

Focus Text

"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. You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. 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." **(Matthew 12:33-37, ESV)**

1. Recognize the Root

"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." **(Matthew 12:33, ESV)**

Jesus continues his criticism of the Pharisees. In response to the unforgivable sin of rejection, Jesus uses two analogies to emphasize their wickedness.

First, Jesus compares fruit trees. He may have been thinking of the lush grape vineyards around Israel. A healthy plant produces healthy, delicious fruit, and a sick or dead plant produces no fruit. A vineyard owner would know a dead plant at the time of harvest, where there would be no fruit on the vine, and it would be time to cut out the dead plant and replace it with a healthy new sprout. Jesus is known for his healings and bringing about peace wherever he goes. Jesus even recalls that people said he was a glutton because he was merry and enjoyed eating and drinking with people. Yet the Pharisees, with over 600 additional laws, were oppressive to the people and refused to care for them. Jesus was furious that they tried to stop him from healing on the Sabbath because they did not think of the people.

Jesus represents the good fruit of living in God's presence. Where Jesus goes, life is better, and people are given freedom. Where the Pharisees go, life gets worse, and there are not enough hours in the day to fulfill the endless rules and regulations they have placed on the people.

For modern Christians, we ask the same question. Do I love people enough to share Christ with them? But also to be patient and gracious with them as they learn and grow in Jesus. Or are the rules I have in place keeping people away from Jesus, and am I judging people based on performance without patience or grace?

"The image of the tree and its fruits is familiar to the readers from 7:16–18*; the metaphor "fruit" is generally known.¹²¹ In contrast to 7:16*, Matthew here stays with the image.¹²² The fruits are "unusable" and not, as in 7:17*, "evil." The meaning of the image is evident: If one sees good fruit, one will say that the tree is good or vice versa, for only on the basis of the fruit can one recognize the value of a tree."¹

2. Sincerity in Speech

"You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil." **(Matthew 12:34–35, ESV)**

Jesus, like his cousin John, calls the Pharisees a den of snakes. The Pharisees want to claim they are helping people, but instead, Israel's relationship with God is distant. Jesus, who has come to bring the Kingdom of Heaven to earth, is making Israel better, and yet the Pharisees refuse to allow Jesus to work. Remember Jesus tried to remove himself from the public eye. He is technically doing these miracles in private. But the Pharisees have followed and continue to refute Jesus, even though his works testify to being the Messiah.

¹ * 16 You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?

17 In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit.

18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.

Matthew 7:16–18 (NRSV)

121 Cf. vol. 1, II A 3.2 on 7:16b* with nn. 28–29, 33, 71–72.

* 16 You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?

Matthew 7:16 (NRSV)

122 Thus the controversial question in the interpretation of the ancient church whether it is Jesus who is meant with the tree (thus, e.g., John Chrysostom, 42.1 = PG 57.451; Hilary, 12.18 = SC 254.284) or the Pharisees (thus, e.g., Augustine Sermo in monte 2.24 [79] = PL 34.1305–6) is posed incorrectly. In v. 34* the image is applied to the Pharisees.

* 17 In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit.

Matthew 7:17 (NRSV)

Luz, Ulrich. 2001. *Matthew: A Commentary*. Edited by Helmut Koester. *Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg.

The second image Jesus uses is a man's treasure. If a king wants to show gratitude, they will lavishly give of their important treasures as a sign of thanks and respect. However, if a king were to be petty, they would overlook their wealth and try to give gifts that were third-rate and not costly to the king. Jesus displays that he has never stopped healing and casting out unclean spirits. Jesus spends his time making the world a better place, one healing at a time. Furthermore, Jesus doesn't care if the people around him are Jew or Gentile; they receive his care. A wonderful picture of God's caring and loving nature. Yet the Pharisees hold onto their material wealth, wield political power, and make the lives of those around them miserable with new laws and rules. Jesus is tired of their games and is making it known, as Lord of the Sabbath, that they aren't pleasing God but are bringing worthless treasures to Him.

Think about this Psalm.

"For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." **(Psalm 51:16-17, ESV)**

Throughout the Old Testament, God declares that what He desires are people who love Him and humbly allow Him to lead. This is commonly referred to as justice and mercy. Doing what is right and being kind in our lives. The Psalmist reminds us that what God truly wants is a surrendered, humble people who love and seek to obey Him.

On a scale of one being the lowest and ten being the highest, how are you doing at surrendering to the Lord?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

"To this point the application to the Pharisees has been clear enough, but now this becomes explicit as they are directly addressed. Matthew repeats here on the lips of Jesus invective which John the Baptist had used in 3:7 (see there) against Pharisees and Sadducees coming to him for baptism."²

² Nolland, John. 2005. *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

"The point is probably that one's actions (here one's words) reveal what one most deeply values; they are what one brings out from one's treasure trove to give to others.⁹³ The text may owe something to the material in 6:19–21, where what one treasures identifies the orientation of the heart. As in 12:33, there are parallel positive and negative formulations."³

3. Accountable Actions

"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." **(Matthew 12:36–37, ESV)**

Jesus reveals that a careless word or action will be judged. One will be justified by the condition of their heart. Jesus makes it clear that a person's words and actions reveal the state of their heart. A great lie in the church is that our lives don't matter to God, and we can continue hating people, and living how we please, and God's grace will ignore everything. This is known as either carnal Christianity or the hyper-grace movement. We are not saved by our good works. You can serve in a soup kitchen every day for the rest of your life, and it won't be enough, because your heart hasn't been broken. We are saved by Jesus Christ alone. When salvation happens, God replaces our heart of stone with a living heart that wants to follow Him. How can one know they belong to Jesus? The testimony of their lives will point to Christ. A good tree produces healthy fruit. A good king gives generously out of their treasury. And a Christian strives to follow Christ. No one does that to perfection. Jesus gives us grace when we fail, so we may try again. That's why our mission is to Be and Make Committed Christ Followers.

³ 93 ἐκβάλλει, translated 'brings out' above, is literally 'throws out'. The verb in Matthew is used mostly for the expulsion of demons, but also of other kinds of violent removals and occasionally of nonviolent removal. The imagery is of disposal and not of display.

"On the day of judgment human words are asked whether they have produced deeds, and in Matthew that means essentially whether they have produced love. That is true for the Pharisees and their words that they spoke about Jesus, but it also is true for the church and its speaking and acting. Here for the first time¹³⁴ the Pharisees are a negative example that is used "productively" to warn the church."⁴

Application

"I am no longer my own, but yours.
Put me to what you will, place me with whom you will.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be put to work for you or set aside for you,
Praised for you or criticized for you.
Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and fully surrender all things to your glory and service.
And now, O wonderful and holy God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, you
are mine, and I am yours.
So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, Let it also be made in
heaven. Amen."

This is a prayer that John Wesley wrote, which Methodists have recited every year for centuries. It reminds us that we are His and that we are to be used by Him.

In 2026, this is my prayer for you. That we will be warm-hearted, alive Christians who love and serve Jesus. Amen.

⁴ 134 Cf. especially the interpretation of chap. 23.

Luz, Ulrich. 2001. *Matthew: A Commentary*. Edited by Helmut Koester. *Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg.