

Sermons on Matthew

Justifying Words

Matthew 12:33-37

With Study Questions

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12/11/2005*

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Matthew 12:33-37

**__Either make the tree good and __its fruit good, or else make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for a tree is known by *its* fruit. ⁻³⁴⁻ __Brood __of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? __For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. ⁻³⁵⁻ A good man out of the good treasure __of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things. ⁻³⁶⁻ But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. ⁻³⁷⁻ For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.
(Matthew 12:33-37)**

Crime and Repentance

I didn't know for sure, but had about 95% confidence that this young man had stolen about \$500 of the church's money collected for our youth camp. In my office I told him, with more confidence than I actually had, that I knew he did it. He denied it. I told him I was going to give him about fifteen minutes to go home and bring the money back before I called the police. He continued to passionately deny it. I began to question myself.

I pressed on with what now seemed like a weak bluff. I told him he could leave but I was going to call the cops. After some very uncomfortable silence he finally confessed. He went home and returned the money and continued as part of the church. I eventually did his wedding. He has since moved, but praise God, last I heard he was walking in the faith. He sin was not obdurate.

Obdurate Sin

The context of the above passage is one of confrontation. The priests were denying the office and power of Jesus. Crumbled by the face-off with the undeniable teaching and power of Jesus, their response was a conspiracy to destroy Him (Matthew 12:14) and to accuse Him of being of the devil (Matthew 12:24).

This behavior laid the groundwork for Jesus' warning against committing the unforgivable sin of being confronted with the truth of the power of Christ through the Holy Spirit and resolving to speak derisively and blasphemously against Him (Matthew 12:31, 32), rather than acknowledging the truth and behaving accordingly.

It was wrong for my young friend to steal the money. It was wrong for him to deny stealing the money. But once he was caught, it would have been unforgivable (if you follow my comparison) for him to simply and stubbornly refuse to give it back. Unlike my 95% confidence, God knows our sin with certainty:

**The heart is deceitful above all *things*, and
desperately wicked; who can know it? ¹⁰ I, the Lord,
search the heart, *I* test the mind. (Jeremiah 17:9, 10a)**

The Convicting Spirit

Knowing our sinful estate and hopeless plight, God graciously brings us the gospel—He brings us Jesus. Throughout history the Holy Spirit of God continues to present and confront mankind with his own sin, as well as the person and work of Jesus (John 16:8-11) through the Scriptures (2 Timothy 3:15), through the preaching of the word (2 Timothy 4:2), and through the sacraments ordained by those Scriptures (Luke 22:19).

The convicting power of the word of God is undeniable.

But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all. ⁻²⁵⁻ And thus the secrets of his heart are revealed; and so, falling down on *his* face, he will worship God and report that God is truly among you. (1 Corinthians 14:24, 25)

The man who had pilfered the church's money probably had doubts about how sure I was of his actions. But no man can deny the knowledge or power of the word of God.

"Is not My word like a fire?" says the Lord, "And like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?" (Jeremiah 23:29)

Perhaps I have belabored this too far, but I hope my point is clear. There comes a time when the presentation of the facts ends and the challenge to respond commences:

Either make the tree good and __its fruit good, or else make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for a tree is known by *its* fruit. (Matthew 12:33)

“Fish or Cut Bait”

These provocative words of Jesus have a “fish or cut bait” ring to them. He had just previously explained that you are either for Him or against Him (Matthew 12:30). There is no neutral ground. Though there are many professing agnostics, there are no functional agnostics—every man lives in this world as if Jesus is, or is not, who He claims to be. Make the tree good, or make the tree bad. Jesus taught elsewhere:

_I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. ⁻¹⁶⁻ So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither __cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. (Revelation 3:15, 16)

This applied more particularly to the Pharisees who gave an outward display of piety and ethics, but had a view of their own righteousness and of Christ which revealed the true sinful nature of their hearts, and that it was not Jesus, but them who were serving the father of lies, the devil (John 8:44). But these crossroads are put before all men.

