

A Tree and Its Fruit

Introduction

The Text

“⁴³ For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, ⁴⁴ for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. ⁴⁵ The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks” (Luke 6:43–45).

How Do We Become those Kind of People?

- A. In our text, Jesus is really trying to answer the question: How do we become the kind of people that He’s been talking about in this sermon of His that began back up in v. 20?
1. How do we become people who see God and His kingdom as so compelling and so valuable that we’re willing to deal with poverty, or hunger, or weeping, or persecution to lay hold of it (vv. 20-26)?
 2. How do we become people who love our enemies—so that we do good to them, we bless them, we pray for them (vv. 27-36)?
 3. Or, more immediately in the context: How do we become people who aren’t given over to judgmentalism, to hypocrisy—pointing out a speck in our brother’s eye while we have a lumberyard in our own? How do we become people who know how to use our words wisely, lovingly, in a way that helps others rather than hurts them (vv. 37-42)?
- B. How do we become full-blooded, authentic disciples of Jesus Christ so that this is the sort of stuff that hangs like fruit from the branches of our lives?
1. Perhaps you heard Christ’s words these past weeks and all but despaired of ever living up to them, of obeying them, of walking them out. What are we supposed to do with this?
 - a. Jesus is trying to help us forward in this text by using the imagery of a tree and its fruit. He uses such simple, common, everyday things, to get at profoundly important realities!
- C. I’m going to organize my thoughts this morning under three headings: (1) The Necessity of Good Fruit; (2) The Priority of a Good Tree; and (3) The Way of Lasting Change.

(1) The Necessity of Good Fruit

- A. As Jesus picks up this imagery of a tree and its fruit, I think it is important to see it in connection with the larger discussion concerning fruit in the Scriptures. When once we do this, one thing becomes unmistakably plain: Good fruit is a necessity.
1. And what I mean by “necessity” is: You cannot be right with God, you cannot pass through the final judgment, you will not inherit eternal life without it. Good fruit is a necessity.
- B. Though we could go anywhere in the Scriptures for this, I’ll stay close to home in the gospel of Luke.
1. We’ve already heard John the Baptist’s terrifying words on the subject, as he warned the Jews coming out to be baptized by him: “⁷ You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?⁸ Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. . .⁹ Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Luke 3:7–8a, 9).
 2. Or later in Luke 13 Jesus will tell the crowd around Him this parable: “⁶ A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none.⁷ And he said to the vinedresser, ‘Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?’⁸ And he answered him, ‘Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure.⁹ Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down’” (vv. 6–9).
 3. Or in Luke 20, Jesus tells yet another parable where He likens Israel to tenants of God’s vineyard. And when, in harvest time, God comes to claim the fruit of His vineyard, the tenants send Him away with nothing. So Jesus says in v. 16: “[God] will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others.”
- C. So, again, good fruit is a necessity. And, with this, we should start to feel the weightiness of the discussion at hand. With this, we should be compelled to examine our own lives and ask: “Do I have this good fruit, or not?”

(2) The Priority of a Good Tree

- A. Good fruit, though essential and utterly necessary, is, at the same time, not the first priority. It’s a subordinate, a secondary matter.
1. Let me show you this in our text back in Luke 6: “⁴³ For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit,⁴⁴ for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush” (vv. 43-44).
- B. In all of this discussion, though good fruit is critical, it is not ultimate, or fundamental. The fruit is the effect and evidence of a deeper reality: namely, the tree. No good tree bears bad fruit. No bad tree bears good fruit.
1. Conclusion: If you want to change the fruit, you must first change the tree.

- C. But, obviously, Jesus is not merely concerned with trees here. He's not an arborist, come to save your garden. He's the Christ, come to save your soul. With all His talk of trees, His concern is with you and with me.
 - 1. And in v. 45, He just cuts from this illustration straight to the point: "The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks."
 - a. "I'm not talking about trees here. I'm talking about people. The good person and the evil person. I'm talking about the state of a person's heart and the fruit (thoughts, words, deeds) that that kind of heart produces."
- D. Therefore, to restate our conclusion not in tree but in human terms: If you want to change your thoughts, words, deeds, you must first change your heart.
 - 1. Something inside me at the deepest level needs to shift, or I don't stand a chance at bearing the fruit that God requires. Because the fruit proceeds from there.
- E. And this leads now to my final heading, where we will spend the remainder of our time this morning...

