

***No One Like Jesus: Fruit Salad***  
***By Jason Huff***  
***July 3, 2016***  
***Proverbs 11:30; Hebrews 13:15-16; Matthew 12:33-37***

Today's final Scripture reading comes from Matthew 12:33-37. May we hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to the church. "[Jesus said to the Pharisees,] "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.""

Words matter. We all know it, right? But the evidence of it is profound. A single verb in a treaty started a war in 1889 between the Italians and the Ethiopians. One single word in Japanese, "no comment" to the Prime Minister of Japan but "contempt not worthy of comment" through a translator, has been called the impetus of the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. In 1950, Secretary of State Dean Acheson spoke about a security perimeter around the world that the United States would hold against Soviet aggression. Guess what area of the globe he left out? Korea...and six months later, the communists in the North invaded the South.

Words can do great things, and words can kill. We celebrate this weekend the words found in the Declaration of Independence, that all men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. Yet we know that words also inspired Nazi Germany and Bolshevik Russia. Words from Martin Luther King, Jr. and his Christian faith led to great progress for civil rights; words from Malcolm X and his Nation of Islam led to violence and incited more racism on all sides. Words are not neutral. Words have power.

The greatest lie I ever learned as a child was that "sticks and stones could break my bones, but words would never hurt me." I don't remember the details of hardly any of the physical harassments I received in middle school, but I can still remember many of the words and who said them to me. The echoes of words last years, decades, sometimes. When we appear before God in judgment, I think we will be amazed at the lasting impact of the kind words we said to others, words that meant far more than we thought. We will also learn all the cruel words that stayed with those we attacked, words that should have gone unspoken.

When Jesus says what He does to the Pharisees, He's just warned them that they are dangerously close to committing the unforgivable sin – blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. He has undeniably cast a demon out of a man who's now back in His right mind. The Pharisees, unable to deny the miracle, instead attribute Jesus' power – which comes from the Holy Spirit – to Satan. Their words show that they have rejected the power of God on display right in front of them. They have rejected Jesus, who has shown Himself time and again full of kindness, wisdom, love, and mercy to the least. Despite their standing in Jewish society as the truly faithful, despite their reputation as the religious leaders of the day, their words prove they do not know God because they do not recognize Him or His power in their midst.

Jesus makes an analogy for their words out of fruit and fruit trees, and it can be misunderstood. This isn't about every action that Christians or unbelievers take; Jesus is specifically addressing speech, how we talk about and to one another. And He says, "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit."

Here's our first key thought for today: *the words you say identify you and who you follow*. We often identify our own by what we talk about. Sports enthusiasts are easily drawn into a conversation about a Tigers grand slam. If you like superheroes, your ears perk up when someone mentions the new *Captain America* movie. We quickly determine how much a person is like us based on what they talk about.

But we also determine who a person is on how they talk. Sure, we can figure out regionalism based on an accent; I don't mean that "how." What I mean is what a person is really like and what their worldview is. Worldview seeps into every conversation eventually. Because a conversation about baseball isn't just about baseball – it reveals deeper elements. Should a player that's been juiced on steroids have a lifetime ban? How about Pete Rose? Even how you handle a bad call against your favorite team says something about your character. The ethics of baseball players' salaries, their behaviors on and off the field, and how you talk about them says something about who you are and what you believe.

What you say reveals your allegiances, your prejudices, and your preferences. I am always very leery of people who speak ill of others in my presence, and I try not to join with them – because if they speak about others poorly when they're with me, what are they saying about me when they're with others? It says a lot that when you find a list of vices in the Bible like you do in Romans 1, right alongside murder and sexual immorality are gossip, slander, arrogance, and boastfulness – all sins of speech.

We often think that God only cares about "big sins," sins that involve physical violence against another person or sins of betrayal, like adultery. We have a habit of writing off slander or talking badly about others. We think of them as harmless. Sometimes we even say we're "speaking the truth in love," trying to put a Christian veneer on it when we describe someone else's faults to others. But it matters to God what we say. People know us by the way we talk.

It's important that we don't try to judge the fruit by the tree. We often judge with our eyes and think we know someone by sight. The Jewish people judged the Pharisees righteous because they kept up appearances; they were always seen in the special seats in the temple, greeted in the marketplaces, debating their special laws. But the Pharisees were rotten. Their words about Jesus proved it.

Sometimes, people put on a thoughtful veneer that disappears when you get to know them. They act tolerant towards others until the wall comes down and then all sorts of bile comes out. I've seen it with conservatives and liberals alike, with differing viewpoints on faith. Sometimes the foulest, cruelest, most bullying mouths belong to the pillars of the community, and sometimes the gentlest, kindest, most God-fearing people are the ones pushing a cart full to the brim down the street to the Salvation Army.

And we do judge people based on the tree. A recent video by the group “Now This” proved it. As an experiment, they dressed a little girl in two different outfits – one was very pretty and formal, the other as if she’d been out on the streets for a while. They didn’t change her smell, her language, or anything else about her. When people saw a fashionable sweetheart, they asked if she was lost, tried to help her, and approached her gently. When she looked like an urchin, even though she didn’t ask for money or anything else, people treated her rudely, speaking to her in such a way that she even burst into tears.

What matters is the fruit. What do people say? And more importantly, what do we say? Are our words building people up or tearing them down? Do we use profane language occasionally as a result of being broken, fallen people trying to explain our passion, or is abusive and obscene language and coarse joking just par for the course for us? When we begin to take an honest inventory of our relationship with Jesus Christ and if we are following Him, we should start with an inventory of our words. Has our speech gotten better as we have followed Him? Have we considered what it means when we use the name of our Lord and our God flippantly, as a joke, to say “OMG” thoughtlessly? Have we thought twice before attacking someone we work with who made us mad or the barista who spoke rudely to us at the coffeehouse drive-thru?