Seek the Lord

_Seek the Lord while He may be _found, call upon Him while He is near. ⁷□_Let the __wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man __his thoughts;□let him return to the Lord, _and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. (Isaiah 55:6, 7)

God has set life and death before us and calls us to choose life (Deuteronomy 30:19). And just in case this particular audience of Jesus was unclear in terms of their current status, Jesus thunders:

__Brood __of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? __For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.⁻³⁵⁻ A good man out of the good treasure __of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things. (Matthew 12:34, 35)

Evil Hearts, Evil Words

Their evil hearts were manifested by their evil words. We tend to minimize the importance of dialogue; Jesus did not. “The heart is the *fountain*, the words are the streams.”¹ In a certain sense, an evil man can say good things, but Jesus is not speaking here of the duplicitous man addressed elsewhere:

These __people _draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. (Matthew 15:8)

Jesus speaks here of men who are committed to anti-Christian propositions and articulate as much. There is an overabundance or superfluity (π_____, *perisseuma*) in the heart of man which must find an exit; that exit is the mouth. The mouth reveals the treasures of the heart. Those treasures (_____, *the_sauros*—where we get the word “thesaurus”) are a storehouse. It was the word used to describe the containers which held the gifts for the baby Jesus (Matthew 2:11).

Anti-rationalism

One safe conclusion we can draw is that Jesus was not a proponent of anti-rationalism. The context of this passage demands investigation regarding certain claims.

¹Henry, M. (1996, c1991). *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible : Complete and unabridged in one volume* (Mt 12:22). Peabody: Hendrickson.

Who is Jesus?

Is Jesus the Lord of the Sabbath making Him equal with God? Is Jesus greater than the temple which was the heart of true religion? Is Jesus the one in whom the nations are to trust?

There are few things more valuable for the Christian to pursue than a deeper understanding of Jesus and His cross. These are propositions and concepts found in Scripture which deserve our attentive study. Testimonials of changed lives, holding hands, brotherly affection and teary eyes may be good and praiseworthy, but there is no shortage of self-help groups and twelve step programs which have liturgies differing slightly from the modern Christian center.

The Mouth of the Righteous

The mouth of the righteous is a well of life, but violence covers the mouth of the wicked. (Proverbs 10:11)

What makes the mouth of the righteous a well of life is that it forms sentences which accurately reveal the depth of God's grace in the fullness of Christ.

Division

And if this sounds slightly divisive I say 'Amen' for Jesus, who did not come to bring peace but a sword (Matthew 10:34). And what fellowship does light have with darkness? (2 Corinthians 6:14)

-But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. ⁻³⁷⁻ For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned. (Matthew 12:36-37)

The Holy Tribunal

And as if to up the ante, Jesus now speaks of the words of men and how they fit in light of the Holy Tribunal of God's judgment. We should be careful to neither overstate nor understate the import of these words.

Words Which Condemn

Words, since they reveal the heart of men, will be a source of condemnation. Jesus makes a lesser to the greater argument here. If idle words are sufficient to condemn, how much more words which are blasphemous! Yet I agree with Matthew Henry when he states,

Nothing but the salt of grace, cast into the spring, will heal the waters.²

Words Which Justify

Let us understand the notion of justifying words within the context of the full counsel of God, which teaches in all places:

Do not enter into judgment with Your servant, _for in Your sight no one living is righteous. (Psalm 143:2)

It would be the zenith of folly to somehow infer from these words that men can form words with their tongues that would somehow acquit them before God. Men's words do, however, reveal the foundation of their hope.

When Jesus asked Peter who He was and Peter answered correctly, Jesus quickly revealed that the blessings Peter found had been granted by His Father in heaven (Matthew 16:17). In the same way that “. . .wisdom is justified by her children” (Matthew 11:19) means that wisdom is revealed as wisdom by what it produces, our words which justify us are words which reveal our hope is Christ. May these words continually flow from our lips, that they might be a means of grace in the lives of others as well.

Questions for Study

²Henry, M. (1996, c1991). *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible : Complete and unabridged in one volume* (Mt 12:22). Peabody: Hendrickson.

1. How did the priests respond to the truth of Christ (page 3)?
2. Discuss the unforgivable sin (page 3)?
3. What does the Holy Spirit do (page 3)?
4. What is man called to do when confronted with Jesus (page 4)?
5. How important are words (pages 5, 6)?
6. What role will words play on judgment day (pages 7, 8)?