(3) The Way of Lasting Change

Not Behavior Modification but Regeneration

- A. We must confess at the outset here that, though Jesus' logic makes perfect sense on paper, we often fail to follow it in our own lives.
- B. When we struggle with our behaviors, our sinful tendencies or patterns, the stuff we want to change, we are so prone to treat these things as the priority, are we not? We go straightaway for the thing itself and think we can change it there directly.
 - 1. If pornography is my problem—Well, I will throw away my computer, that should solve it.
 - 2. If anger is my problem—Well, I'll learn some new breathing techniques. I'll meditate my way back to my happy place and that should fix it.
 - 3. If I'm struggling with substance addiction—Well, I just need to check myself in somewhere, chain myself to a bed, and sweat it all out.
- C. While strategies like these may prove helpful as part of a holistic approach to change, they are utterly insufficient when it comes to dealing with the root of the issue. They might help change certain external behaviors, but they cannot change my heart.
 - 1. I throw away my computer, but I start to just use my phone. I throw away my phone, but I start loitering down by the mall to lust after the women that come in and out.

2. I do my breathing techniques, and I may grow more skilled at swallowing down my angry words, but the root of my frustration will just find another way of expressing itself—giving the silent treatment, or the cold shoulder, or using passive aggression.
 3. I may break my addiction to this or that substance, but until my heart is satisfied in Christ, I will just transfer that addiction to something else that promises to fill the void—perhaps something more socially acceptable like exercise, or food, or work.
- D. The specific example Jesus gives us in [v. 45](#) concerns our mouths, our words: “[O]ut of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.”
1. Anyone have a mama who would wash your mouth out with soap? You’d let one of those four-letter words slip in front of her and so to the sink you would go. But let me ask you: How did that work out for you? Did that all that soap actually clean up your mouth?
 - a. Maybe around her it did. She’d come around and you’d be a perfect little angel, humming the latest K-Love tune, or reciting memory verses, or complimenting your siblings. But how about with your friends? Weren’t your words just as filthy and foul as ever, perhaps increasingly so?
 - i. You see, there is a problem with your mouth, Jesus says, because there is a problem with your heart. And all the soap in the world can’t wash you there!
- E. To let psychological categories clash with biblical ones: We don’t need behavior modification, we need regeneration. We don’t need to pick ourselves up and try again, we need to lay ourselves down before the cross of Christ and be born again!

The Book of Jeremiah

- A. I was reminded of the book of [Jeremiah](#) at this point. A while back, I was reading through Jeremiah in my devotions and I started to pick up on just how many times God speaks of Israel’s heart as the fundamental problem, as the root beneath all their rebellion, as the reason He’s hurling them into exile. I’ll give you just a sampling here:
1. “Circumcise yourselves to the Lord; remove the foreskin of your hearts, O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem; lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your deeds.” (4:4).
 2. “O Jerusalem, wash your heart from evil, that you may be saved. How long shall your wicked thoughts lodge within you?” (4:14).
 3. “[T]his people has a stubborn and rebellious heart; they have turned aside and gone away” (5:23).
 4. “Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but everyone walked in the stubbornness of his evil heart. Therefore I brought upon them all the words of this covenant, which I commanded them to do, but they did not” (11:8).
 5. “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (17:9).

- B. So God through Jeremiah has clearly identified Israel's (and our) problem: the heart. But what in the world can they do about it?
 - 1. The unfolding of history made it plain: They could not circumcise the foreskin of their hearts, they could not wash their hearts from evil, they could not even understand their own hearts, let alone heal them.
- C. So God, in love, in grace, will come down and change their hearts Himself: “³¹ Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah . . . ^{33b} I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (31:31, 33b).
 - 1. And He continues until in 32:41 we read this: “I will rejoice in doing them good, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul.”
 - a. Did you hear that?! God is doing the heart work, God is doing the planting, God has taken it upon Himself to change this tree, from the inside-out.

Jesus Changes the Tree!

