt and the still louder heart-beat combine to bring about a full confession to the police of everything he had done. He could not escape the message ringing out in his own mind from the tell-tale heart.

In this morning’s text Jesus points to an inescapable message that rings out in every man’s words. A person’s words reveal the nature of his heart.

[Read Text; Pray]

These words spoken by Jesus are actually a continuation of what he had said about the unforgivable sin. At issue was the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. It was by the power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus had just healed a man oppressed by demons. The Pharisees had ascribed the powerful casting out of demons by Jesus to the devil. More precisely, they said it was by Beelzebul, the Lord of Dung. The Pharisees had used their words to express the foaming hatred filling their hearts. So Jesus takes the occasion to give instruction as to where words come from and why they are so crucial.

He starts with . . .

I. Four Pictures that Tell the Same Story.

A. The first picture to which Jesus refers is of a tree and its fruit.

The nature of the tree and the nature of the fruit are the same. Good fruit comes from good trees and bad fruit comes from bad trees. If you want to

discern the health of a tree, then consider the fruit you get off of it. If the fruit is good, then the tree is a good tree. It is healthy. Its nature is good. And Jesus' point is that what fruit is to a tree, speech, one's words, are to a person. Good words come out of the mouth of a good person. Bad words come out of the mouth of a bad person. If you want to discern the nature of a person, listen to their words. What they say is the fruit of who they are.

B. The second picture to which Jesus points attention is a brood of vipers. A brood is a cluster of children, as in "mom and dad are taking their whole brood to the lakeshore." Jesus calls the Pharisees a brood of vipers. They are the offspring of snakes. John the Baptist had spoken to them similarly. The term offspring ties the brood to the parent. If you are a brood then you have the same nature as those from whom you come.

It was highly offensive to Jesus' opponents that he called God his Father. For Jesus to claim God as his Father was to claim to be the Son of God. The implication was that he had the same nature as God and hence he was equal with God. Well, Jesus here is using "brood" to signify they were the offspring of snakes and shared their nature.

The word viper was a common designation for poisonous snakes in the middle east and Mediterranean region. The size and shape of the reptiles made them deceptive. They were often mistaken for a stick. Their poison was deadly, sometimes bringing instantaneous death. So Jesus is saying it is the very nature of the Pharisees to be deceptive and deadly with their tongues. He is no doubt also connecting them to the devil, the serpent of old, and indicating that their words are simply revealing the evil nature that they get from their father the devil.

There can be no doubt that the fall into sin has left its indelible mark on our speech. Romans 3 describes the nature of fallen humanity. There Paul says, "None is righteous no not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness." Such was evident in fullness in the Pharisees.

Their nature was evil, and it was inevitable that their words would be as well.

C. The third picture presented by Jesus is of an abundance. The thundershowers that rumbled through town this week brought an abundance of rain at one time. An abundance is always more than enough. It is quite a lot. Jesus says that it is out of the ABUNDANCE of the heart that the mouth speaks. The heat of summer seems to have arrived. I am so glad! It has always seemed that it happens more often in summertime that 2-liter bottles of soda get shaken up so that when you turn the cap and began to open the bottle, they spew. And what comes out is what fills the inside.

What fills one's heart is what comes out when the lid is removed, when the lips are opened. So when you hear people talking what you hear is what exists in abundance on the inside, down in their heart. It is what people are filled with that comes out when they speak. When you hear yourself talking, you hear who you are. You and I speak out of the abundance that fills the heart.

D. I see one more picture here. It is a picture of treasure. In the sermon on the Mount Jesus said that "where your treasure is there your heart will be also." And here Jesus says that the good person out of his good treasure brings forth good and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil.

Treasure comes in all kinds of forms. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder and so is treasure. It is whatever is valuable to you. It is what you prize. And that is why Jesus said "where your treasure is there your heart is too."

We all have our own treasure store. It is what brings us satisfaction and delight. Ultimately we live for it. King Hezekiah is one of the few good kings to follow David in the history of Judah. But he was too proud of the stockpile of valuables that the kings had accumulated through the years. When envoys came from the king of Babylon, Hezekiah welcomed them and showed them how great he felt about himself. He showed them all his treasure house, the silver, the gold, the spices, the precious oil, the

armory, all that was found in his storehouses. And you know that in future years the king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and carried it all to Babylon.

