

Betrayed by Words from the Heart

Matthew 12:33-37

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33 "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. 34 You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. 35 The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. 36 I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, 37 for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matt 12:33-37).

There are some passages in the Bible that are meant to make us shutter. Last week we looked at the frightening reality of the one unforgivable sin which is the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. We learned that it is possible to so grieve the Holy Spirit that he forever withdraws his convicting power from a person's life such that he or she will never repent. They are beyond the reach of repentance because they have spurned the only one who can make repentance possible. This kind of text is designed to wake us up, to shock us, or to make us think, "Wow, this is really serious."

If you understand the sober reality of what Jesus is saying and if your response is to tremble, then there is another question that will likely emerge: "Where does this sin come from or how does this sin happen?" It almost seems like it is common sense that the blasphemy of Holy Spirit just doesn't come out of nowhere. It seems like it is the fruit of a poisonous vine. Blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is, in fact, the fruit of a poisoned heart.

Matthew 12:33-37 could really be seen as an extension of Jesus teaching on the one unforgivable sin. And Jesus does here what he so often does – he aims for the heart. In other words, he presses the Pharisees beyond just the reality of the one unforgivable sin. He shows them (and us) that the real problem is not just the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit; the real problem is their hearts. Their words reveal their hearts or to use our title they were "betrayed by words from the heart."

Three Heart-Related Issues:

This morning we are going to see how Jesus unpacks the heart and shows us three heart-related issues. He Jesus gives us three important statements that relate to the heart. Each of them begins with the word "for."

- v 33 – "for a tree is known by its fruit"

- v 34 – “for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks”
- v 37 – “for by your words you will be justified and by your words you will be condemned

Let’s look at each of them to discover the various layers as it relates to the problem of the heart.

External: Actions are telling

The first thing that we see here is that Jesus uses a familiar analogy of a tree and fruit. This is a common analogy in the New Testament, and we’ve seen it before in Matthew.

16 You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?
 17 So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. 18 A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit (Matt 7:16-18).

The point of the tree/fruit analogy is to show that there is a direct connection between the kind of tree and the kind of fruit and between the caliber of the tree and the quality of the fruit. Grape vines produce grapes. Fig trees produce figs. The sure sign that you have an apple tree is the production of apples. Good trees produce good fruit and bad trees produce bad fruit.

Now when Jesus says in verse 33 that they are to “make the tree good” or “make the tree bad” he is making a proverbial statement connecting good trees and good fruit, bad trees and bad fruit. He making a statement like we do when we say “give him an inch and he’ll take a mile?” We use the words “give” and “take” in a proverbial way to make a bigger point. And Jesus’ point is simply that there is a natural and normal relationship between what a tree is and what it produces.

Jesus is not giving a horticultural lesson here. He has something else in mind, and that is why the passages that talk about fruit also have a tone of judgment connected to them.

10 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 (Matt 3:10).

19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus you will recognize them by their fruits (Matt 7:19-20).

Jesus is using the tree/fruit analogy to press home an important point that we often would like to minimize: **actions are telling**. Jesus says “for a tree is known by its fruit.” He wants the Pharisees to see that the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is not just a slip of the tongue. Jesus intends to make a strong point here that makes us uncomfortable. He is telling us that what a

person does reveals who they really are. Jesus is interested in exposure here, and he uses the works of people to shine the light on what is really going on.

This verse cuts through all the games that people play, all the things that they claim to believe, and all the statements that they make. The real proof is in what a person does. It is clear and uncomfortable: bad things come from a bad person, good things from a good person. The Pharisees cannot hide behind their pious statements and their religious lingo. They cannot take cover under spiritual knowledge or being conservative. They cannot live before God on appearances. What they did shows what kind of people they really are.

So how do you view your actions? What do your actions tell you? What do they speak to you? I think Jesus intends this warning not to be used so much on others as he intends for us to use it for personal self-inspection. Our actions expose who we really are. And I think Jesus would want us to ask what our actions are really saying. Words do indeed come from somewhere, and an honest evaluation of our words should lead to the next level.

