

Open Mouth, Expose Heart

Luke 6:43-45

We are familiar with the concept of “Open mouth, insert foot.” It means to speak, and in the process to wish we had opted for silence. The following demonstrate what that means:

- “Whenever I watch TV and see those poor starving kids all over the world, I can’t help but cry. I mean I’d love to be skinny like that but not with all those flies and death and stuff.” - Mariah Carey
- “Outside of the killings, Washington has one of the lowest crime rates in the country.” - Mayor Marion Barry, Washington, D.C.
- “We’re going to turn this team around 360 degrees.” - Jason Kidd
- “The word ‘genius’ isn’t applicable in football. A genius is a guy like Norman Einstein.” - Joe Theisman

Jesus presents a new dimension to “Open mouth, insert foot.” He suggested that the things we say and do, in fact, reveal what is truly in our hearts. The produce or fruit of our hearts often reminds us that we are still battling many sins. We should carefully scrutinize that which emerges from our hearts and even that which emerges from those who would set themselves up to be teachers over others. So, while we are to resist our tendencies toward self-condemnation and of being judgmental toward others, there are times when we must examine fruit.

I. The Principle of Fruit Inspection

A. Context Is Crucial Here

Verse 44 says, “Each tree is recognized by its own fruit.” Of course, the context of any Bible text is crucial anytime that we want to understand and apply it appropriately, but this is especially true when the passage seems to send a mixed signal. In this same *Sermon on a Level Place*, Jesus has already forbidden our natural human tendency toward judgmentalism:

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged.” - Luke 6:37

“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? - Luke 6:41

But now, Jesus is clearly commanding us to make some sort of assessment of the teachings of those who would present themselves to us as teachers and spiritual guides.

Certain adults in the church where I grew up use to recite the cliché: “I’m not supposed to judge, but God expects me to be a fruit inspector.” But, in fact, that was just a way of granting themselves permission to be just as judgmental and critical of others as they pleased. Obviously, the judging that Jesus forbids and the fruit-inspection that He requires cannot be the same thing. Equally obvious, if we wish to honor Christ in this matter, we must figure out the difference.

Jesus preached this sermon against the backdrop of the Pharisees, who were the recognized authorities on all matters of practical righteousness. But, what were their teachings, and what did those teachings produce in the life of the nation as well as in the lives of their countrymen?

The Pharisees taught that personal righteousness was secured to the degree that one meticulously kept the Law of Moses. Of course, they also added onto that written code various traditions that had been passed down by various rabbis. The Pharisees taught that God had a way of demonstrating who He liked and who He disliked simply by the degree to which He blessed their physical existences. What was the net result of such theologies dominating the landscape of religious thought in the days of Jesus? Did it produce a nation of people that honored their covenant God? Did it produce the kind of social justice about which the Old Testament prophets were so insistent? Did it produce the kinds of worshippers that *JEHOVAH* desired?

B. What Does Fruit Tell Us?

1) Fruit exposes the health of a tree. verse 43

⁴³"No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit.

The words referring here to "good" and "bad" refer to the quality of a thing. An apple tree might produce an apple, but the quality of that apple tells us something about the overall health of the tree. The Pharisees were not wrong every time they spoke. They made a good point about the importance of being separated from the pagan influences of their world. Certainly, the fiercely monotheistic Jews were better off for worshipping their one true God than they would have been had they become caught up in the worship of the many Roman gods or of the emperor.

But, their particular brand of zealousness for God rendered them a people who were harshly disposed towards anyone outside of their own camp. The Pharisees looked down on "the people of the land", those who were too engaged just trying to get by in life to attend to all of that ceremonial minutia of the Pharisees. Most Jews looked down upon the nations as races to whom God was either hostile or indifferent. God had set His nation apart to be a light to the Gentiles, but far too much hostility for others existed in the hearts of the Jews for that function to be realized. The bad fruit of first-century Judaism was a kind of loyalty to God, but an ineffective loyalty, a loyalty that caused the Jews to be the bane of the world rather than the lamp of God.

