

Chapter 45: Speaking from the Heart

Matthew 12:33–37

In the previous passage, Jesus disproved the Pharisees' assertion that he had cast out demons by the power of Satan. In Jesus' response to the Pharisees, Jesus had made many profound theological points about the kingdom of God, binding the strong man (Satan), and blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Within that response, however, Jesus had largely argued along the assumption that it would be impossible to mix good with evil. So, Satan would not destroy his *evil* kingdom by permitting Jesus to do *good* by casting out demons (Matt. 12:25–26). Furthermore, anyone who stands against the *good* kingdom of God by opposing the work of the Holy Spirit through Jesus will ultimately scatter (Matt. 12:30). Overall, Jesus argues that no one good can do ultimate evil, and no one evil can do ultimate good. Here in Matthew 12:33–37, Jesus will take this idea one step further as it relates to the words we speak: *you are what you say*.

Sincerity (Matt. 12:33)

This theme of the impossibility of mixing good and evil in their ultimate forms leads directly into Jesus' next assertion: "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" (v. 33). Hendriksen makes this connection well: "Fruit and tree belong together. They must not be separated. Therefore to say that while the deeds of Jesus, such as demon-expulsion, healing the sick, etc., may be beneficial, yet he himself is bad, being a tool of Beelzebul, makes no sense. Who Jesus *is* must be determined by what he *does*: a tree is judged by its fruit."¹ If the Pharisees believe that Jesus is evil (like a rotten tree), then they can hardly explain the good fruit that he bears by casting out demons. Moreover, those opposed to Jesus should consider the simplest explanation for this good fruit: namely, that Jesus *is* good.²

Furthermore, just as Jesus is known by his fruit, so also the Pharisees shall be known from their fruit. Jesus has been accusing the Pharisees of having committed blasphemy against the Spirit, by which he attributes to them hard, unbelieving, and wicked hearts. Nevertheless, while we think of "Pharisee" as proverbial for evil, the people of Jesus' day did not. Thus, Jesus is showing that the outward piety of the Pharisees is nothing more than a hypocritical mask, as John Calvin writes: "their pretended sanctity had so blinded the minds of the common people, that no one ventured to pass sentence on their vices. Wishing to remove this mask, Christ desires them to be either good or bad;

¹ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 530.

² "The evident good deeds of Jesus performed by freeing demoniacs cannot come from a person connected with Beelzebul; to have such a person, his deeds would have to be of the same type. Compare the same argument in John 10:25; 37, 38. The absolute irrationality of the blasphemy of the Pharisees exposes its devilish animus." Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 486.)

or, in other words, declares that nothing is more inconsistent with honesty than hypocrisy...because they must be *either good or bad*.³

Importantly, Calvin goes on to make an important pastoral point:

Christ does not demand absolute and entire perfection, but only a sincere and unfeigned disposition, which the Pharisees whom he addresses were far from possessing. As Scripture applies the terms, *bad and wicked*, to those who are completely given up to Satan, so the sincere worshippers of God, though they are encompassed by the infirmity of their flesh and by many sins, and groan under the burden, are called good. This arises from the undeserved kindness of God, who bestows so honorable a designation on those who aim at goodness.⁴

Hypocrisy is not the same thing as *inconsistency*. Furthermore, not everyone who falls short of perfection should be considered a *hypocrite*. The opposite of hypocrisy is not *perfection*, but *sincerity*. Yes, Christians fall short of God's perfect law *before* their regeneration, conversion, faith, and repentance, but also *after* they have come to a saving knowledge of Christ. The gospel alone is our confidence to stand without fear before the judgment of God on the last day. As Christians, we are not so much seeking to be perfect, as to be sincere in our faith.