- A. And He's going to do it through His Son, Jesus the Christ: “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20b).
 - 1. “Though I have born nothing but good fruit for My Father, I will let the axe have its way with me on that cross, I will be cut down, for your sin, for your fruitlessness. But when I rise, by My Spirit I will give you new life. Not behavior modification. Regeneration!”
- B. This is why Paul would come later and write: “[My brothers, you . . . have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong . . . to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God” (Rom 7:4).
 - 1. In other words: Jesus changes the tree!
- C. You might be sitting in this room this morning feeling like your life is a total wreck. And everything in you wants to focus on the rotten stuff hanging from the branches. “I want to change this about me. I want to change that about me.”
 - 1. But hold up on that for a minute and let's get you plugged in to Jesus, the Vine—and He'll take care of all that other stuff, the branch situations in your life.
- D. I love how this is worked out in a book on marriage I'm reading right now with a couple in our church. It's a solid book, dealing with all the standard hot-button issues, but do you know where he begins? With the gospel.
 - 1. Before we talk about your relationship with one another, we have to talk about your relationship with Christ. Because he knows, we're going to want to jump to the chapters on finances, or conflict resolution, or sexual intimacy—“Fix us there!”

- a. But the only way to get that stuff right is to get Jesus at the center of it all. When you see His love, His grace, His acceptance, His glory, when you are changed at the core by Him, all the “fruit” will work itself out.
 - i. Jesus changes the tree!

A Good Tree with Bad Fruit?

- A. If you are not a Christian here this morning, the plea is for you to come to Christ, to repent of your sin and receive what He accomplished for you on the cross, and He will put you back together from the inside out.
- B. But if you are already a Christian, if you are self-reflective in any way, I assume that there is something still left nagging at you from v. 43. And it is to this that we must turn before we close: “[N]o good tree bears bad fruit.”
 - 1. Any Christian feel like they bear bad fruit? Are all of your thoughts pure? Are all your words edifying? Are all your deeds kind? So what do you do with that? Are you not a Christian? Are you not a good tree?
- C. If this is where you are at, and I assume all of us are here, let me assure you: Good fruit is not composed merely of good behavior but also of good reactions to bad behavior!
 - 1. As A.W. Pink has said: “It is not the absence of sin but the grieving over it [that] distinguishes the child of God from empty professors.”
 - a. How can you tell if someone is a child of God or a pretender, if someone is a good or a bad tree? Well, Pink is saying: We don’t look for perfection, the absence of sin, we look for how that person feels about his imperfection, how he feels about his sin.
 - i. Do we get buddy-buddy with what God calls us to make all-out war on? Well, then we have no reason to think we are a good tree after all.
 - ii. But perhaps we see our failures, our falling short of the glory of God and we grieve, we confess it to God, we repent of it, we beg to have His help in being free from it. Well, then, if that is where we are at, we can be confident that Christ has done work on our heart, that we are a good tree after all.
 - (1) For, again, good fruit is not composed merely of good behavior but also of good reactions to bad behavior!

We Sin Not from Our Nature but Against It

- A. I might put it like this: For the Christian, sin is no longer so much from his nature as it is against his nature. Because Jesus has changed us in a fundamental way, sin is no longer so much an expression of my heart as it is an attack on my heart.

- B. If you'll let me get real and a bit raw with you for a moment, I'll try to illustrate this for you. Before I became a Christian, I was, like many young men my age, addicted to pornography. And then Christ got a hold of me. He forgave my sin. He regenerated my nature. He put His Spirit within me. He wrote His law on my heart. He changed the tree.
1. But I wanted to go back to my drug. I wanted to keep taking hits off the internet. But I couldn't do it. At least not in the same way. O I would try. But here's what would happen: my whole body would start to shake. It was as if something inside me knew that what I was doing was horrifyingly filthy in the sight of God and so there was this resistance to it all.
 - a. O I could go back to those same sites and look at those same images, but I was not the same person. And this sin was now not from my nature but against it. And the Spirit in me was grieving, and it wasn't long before I was grieving as well, repenting, and growing in holiness.
- C. So take heart O war-torn, sin-tattered Christian, hear me: If you are in Christ, then you are a good tree! And no good tree bears bad fruit...in the end.