But my point is that when we open our mouths and speak, we reveal our treasure. We open the storehouse. Our words disclose what is important to us. It's like taking envoys to our storehouse to see before their very eyes what we value. And what we value shows where our hearts are.

So our words are critically important. They are the fruit of our tree. They uncover who our spiritual father is. No DNA test needed. Our words are the abundance of what fills our hearts. And our words are our treasure. They come out of and reveal what we value. If we bring out good in our conversation, we show that we treasure what is good. If we bring out evil in our conversation, we show that we treasure what is evil. In short our words declare before a listening world who we are, what our nature is. The words we speak are critically important.

How important are they? So much so that we can be judged accordingly. After displaying four pictures that tell the same story, Jesus pointed to . . .

II. One Criteria of Eternal Judgment.

Because our words declare who we are, where we come from, what fills us, and what we treasure, we will give account for them on the day of judgment.

A. Notice that Jesus prefaces the statement here in verse 38 with the three words, "I tell you." These three words add a dose of solemnity to the situation. Everything Jesus ever said was important, but some things are of elevated importance. And here comes one of those. Do not miss this. Do not overlook it. Do not be fooled into thinking your words are not important. I tell you, they are. Be sober. Be alert here. Do not fail to account for this fact. And here it comes.

B. One point Jesus is urging folks not to miss is that there is a day of judgment. It is the day on which people will stand before God and give account. Living everyday in the midst of making breakfast, drinking our coffee, going to work, solving urgent problems, cleaning house, meeting friends, paying bills, shopping and incurring more bills, dealing with car

repair, planning a vacation, and all that stuff, we often lose touch with the bigger more ultimate realities. How often when you are standing in the grocery line do you think, "The day of judgment is coming"? What about when you are outside weed-eating and mowing the grass? Or even when you are doing important church-related planning?

We need to never lose sight of the gravity of this reality—the day of judgment is coming. Every deadline we have to meet should make us think of the day of judgment. Bills have to be paid on time. Taxes have deadlines. I just had to renew my license plate. I got the reminder back in April but it wasn't due until June 30. But you know what I did with that April reminder? I filed it away; I forgot about it until the day got closer! There were so many days until June 30 I didn't bother to think about it much. Thankfully I remembered last week in time to get my emissions test done. I need not say it, but then again I must say it. The day of judgment is incomprehensibly more important than the day your license plate expires.

It is the day of days. It is an inescapable day. And it is a day the thoughts of which should fill you with sobriety and care not to ever forget but to be ready. It is true we do not know what day it will be, but one thing is for sure, it is coming. There is 100% chance of the day of judgment.

And on that day, you and I will stand before God. We will stand before his holiness. His perfect transcendent purity is the standard by which we will be judged. We will stand before him who is omniscient. He knows everything. Nothing ever done, said, or even thought by us has escaped his notice. And we will have to give an account. The day of God's judgement is when God's righteous judgment will be revealed; it is a day of wrath for which the unrepentant and hard-hearted are storing up wrath for themselves.

There is but one way to weather the storm of God's wrath in that day. And that is by taking cover in the blood of Christ. If any man is in Christ, God's wrath has already been satisfied when he put our iniquity on his servant the Lord Jesus. That happened when he was on the cross. Just as the ark was the only safe passage through the flood of God's judgment in the days of

Noah, so Christ is the only ark of safety to withstand the flood of God's final judgment. It is an ark prepared not by man but by God himself.

C. The other point Jesus is emphasizing here is that when that awful day comes, we will have to give account for our words. Words matter. Careless words matter. They matter to God because they tell who we are. And for this reason in the day of judgment, Jesus says, "by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

This is a provocative statement. Some might say, "this seems to teach salvation by works! Is it by works or is it by grace?" Salvation is by grace, free and total grace. The context is key. This statement is made as a conclusion to the fact that our words reveal our character. Since our words reveal what we value, reveal what we treasure, then those words condemn us as belonging to the devil or justify us as belonging to Christ because if we belong to Christ, then we have been changed on the inside. We have faith in him and our words will reflect it. They will bear it out.