There is a kind of Christianity today that seems to be more of a bane to the world than a blessing. It appears to love purity more than it loves people. It seems to relish in its own status as a subculture more than it understands its calling to affect the culture in which it is situated. It seems to be angry rather than redemptive. Don't get me wrong. Believers must hold to moral values even though the world will accuse us of lovelessness, bigotry and intolerance. Jesus said that we would be falsely accused. Our burden as we assess our reaction to those accusations is to be very sure that they indeed remain false, and that the vitriol levied against us does not move our hearts toward lovelessness, bigotry and intolerance. Jesus promised that we would be blessed when we were falsely accused. I suspect that we are on our own when we are validly accused.

2) Fruit exposes the kind of a tree. verse 44

... ⁴⁴Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars.

Want to know what my grandson calls an apple? An apple. Want to know what he calls a banana? An apple. Want to know what he calls a peach? An apple. Want to know what he calls meat? He calls it meat, of course. You think he doesn't know anything?

There can be certain degree of superficial similarity between different kinds of trees. But, to rightly evaluate a piece of fruit tells us beyond any doubt, what kind of a tree it came from. Apples come from apple trees. Bananas come from banana trees. Meat comes from a meat tree?

There were superficial similarities between the righteousness that God desired and the counterfeit righteousness of the Pharisees. There was a biblical dimension to both. There was a moral dimension to both. There was a loyalty to *JEHOVAH* dimension to both. The difference appeared in the fruit each system yielded. When the Pharisees taught a man how to be righteous, he became arrogant and loveless. He did not see how far his heart was from God. Or, his life was shipwrecked by guilt and terror because he *DID* sense how far his heart remained from God.

Of course, a man is more complex than a tree. Jesus read hearts, but He never turned His disciples loose to do the same. What might seem "good" to us at a glance may simply mean that some bad tree is a better actor than others. What may seem "bad" to us may simply be something that God is already in the process of pruning from a heart that genuinely does belong to Him. At the end of the age, God will separate the good and bad fish in the kingdom net. The judgment Jesus calls us to here simply has to do with carefully picking those we are willing to follow.

C. What Does the Good and Evil within a Man Tell Us? verse 45

... ⁴⁵The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.

I guess if the only thing that ever came out of a man was evil, that might be telling, but for most of us, ours is a mixed bag of fruit. We do good things. We do evil things. We speak righteously. We speak wickedly. This passage is not intended to cripple us into some sense of hopeless despair that we are irrevocably evil every time we fall short of God's glory. It only reminds us that evil remains in us. These words remind us of our need to be further refashioned by the hand of God. The evil we do should humble us and keep us from ever thinking that we have arrived.

Sometimes, our words or actions embarrass us. I'm perplexed whenever some celebrity goes on some hateful tirade and then, tries to salvage the situation by saying, "That wasn't me," or "That's not what is in my heart." Who was it? Where did it come from? I would prefer to hear them lament that things they did not realize were in their hearts or things that they wished were not there are obviously still there. That's the only way a believer is ever going to deal with the things in his heart that blurt out at inopportune moments. The healthiest thing he can say is,

"My heart is not where I want it to be and not even where I thought that it was. But this embarrassing episode will send me running to Christ. It reminds me that I am needy and sinful and constantly in need of His forgiveness and cleansing."

When you do or say evil things, the question is not, "Does this mean that I am irrevocably evil?" The proper question to ask is: "Do I want to get well?" And, if the answer to that latter question is, "Yes," then, your awareness of sin tells you exactly to Whom you must continue to turn.

II. The Purpose of Fruit Inspection

A. A Basis for Choosing our Leaders

People will follow a man of passion. People will follow a man of charisma. People will follow a man of influence. People will follow a man of vision. The most important question that we must ask, however, when considering whether or not a man is worthy to be followed is: “Does he speak the words of God? The Pharisees dominated the religious stage of their day because there was widespread ignorance of the Scriptures. Few could call them into account. But, Jesus called them into account, not because He could whip them in a debate on the Scriptures (which He could), but because there is a certain flavor to the presence of God that is not severe or harsh like a Pharisee.

In his book *The Gospel According to Starbucks*, Leonard Sweet tells the story of Ed Faubert, a professional coffee-taster whose taste buds are so precise that they are certified by the state of New York. Blindfolded, Faubert can take one sip of coffee and tell you “not just that it is from Guatemala, but from what state it comes, at what altitude it was grown, and on what mountain.”