Internal: The source is within you

Jesus goes deeper and ratchets up the discussion in verses 34-35. His words are meant to get to the core of what is really going. You see words and actions, while telling, are not the real problem.

He begins by a statement that is verbally shocking. Jesus calls them "a brood of vipers." We've already seen this statement in 3:7 when John the Baptist used it against them, and we'll hear it again in 23:33 when Jesus uses it in the context of judgment. The point of the statement is that the Pharisees are like a pack of venomous enemies who attack deceptively.

Jesus then makes a series of statements about who the Pharisees are. The problem is not just their words. The real issue is the fact that the words are coming from somewhere, and Jesus pushes for them to see the source.

First, he simply says that they are only doing what is natural for them. Jesus unequivocally tells them that they are evil. "How can you speak good when you are evil?" (v 34). He tells them what their words are saying: they are evil.

Secondly, he explains what the real problem is: "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." Here is our second "for" statement. And what he says is that the mouth (actions) is just a window to a problem on the inside. Bad actions and bad words are not created in a vacuum; they are not isolated or alone. They are the product of something else.

We never need to wonder what the real problem is or where some wicked thing came from. The answer is always the same: the heart. **The real problem is the heart.**

Notice that it isn't just that the problem is the heart; the tragedy is the abundance of the heart. The heart is source of this bad stuff, but we learn here that what comes out is just the abundance or the overflow of the heart. So this makes the picture even darker. What comes out of the mouth is the spill-over. This is important so that you get the right imagery. It is not just that the heart produces a few thoughts, feelings, or words that get loose. Rather, it is that the heart is continually producing so much bad stuff that eventually it cannot be held back. The issue is not isolated creation but impossible containment. What comes out is indicative of a much bigger but unseen problem. We know only a sliver of what is really going on inside the heart of a person. It is always safe to say that if we knew the full picture of the heart, it would be far worse than we could possibly imagine.

You might think of it like what happens in the summer to your trash can. Through the hot days of August, heat tends to make your garbage rot and smell faster. If your garbage is like mine, it is inside the garage, and once and a while you might get a whiff from it. But if you walk over to it, open it, stand close to it you'll find out that you are only smelling the overflow. The smell is much worse than what a whiff would indicate.

That is why, thirdly, Jesus uses the word "treasure" to describe what is happening on the inside. He says, "the good person out of the treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil" (v 35). The source is what is behind the words or actions. It is the source that is most concerning and most telling.

Jesus is aiming for the heart. He is trying to show us that bad words, as telling as they are, are really not the ultimate tragedy. He wants us to see that words only reveal the orientation of the heart; words show us what is inside the heart. You could think of it as an accent of the heart. The words give us good sense of where the heart is.

The kind or style of words that we use can reveal where we are from. An accent, whether it is Southern, British, Canadian, or Californian reveals where we are from. Yet often the person who has the accent doesn't really seem to know how telling their accent is. An accent is not only telling but it is often surprising.

The question that we all have to ask ourselves is what is the accent of our hearts? In other words, what is really going on inside of your heart? You see the problem is not just actions or words, as telling as they are, the real problem is much deeper.

Christianity is the only religion that properly answers the question "Where did that come from?" and it is the only religion that gives a truly hopeful answer. Christianity, like no other faith, is deeply concerned about the heart. It focuses on the heart as the center and source of the whole inner life, diagnosing our hearts as sinful (Jer. 17:9), and offering to change us from the inside out through work of Christ (Ezekiel 36:26).

Jesus mercilessly exposes the heart with the intention of mercifully changing it.

Eternal: Consequences are colossal

The final heart-related issue is connected to the consequences of this discussion. Remember that when it came to the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit we learned that something happens in this life and it will not be forgiven in the next.

In a similar way Jesus seeks to establish here that evil words that come from evil hearts have eternal consequences. He wants us to avoid the tendency to downplay the problem of our words, and that is why he connects the actions of this life to future judgment in verse 36 – “I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak.”