R. C. Sproul explains

Jesus was not speaking here about the doctrine of justification. He was talking about manifesting what is in the heart. When we face God at the judgment, He will rehearse the records of our mouths. If that record contains a constant stream of empty words, those words will condemn us. On the other hand, if the words that came out of the treasure of our hearts reveal our affection for Christ and our love for the things of God. Then God will bless us on that day."

III. How Can I Improve My Words?

A. While we are talking about our words and the fact that we will have to give account for them and the fact that they reveal who we are, it is altogether appropriate to ask how we can improve our words.

Other teaching in the New Testament urges us to give great attention to what we say. James talks about how hard it is to tame the tongue. He says if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man. He talks about the damage that is done by a tongue out of control. He remarks, "How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire." He talks

about how unseemly it is that from the same mouth come praise to God and curses to people. James declares, "These things ought not to be so."

Paul says to the Ephesians, "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear."

Therefore, what are the basics? How can we have words that are justifying and not words that are condemning? What can we do so that we will do more praising of God and less cursing of each other? And Jesus right here gives us the keys.

B. The first key is to watch our focus. Watch our focus? Yes indeed. We need to give attention to the words that come out and how they come out and such. But Jesus puts the focus on where they come from. We can control our speech and we need to work on that, but if we merely clean up the surface, our careless words will still betray our hypocrisy. So it all starts with our heart.

C. The four pictures Jesus puts on display highlight the fact that the key to God-honoring speech starts with the heart. And they show us what we need to do to improve our words.

1. First, Jesus says make the tree good and the fruit will be good. "Make the tree good" suggests giving proper care to keep a tree healthy. Once the fruit has been produced, it is what it is, either bad or good. The way to ensure good fruit is to ensure that the tree is healthy. Then it will produce healthy fruit. Likewise to have good and godly speech, we must make the heart good. We must keep the heart.

Proverbs 4:23 says, "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life." The very next verse says, "Put away from you crooked speech, and put devious talk far from you."

Keeping a garden takes constant effort. Melissa and I went to the botanical gardens this week with Anita Wonder. People were everywhere working on those gardens. You might think that the gardeners would just throw some

seeds out and presto, but you would be wrong. Beautiful gardens require constant care, constant weeding, trimming, and watering. Beautiful words require the same thing. You've got to keep your heart to insure healthy speech.

In John 15, Jesus said I am the vine and you are the branches, whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. This is how we make the tree of our hearts good. We abide in Christ. We stay in deep and rich fellowship with him. We enrich our hearts with much meditation on the Scripture.

2. Second, Jesus used the word, BROOD. He pointed to whose children you are. The Pharisees speak like they do because they are offspring of snakes. It is the second picture, but the picture here is of fundamental importance. We must come to Christ and through him become children of God to have good words. "As many as receive Christ, to them he give the right to become children of God even to those who believe in his name. They are born of God. Christians are beloved children with a gracious father. And we should bear in mind that our language and our manner of speech reflects him.

3. Third, Jesus said the mouth speaks out of the abundance of the heart. Here is instruction to fill ourselves abundantly with good. It's like Paul when he writes, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." Let it dwell abundantly. The more Christ's word dwells in us, the more godly our words will be. Memorize the word and meditate upon it. Fill your heart with it.

4. Fourth, Jesus talked about treasure. To improve our words and our communication, we need to treasure what God treasures. That pleases God and it transforms our character. Cultivate mercy, compassion, humility, and grace. Cultivate in your heart a love for your neighbor. Treasure these things. And as our character is transformed, our words will put that on full display.

Conclusion

The murderer in Edgar Allen Poe's story just could not hold back. With his tongue he declared his own guilt. He confessed to the crime. His words

gave him away. Ours give us away as well. But how great it is that through Christ our words can give away that we belong to him, that we are his offspring, that we have good treasure in our heart. Let us speak words that justify, but let us cultivate a heart that will speak these words and this way.