Now, if we were all that discerning in matters of truth, we should probably be presenting ourselves to be considered as teachers and leaders of others. Still, anyone can tell if coffee is even coffee or not. Even if a man’s words are biblical, any authentic believer ought to be able to sense whether his teachings promote a life marked by trust, sacrifice and service to others or if they promote a life that is simply a way of attaining one’s own comforts, desires and pleasures.

Does a man practice what he preaches? In the final analysis, there is no more visible measure of any teacher. And, beyond a teacher’s deeds and words, “Does he evidence that the fruit of the Spirit blesses his life? Charisma is not a fruit of the Spirit. Passion is not a fruit of the Spirit. Vision and influence are not fruits of the Spirit. How does this man bear his struggles and trials? Why would any believer choose to trust a teacher whose life is not typically stilled by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and the like? Jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker once said, “If you don’t live it, it won’t come out of your horn.” We like to hear what teachers have to say, but we should reserve our trust for those in whose lives God’s presence seems to make a tangible difference.

B. A Basis for Measuring our Repentance

There is a value in examining the fruit of what a teacher teaches, but there is, perhaps, an even more practical value in examining the fruit that is being produced in our own lives. When John the Baptist appeared, he proclaimed a message of repentance in preparation for the appearance of the kingdom of God. This repentance was expressed through water baptism. Many came out to be baptized, because they were excited about the coming of *Messiah*, but not all of them connected the dots as to what real repentance ought to look like in their lives. On one occasion, John had to remind some of them that repentance meant marked change.

⁷John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ⁹The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” – Luke 3:7-9

John explained what this fruit of repentance was to look like. He expected those who were blessed to become blessings for others. If a man owned two tunics (the light linen shirt worn under the outer robe), he should give one to the man who had none. Tax collectors were despised by the public because they were Jews that collected revenues for Rome. Their profit was whatever they could collect beyond what Rome required. The system lent itself to the exploitation of people. John did not say that repentance demanded they change vocations, only that they clean up their vocations by behaving honestly. Soldiers were present. These were probably Jewish officers who attended to certain civil matters. Such men might have access to places where it would be easy to extort money either by blackmail or with false accusations. Repentance meant knocking off such opportunism and being content with what they were paid just to be soldiers.

Repentance still looks like something that practices Godly contentment and that conspicuously loves others. We live in an age when we can become agitated and deeply distressed over some of the world views, philosophies of life and values that denigrate our culture. We pray. We organize. We vote. But, is that really the kind of activism that can truly reshape a culture, or does it just affect it superficially until the next election cycle? There is a different variety of activism than that to which we are most accustomed. It is probably slower to affect change than the political process. In many ways, it is less sensational. But, its results are doubtless more enduring. It is the activism of repentant living, bearing fruit that reflects our professions.

“The only way to prove the superiority of Christianity is to show by our lives that it produces better men and women.” – William Barclay

C. A Basis for Examining our Hearts

I am encouraged on those occasions when I control my temper or when I do what is just and generous and pure, but I have to be honest and refuse to hide from God when I blow it by acting violently, unfairly, selfishly or immorally. The fact that my life continues to be plagued by certain vices that are apparently hypocritical does not in and of itself render me a hypocrite. A hypocrite is blind to the fact that he is a sinner in spite of the obvious inconsistencies. He justifies those inconsistencies. The true believer is distressed by his sins, but he faces them, he calls them what they are and he does not publicly posture himself as a man who has no battles.

We all have failings. The important thing is, “How do you respond to them?” You can repress them, deny them and try to whip them in your own strength. But the Bible says:

... ⁹If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. – 1 John 1:9

We are embarrassed when the evil that still resides in us slips out so that others can see it. But, that’s hardly the worst thing that can happen to us. The worst thing that can happen to a man is that he can actually become accustomed to and adept at rationalizing his flaws, denying them, covering them up or blaming others for them. Why is that worse? Because one day, his sins will find him out anyway. But, when a man simply faces the fact that the battle still rages within him, he is more apt to run to Christ and to embrace His transforming hand upon His life.