What is Jesus saying here? The word “careless” means inactive, idle, or worthless. Many people think it means flippant or thoughtlessness. But that is not the full meaning. It is the same word that is used in James 2:20 – “faith without works is dead (ESV: useless).” So the idea of a careless word is one that is spiritually useless. He’s talking about the kind of speech that implies that one is working righteousness when in fact it is doing nothing. So this isn’t just abusive speech; this is evil speech that is evil because it never intends to really do any good. It is the accent of the spiritual hypocrite.

So we have to feel the full weight of evil words from evil hearts. It is not just that evil words are abusive, derogatory, and sinful words. Certainly that is the case. But they also include spiritual sounding words that provide cover for a deceptive, sinful heart. The overflow of the heart might not be explosive, loud words, but rather the smooth, calm tone of a rebellious heart that makes everyone believe that they are righteous.

It is the useless of the kind of deception that James 2:16 talks about when we see someone in need of clothing and food and we say, “Go in peace, be warmed and be filled.” Oh it sounds so spiritual, but it is really evil. You see, Jesus knows the heart.

The third and final “for” statement appears in verse 37: “for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.” This means that the useless words of the overflow of evil of every kind will serve as the evidence in God’s judgment to demonstrate who you really are. And words flowing from a heart captured by grace will be the evidence of a life that has been truly changed.

Words are a big deal because they come from the heart. Words are a big deal because they verify who we really are; they show us what we are really like in our innermost being.

So Jesus talks about the blaspheme of the Holy Spirit and then he talks about words because he wants to get to matters of the heart.

How Should We Think About the Heart?

In light of the strong warning about the unforgivable sin and the deep examination of root causes, what should we think about the heart? Let me suggest four things:

1. Be heart-aware

The heart in a spiritual sense is not an organ, but rather the controlling interplay of the mind, the affections, and the will. It is the essence of what you think about, what controls you, what motivates you, and what drives you. We need to see that the heart is seat or source of everything that we do; it is the "spring of life" (Prov. 4:23). We need to see that the heart can be dangerously deceptive – "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? (Jeremiah 17:9). And we need to see that the heart can be a massive idol factory (Ezekiel 14). We need to understand that utter importance and dangers of the heart. We need to be heart-aware.

2. Know the heart-changer

The Bible paints a very grim picture of what mankind's natural and normal heart is like. Romans 1:21 tells us that the heart is naturally foolish and darkened, and that those who have hard and resistant hearts are storing up wrath (Rom 2:5).

Yet God has made a way for our hearts to be changed.

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: 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. 34 And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (Jer 31:33-34).

It is through Jesus Christ, that this promise became a reality such that Paul declared "If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation. The old has passed away, behold the new has come" (2 Cor 5:17). Jesus can give a person a new heart.

3. Diagnose the heart with the Word

The only way that you will know your heart is through the Word of God. There is no other tool in the universe that is given to accomplish that purpose. "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb 4:12).

A steady diet of the Word of God through meditating, listening, and praying is a vital part of really knowing what is going on in your heart. If you remove yourself from the Word of God it will be long until sin and the deceitfulness of your heart conspire together and a hardening will set in. Your heart is in big trouble without the Word of God.

4. Pray often about your heart

Finally, let me urge you to pray often about your heart. God knows your heart fully and you know it partly so you ought to often pray about your heart. What should you pray?

- For God to search you, know you, and show you who you really are (Ps 139:23-24)
- To unite your heart so you can fear his name (Ps 86:11)
- That you would guard your heart (Prov 4:23)
- That you would not succumb to the deceitfulness of sin that leads to a hardness of heart (Heb 3:13)
- That you would love the Lord your God with all your heart (Matt 22:37)

A right understanding of the heart should lead to earnest praying about the heart.

The fact of the matter is that we have to think about the heart. We need to take careful inventory of what is happening in the heart, and we ought to thank God that he has provided the means and the power to transform our hearts.

Teaching on unforgiveable sin is meant to make us shutter. Teaching on the heart is meant to make sober, reflective, and repentant. It is meant to show us that are real problem is not just our words, blasphemous as they may be. And as telling as actions are and as eternal are consequences are, the real problem, the serious problem is our heart.

May God, through Christ, help our hearts!

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