

December 4, 2016

KNOWN BY ITS FRUIT

Matthew 12:33-37

Back in Matthew's Chapter Seven (15-20), Jesus talked about how trees are known by their fruits. The context, there, revolved around His warnings about false prophets. Here, the context is more about what we might say. Words are the fruits of our thoughts, and, sometimes, our thoughts produce fruits that are contrary to our purpose in faith.

Jesus doesn't seem to know a lot about botany. After all, He was a carpenter. Good trees *can* bear bad fruits, and bad trees *can* bear a few good fruits. Still, we can all agree that a tree *is* known by its fruit. Of course, Jesus is not really talking about botany here. He is speaking about human behavior. From experience, most of us can probably agree that, sometimes, good people produce bad fruit, and, sometimes, bad people produce some good fruit. Remember the saying: "There's so much bad in the best of us, and so much good in the worst of us, that it's ill-becoming for some of us to find any fault in the rest of us!" (Edward Wallis Hoch)

It may be curious that Jesus, in His Sermon on the Mount, has said, "*Do not Judge.*" And He has said it is hypocritical to want to remove the speck in our neighbor's eye without dealing with the log in our own. And then He says something that sounds very judgmental and critical as He basically calls the bad unredeemable: No bad tree ever bears good fruit! Ever?!

We all know from experience that life is a mixed blessing. We are all a bit of a mixture of good and evil. Even Christians are, at one and the same time, saved and sinful. God isn't finished with any of us, yet. We all have some growing to do and more good fruit to produce.

Note that it *is* relevant that we *do* produce fruit! It is not enough just to be a good tree! Jesus says that the tree is *known* by its fruit. Likewise, it is not enough just to have faith. *Faith without works is dead!* (James 2:17) A tree that produces no fruit is like faith without works, and... like lukewarm water. What happens to the lukewarm Christians? See Revelation 3:16! And the challenge before all of us is that sometimes even a good Christian can show a bad example! Produce some bad fruit! I know I have. Even good Christians can sometimes be lukewarm! I think, for example of the person who has been a leader in the church, who, for one reason or another, finds fault in either the pastor or in some other member, or, who took offense about something, and then chose to stay away from worship rather than to become reconciled, or, rise above and look beyond the problem, and fulfill their purpose in faith – to glorify God – which is accomplished primarily in our worship. Even the best of us can do the wrong thing. And sometimes, the wrong thing is to over-react! And as I said a few weeks ago, it's a sin to find fault without both wanting to remove the fault and trying to see beyond that fault. What we need to do is tell the stories of the good things we are doing!

Here's what I'd like to start doing at the beginning of 2017 – I'd like to have a column in the newsletter called **Ministry Fruit**. In this column, there will be simple paragraphs about the ways the people of the congregation are in ministry, not just here, at the Church, but in their daily lives. For example: One woman, back in Rockton, who serves dozens of clients had one man who saw in her a disposition that displayed a special sort of graciousness and faith. He asked her what she thought. In that moment, because he asked her, she was able to respond. She shared a few things and loaned him her copy of [The Purpose Driven Life](#) by Rick Warren. That's ministry. Another example may be as simple as a conversation where you expressed a belief, or, challenged a lack of belief. You might have received a request from a particular charity and given a donation. Or, you might have helped someone in need with a few extra dollars. You might have changed a lightbulb for the church, or, an elderly neighbor! If you feel that something you've done, or that someone you know has done something worth noting, that is ministry, you have been fruitful. If you feel that something done might have been a sign of God's grace,

or, at least, God working in you or through you, you have a story to tell. Just write a little paragraph, a few sentences. You can turn it in anonymously, but we would really like to know who it is that is doing these things, or, who has been the recipient of these fruits. If you haven't any ideas of how God may be at work in your life, or, in the life of someone else, well, let me preach a little more...

Jesus called His critics a *brood of vipers*. "*How can you speak good things, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks!*" (12:34) Where else have we heard the expression, *brood of vipers*? John the Baptist. He was Baptizing people in the Jordan River who were responding to his call to "*Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near!*" (Matthew 3:2) "*But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for Baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance! Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor;' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree, therefore, that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire!*" (3:7-10)

In Luke, at this point in the story, the crowds ask him, "*What then should we do?*" In reply, he said to them, "*Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.'* Even tax collectors came to be Baptized, and they asked him, '*Teacher what should we do?*' He said to them, '*Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.'* Soldiers also asked him, '*And we, what should we do?*' He said to them, '*Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.*" (Luke 3:10-14)

More clues about what to do come from Micah 6:6-8; Isaiah 58:3b-11a; Romans 12:7-21; Philippians 2:4-8... The Bible is a wonderful resource for things we can do. Even if you, or, someone you know, can't go out and actively minister the grace of God, do fruitful things, you can pray! Let us know. Tell the story. "*The good person brings good things out of a good treasure!*" What is in your heart?

And what words are on your lips? Here's a heavy challenge: "*On the Day of Judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned!*" This scares me a bit, because with my childish sense of humor, sometimes I say some pretty stupid things. I repent. I need to keep growing up. Heaven help me. But... it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks. Our words can inspire and our words can confuse. And our words can minister grace!

What should we do? *Whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord, giving thanks to God the Father through Him!* (Colossians 3:17)