Speech (Matt. 12:34–35)

So, while Jesus does not break the bruised reed or quench the smoldering wick of the sincere among his people (Matt. 12:20), he is nevertheless withering in his condemnation against the Pharisees: “You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (v. 34). As the “brood of vipers,” Jesus is saying that the Pharisees are the offspring of the Satan, the serpent from the garden of Eden (Gen. 3:15). Then, Jesus addresses the *speech* of the Pharisees. As their father, Satan had murdered and lied, so also do they (John 8:44). Hagner rightly connects this with the concept of the “blasphemy” against the Spirit that they had “spoken” (Matt. 12:32): “This passage about good and bad words follows the preceding pericope with its reference to blasphemy in order to clarify the problem of blasphemy, which is far deeper than the mere words themselves. The problem is one of the basic nature of the speaker; what a person says is inescapably related to what a person is.”⁵

Jesus teaches, as Lenski explains, that the “heart is like a reservoir: it holds much, but when it gets to full, the mouth carries the περίσσευμα [*perisseuma*], the overplus, off in speech. The heart overflowing in speech through the mouth is about the same as the tree with its native fruit. The overflow shows what is in the reservoir.”⁶ They did not simply misspeak when they accused Jesus of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebul. Rather, their words exposed the steady, persistent rejection in their hearts against the purposes and power of the Holy Spirit in the world. While they

³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:78.

⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:79.

⁵ Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 349.

⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 487.

went to great pains to hold themselves out as holy, the overflow of their hearts spilled a viper's venom out in their words. Thus, their words revealed who they really were.

Once again, though, we see how the principle of speech goes both ways, whether for good or for evil: “The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil” (v. 35). Just as the evil Pharisees speak out of the evil treasure of their hearts, so also God's people will speak out of the good treasure laid up in their hearts. Again, Lenski explains this well: “Each man stores up what he thinks is valuable in thoughts, judgments, convictions, and the like. As occasion arises, he draws on these treasures of his. They are exactly like the man who has stored them away.”⁷

Scrutiny (Matt. 12:36–37)

It is only in the context of understanding that our words reveal our hearts that Jesus' next statements make sense: “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” (v. 36–37). We should not think of our words as though they were light, trivial, or unimportant. Even the word translated here as “careless” (v. 36) does not mean flippant, but something that gets closer to the idea of “hypocritical.” France writes, “The Pharisees' charge against Jesus, which was far from ‘casual’ or ‘thoughtless,’ is such an utterance, purporting to be a defense of God's truth but all the time working against his saving purpose.”⁸ Jesus is not so much condemning silly or playful words (in the right context), but rather words that attempt to signal virtue that does not really exist in the heart.

Here, Jesus insists that we will be judged for hypocritical words, whether to be justified or to be condemned. The point is not that we will be justified by words as though we had uttered the correct magical incantation. Rather, as Blomberg writes, “all words ultimately reflect one's more fundamental commitments (cf. v. 37 and Jas 3:1–12).”⁹ So, our justification or condemnation arises how from the sounds that roll out of our mouths, but by what those words express about the status of our hearts. Paul makes virtually the same point when he ties together our faith and our speech in explaining how someone comes to be saved: “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” (Rom. 10:9–10).

What, then, do your words reveal about your heart?

Discussion Questions

1. What does Jesus mean when he says that a good tree will have good fruit, and that a rotten tree will have rotten fruit (v. 33)? Why do our words and our actions conform to what lies within our hearts? How does this relate to Jesus' own work of casting out demons? How does this relate to the Pharisees' condemnation of Jesus? What is the difference between perfection and sincerity?

⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 487.

⁸ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 486.

⁹ Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, NAC 22 (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 205.

2. What does Jesus mean when he calls the Pharisees the “brood of vipers” (v. 34a)? In what sense do the Pharisees “speak good” when Jesus says that they themselves are evil (v. 34b)? What does Jesus mean when he says that “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (v. 34c)? How do our words reveal whether we are good or evil in our hearts? Why is Jesus so concerned to confront the sin of hypocrisy?
3. What does Jesus mean when he says that we must give account for every “careless” word we speak (v. 36)? In what sense can words justify us (v. 37a)? In what sense can words condemn us (v. 37b)? Why are our words so tightly connected to the condition of our hearts? How does this concept help us to explain the notion of “blasphemy” against the Holy Spirit (Matt. 12:31)? What does Paul say about being saved by what we confess with our mouths (Rom. 10:9–10)?
4. As you think about your own life, how often do you separate yourself from the words that you speak (e.g., “I didn’t mean it!”)? If you analyze the words you speak, what are your words saying about who you are in your heart? Where do you need to repent for your words? Where do you need to repent for what your words reveal about your heart? How does God’s Word change our hearts, and, therefore, the words that we speak?