



Matthew 12:33–37

33 “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. 34 You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. 35 A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. 36 But I tell

you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. 37 For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”

Reflection

‘The crowds were amazed ... because he taught as one who had authority’ (Matt 7:28–29). I don’t know about you, but as I read these verses, I can feel the authority of Jesus, almost as if it is reaching down throughout the two thousand years that have passed since these words were first spoken, to grip me as powerfully as it did his first hearers. The bible says that the word of God is living and active and the

authority of Jesus Christ is certainly living and active in our passage today.

The Pharisees have accused Jesus of working for Satan. They've accused the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, who is closer to Jesus than life itself, who is empowering his ministry on earth, and who is God himself – they've accused the Holy Spirit of being Satan. Yesterday Jesus warned them sternly about this unforgivable sin, today he is incensed.

He stares down whichever poor Pharisees can still manage to meet his gaze and addresses the Jewish religious leadership with these words,

34 You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good?

Jesus is a powerful communicator. He could not be much clearer could he? Do you notice also how he's wrapped this declaration (which comes in the form of a rhetorical question) with truisms and with highly evocative imagery?

He begins again with an agricultural illustration, these people of the land couldn't help but see clearly his point. His words would call to mind a healthy, flourishing tree bearing abundant fruit that feeds the community, in contrast to a stunted, sickly tree, bearing little to no fruit at all, and that fruit, shrivelled or blighted or inedible. You can judge a tree by its fruit, you recognize it by its fruit. The Pharisees' words and works are evil which means so are they. They've misunderstood and distorted the

Old Testament, added their own rules to God's law, and when they do obey the Old Testament they make a self-righteous display of what should be between them and God. And add to this the fact that they've just accused the Messiah of working for Satan, and the Holy Spirit of being Satan, all the while, plotting behind the scenes as to how they might kill Jesus. Their words and works are evil.

Next Jesus refers to them as a 'brood of vipers.' We picture a dozen or so dangerous little snakes that have emerged at birth from a mother snake. There's so many layers to this image. Not only is it repulsive to most people since snakes were cursed in Genesis 3, but also each viper is venomous, deadly, come out of the mother snake, resembling their mother, which of

course has the strongest overtones of being Satan who took on the form of a snake when sin entered the world. Then Jesus completes his accusation with two other truisms,

‘For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. 35 A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.’

Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks. A good man speaks the good that is stored up in his heart, an evil man brings out the evil stored up in him.

There is nowhere to hide against this onslaught from Jesus. ‘You evil sons of Sa-

tan, your words and your actions betray you. You've accused me of working for Satan, and the Holy Spirit of being Satan himself; but your words and your actions as the clearest demonstration to all that in fact it is you who are guilty of the charge you are levelling at me. You evil sons of Satan, on Judgement Day you will meet the same end as he.

Standing back from the text a moment it's interesting that right throughout Matthew's gospel Jesus has been encouraging us to assess him by his words and his works. So it's interesting to see him hear using the same measure against the Pharisees. Jesus goes on to show that this same measure will be used for everyone on Judgement Day. See in verses 36 to 37,

36 But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. 37 For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”

It doesn't get much more gripping than Jesus, the Word of God, speaking to us about the importance of words. There's a whole sermon in these two verses. Every word that passes your lips matters. Every empty word will be weighed and judged. He's just demonstrated this with the Pharisees, their evil words lead back to their evil hearts. By our words we'll be acquitted or condemned.

Think

There's so much to marvel at and to deeply consider in this passage. You might just want to marvel now at how powerfully Jesus, the Word of God, uses words to express truth. What does that mean for the way we speak? The way we communicate our faith? And for the depth of meaning that we should search for as we contemplate Jesus' words in Scripture?

And what do you make of Jesus' warning about empty words? Over the course of our lives we'll only speak, email and post so many words. How will you use them? Do you feel the opportunity and responsibility that each word presents? How do you feel about your every word being weighed one day? You also might consider how the words that you speak reflect the true state of your heart.

It's also important in thinking through this passage for yourself that you consider how grace intersects with Jesus saying explicitly in our passage that by our words we will be acquitted and by our words we will be condemned. Romans 10:9 ultimately gives us the only words by which we will be acquitted,

9 If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

As hard as we must try, our words will ultimately fall short, and it will be only through these words that we are saved. However, as Jesus teaches so clearly in our passage today, the words that pass our lips

are reflective of the state of our hearts. When we become Christians, we are given a new heart and a new spirit, the Holy Spirit, and it is out of this new heart and by our new Spirit that we speak. So one of the encouragements of this passage must be to give ourselves over to him more and more so that our words might be increasingly effective for the kingdom of God.

Pray

Close this time now in prayer. Pray for whatever is on your heart as you've encountered the word of God this morning. Be sure to thank God for his eternal Word, the Lord Jesus Christ. And pray also that our words would always be like God's words; that they would never go out empty, and therefore never return empty; but

that they would always achieve his purposes and desires, and in so doing bring great glory to him.