

Three Proverbs from Jesus

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1-7-07

Introduction.

- A. Proverbs 15:23 reads, "A man has joy in an apt answer, and how delightful is a timely word!" All of us know the joy of giving an apt answer. It's very rare for me, but there are extremely occasional times in my life when someone puts me on the spot, and I know exactly what to say. Now, I suspect most of us are happy if we can get our answers out without tripping all over our tongues, but imagine if we could take things to a higher level. Imagine if, just on the spur of the moment, we could come up with something so appropriate and wise and quotable that people would remember it for a thousand years. Now THAT would be an apt answer!
- B. One of the things that I most enjoy about Jesus was His ability on earth to do exactly that, over and over again. Jesus had many enemies, and they repeatedly tried to trap Him with words. Jesus, though, in response to these attacks, didn't just defend Himself. He would verbally devastate His opponents with the aptness of His replies, and many of those answers were so perfect that they still have applicability to us today.
- C. In Matthew 12, we see one such exchange. The Pharisees were jealous of Jesus' power to cast out demons, and they accused Him of doing so by the power of Beelzebub. Jesus' rebuttal is a masterpiece of logic from beginning to end, but we're just going to examine its final five verses, which contain not one but three pithy statements. Let's see what we can learn from these three proverbs from Jesus.

I. A tree is known by its fruit.

- A. The first response that Jesus makes is that a tree is known by its fruit. We see this in Matthew 12:33. Now, this is, of course, literally true. I grew up in Missouri, and I spent a fair amount of time in the outdoors. There aren't all that many fruit trees that grow wild in Missouri, but one of the ones that does is the persimmon. I'm no plant expert. I can't tell a persimmon leaf from a fig leaf. I do know this, though, that when I'm walking through the woods, and I see a tree with persimmons scattered around its base, and there're more persimmons in the branches, I know that I've found a persimmon tree. I literally know the tree by its fruit.
- B. Of course, Jesus isn't talking about botany in this passage. He's actually talking about people, particularly Himself. He's telling the Pharisees that if they want to know what someone is really like, look at what he does with his life. That'll tell you who he is. Now, the Pharisees wanted their audience to think that Jesus was a servant of demons, but Jesus' point is that this claim just doesn't make sense. The Jewish people of Jesus' time knew what the demon-possessed did. They attacked people, they lived in tombs, they had seizures, and generally behaved in an evil and destructive way. Jesus, by contrast, went around doing good and healing. His fruits were not the fruits of an evil man, so logically He Himself could not be evil.
- C. Now, this passage doesn't just have applicability to Jesus. It applies to us as well, because there are fruits by which Christians are supposed to be known. Consider Jesus' comment in John 13:35. He tells us that people should be able to tell that we're Christians because of the love we show for one another. There are a million different manifestations of Christian love, but there is only one source—an unconquerable desire to seek the good of others. Nor, indeed, should this kind of love be limited to Christians. Jesus teaches that we are to love whomever we have the opportunity to love, and desire to bless their lives however we can. If this is our mindset, everyone around us will know that we are Christians, and everyone who truly seeks God will be drawn to us like iron filings to a magnet. Let's remember that. Let's be loving people.

II. Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.

- A. Jesus next observes that out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks, which is what He says in Matthew 12:34-35. Of all the epigrams of Jesus, this is actually one of my favorites. I have never known a human being who could keep a secret from his mouth. If you want to know what somebody's like, listen--really listen--to what he says. If a man has a good heart and desires the things of the kingdom, you won't have to be in a room with him for five minutes before you know it. Similarly, if a man has an evil heart, no matter how hard he tries to hide it, his speech will betray him. The truth may be subtle, but it is always there.
- B. In context, this is actually an extension of Jesus' earlier point. Now that He's used "a tree is known by its fruit" to defend Himself, a sentence later, He's using it to counterattack the Pharisees. A man who bears the fruit of God by helping people is a good man. What, then, is true of the one who accuses that good man of evil? Jesus statement is clearly accurate. By attacking the good, the Pharisees show themselves to be evil.
- C. There are a couple of immediate applications we need to make from this. First, this shows the importance of speaking in a godly way at all times. When we go out into the world, we don't just represent ourselves. We represent the entire church as well, and indeed, we represent the Lord Himself. If we use our tongues to do evil, through gossip, corrupt speech, or any other form of verbal sin, we bring dishonor upon the Lord's people.

- D. Second, this passage reminds us to consider what we put in our hearts. We can't show Christ to the outside world unless He is first inside of us. We are responsible for guarding our hearts from evil and preserving them for the purposes of God. Look at what Paul says in Philippians 4:8. We need to be people who are not just committed to doing godly things, but also to thinking godly thoughts. We have to examine our entertainment to make sure that it does not corrupt us. We have to monitor our daydreams to make sure that they are pure. We have to actively fight against the evil mindset of the world by seeking a good mindset instead. If we don't do this, if we allow evil to take root in our hearts, evil will first become evident in our speech, but then everywhere in our lives. Let us meditate on the things of God instead.

III. By your words you will be justified.

- A. Finally, Jesus notes to each one of us that by our words we will be justified, and He makes this comment in Matthew 12:36-37. This two-verse section actually continues Jesus' earlier condemnation of the Pharisees. In 12:36, the word that the NKJV translates "idle" is actually a word that the Greeks used to describe a field that wasn't under cultivation. It was barren, it was unfruitful, and it was worthless. Jesus here tells the Pharisees that their words are like that field. They don't produce anything good, and are worthy of judgment.
- B. This passage tells us, friends, what kind of words will justify us and what kind of words will condemn us. As James says, it's very easy to sin with the tongue. In a moment of thoughtlessness, we say something cruel to a brother or sister, and we have brought ourselves under condemnation with our idle, worthless words. Consider Paul's admonition in Ephesians 4:29. We need to recognize that words mean something and have an effect, and the effect of our words will be to tear down others unless we actively seek to edify—to build them up instead. Tearing down is easy. We've all seen footage on TV of some huge hotel or casino or stadium being demolished. Some celebrity pushes a plunger, and in seconds, a building that took months to create is destroyed. Just like that, our words can demolish the ones we love, and we don't even have to work very hard at it. Let's be better than that. Let's think about what we say, so that our speech builds up in Christ.

Conclusion. If your speech and your life haven't borne the fruit you want to see, repent and return to God.