We need to regularly check our speech because of our second thought: *the words you say reflect the core of who you are*. Jesus goes on: “You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.”

Words don't just tumble out of our heads at random, though sometimes it might feel like it. We don't just randomly pick words out of thin air, either. We choose words based on our audience – who's listening to us – and what they'll appreciate. I don't speak the same way to my pastor friends as I do hear on Sunday as I do in my gamer's group. But all of those words flow out of my heart. They come out of the core of my being. They come from forty-two years of learning not only the rudiments of the English language – vocabulary and sentence structure and parts of speech – but how words are perceived, in my own head and by others.

The core of our beings is reflected in our speech. Someone who consistently swears up a blue streak at everything is usually a very angry person. Someone who gossips all the time is often malicious, but often also very lonely and jealous of others. Someone who is consistently kind with their words – not just polite, but actually loving with their words – is usually a kind person in their actions too.

As we learned last week, we belong to one of two kingdoms. As humans born into this world as sinners, we initially belong to the kingdom of this world, the kingdom of darkness, the kingdom of the devil. We can, through God's sovereign will, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for sin, and the power of the Holy Spirit, be brought into the Kingdom of Heaven instead. Which Kingdom we belong to will be reflected in the way we talk.

This doesn't happen overnight. You can meet a surly Christian and a chipper atheist. Decades of patterns take a long time to correct. Yet they can be corrected. When we become Christians, the Holy Spirit begins chipping away at those years of words in our hearts and begins transforming them with His Word, the holy word of God. We start learning what it means to be holy and righteous, and we begin to desire those things.

In Galatians 5:22-23, Paul describes the fruit of the Spirit. The fruit – not fruits plural but fruit singular – is “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” Paul is describing us holistically there – he's not just talking about our words but our actions. But Paul is still working with the same analogy. We are bad trees when we are rooted in the kingdom of this world. Though we occasionally produce fruit the world sees as delicious, we're still rotten on the inside. But when we believe and become a part of God's Kingdom, we bear the fruit of the Spirit because we are now trees born of the Holy Spirit. You can't bear true spiritual fruit unless you are a spiritual tree. But once you are, that's what you'll produce.

When you think about your words, are you starting to want to change them? Do you regret those times that you have said something biting or unkind, when you questioned God's work in your life or took His name as a curse? Do you want to make amends for them and begin living in a way that reflect the goodness of God? Those are all signs of a heart's allegiance to Jesus Christ. Don't abandon them; act on them. Work to guard your tongue against any evil or malice. Think before you speak. Say words that build up and encourage. You will see that the core of you and your language will change together as you desire more of God in your life.

It can be daunting to think about changing how we talk, guarding our speech. But we must based on this final thought for today: *belief in Christ does not spare us the judgment of our words*. Christ finishing this saying with, “I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”

Many of us think that believing in Jesus is our free ticket to heaven. There is some truth to that. We cannot earn our salvation; it is given to us as a free gift. Believe in your heart and confess with your mouth that Jesus is Savior and Lord and you will be saved, Scripture says. Though it's not a one-time belief or a one-time confession, it is true. As we discussed last week, direct, knowledgeable blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is the only unforgivable sin. Every other sin you commit with your words can be forgiven.

Yet there is a day of judgment coming. The Scriptures, both the Old and New Testament, speak about this day of reckoning to come. It's that day when God will bring justice on every nation, tribe, and people. No one will escape it. While it shouldn't terrify Christians, it should make us incredibly cautious about what we say.

Do you want to answer for every careless word you've spoken? I don't. I've spoken many many many over the years. I don't want to speak more. Yet in a moment of anger or frustration, they can fly out. One of the most dangerous phrases in the English language was, "I was only kidding." It usually means we've said a careless word that we sort of wish we could take back.

Our words will acquit us and our words will condemn us. They will show the matter of our hearts. They will show whether or not our belief in Christ was genuine. They will show the results of a changed life. What will the words you have spoken say about you?

We can think all we want. I'm the kind of guy that lives a lot of my life in my mind. I'm a thinker. I can think about lots of things that are kind and godly. But how do those thoughts affect my words and actions? Because while we should think in a godly way – we're told so in Philippians 4:8 – those thoughts should translate into the words we speak to others and about others. What comes out of our minds reflects our thoughts. Do they reflect God?

The judgment of God, on one hand, is a frightening thing. We know so little about the rewards that await us, the treasures we've been storing up through the righteous deeds we accomplish through the power of the Holy Spirit. If we have truly trusted in Jesus and confessed Him to others, if we have genuinely repented and the Spirit brought us to grace, we don't have to worry about our salvation. But how sad we will be if, as 1 Corinthians 3:15 tells us, our works are proven to be insubstantial, our words untrue, and we are saved but only as by fire where all else is lost? Having to account for my own unkind words scares me because I know those times have disappointed my Lord.

But on the other hand, the judgment of God also bears great promise. There is still time for change, for the Holy Spirit's work to reflect in us and our speech. What 1 Corinthians 3:14 promises us is that if our work survives the test, we will receive a reward. How exciting is that possibility! We have seen the joys of God's earthly blessings – our lives, our health, our homes, our families, many of us, different things, but things that we have been given by God's good grace alone. Imagine what rewards God may have for us if we simply stay the course and act like His people, as the Bible trains us! I don't even think I can imagine that well. God's gifts through eternity are sure to exceed anything we can think of on this earth.

Friends, let us make our trees good. May we speak words of grace, of love, of compassion to others. Let us bite our tongues rather than to speak evil of someone or spout off carelessly. May our hearts overflow into our speech every day so that others may hear our words and know that our God has made us new.