

Title: B-b-b-bad to the bone.
Text: Matthew 12:33-37
Theme: Root and Fruit
Series: Matthew #69
Prop Stmt: A rotten root produces rotten fruit.

Ezekiel was a prophet to the nation of Judah. He was taken into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar and was deported to Babylon along with thousands of fellow Jews. There in Babylon Ezekiel spoke the word of God to the people of God as it was revealed to him. In the 37th chapter of his prophecy, Ezekiel spoke about the day when the real king would come to rule over his people. It seemed too good to be true because when Ezekiel was preaching, Judah fell. Jerusalem was burned and the Temple was destroyed. And here, Ezekiel is talking about the day when the Jews would be back in their land. They would be protected. They would be secure. They would have a king. This king would be like David, but even better. And they would love the king. Ezekiel said,

They shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey my statutes. They shall dwell in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children's children shall dwell there forever, and David my servant shall be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forever. My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when my sanctuary is in their midst forever." (Ezekiel 37.24b-28)

Jesus came to this earth over 550 years after Ezekiel wrote this. The people of Judah were back in the land. They had a king, but he was not from David. He knew it and everyone knew it. He was an imposter. Then Jesus showed up. He was the real deal. Now, you would think that for the people, the choice would be simple. They would want the real king. They would want the king who would establish a covenant of peace with them and would change them so that they would walk in his statutes and rules. Living under a king who provides protection and provision and loves them would be a dream, right? But, the more that the people (the leaders anyway) find out about the real king, the more they hate him. In fact, they want him destroyed. They would rather live with an imposter king than with a real king. Have you ever wondered why they would rather be ruled by an imposter than by one who is real?

Read Text:

Why is the response of Jesus so intense and so full of warning? Remember what is going on in this scene. The leaders of the nation, the representatives of the people have just publicly rejected Christ as the Messiah and have labeled him as an agent of Satan. The only thing left to do that could possibly be worse than this, I guess would be to crucify him. Jesus does not retaliate with hateful spite, but he does respond with truth. There are

consequences to what they have said. But, what they have said is the fruit of what they believe. Our words matter because our words are a means by which our heart is exposed.

Let's say that last night, you only got 3 hours of sleep. Is that a factor in your life, right now? Yes! Are you prone to be irritable? Yes! Can you use the fact that you only got 3 hours of sleep as an excuse to snap at your wife and be hateful to your children? Does God say, "Let no corrupt talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear, unless of course you only got 3 hours of sleep, or if you are clinically depressed, or if your football team got beat yesterday, then, it is okay to be a jerk, but only for a day. You only get one day to be a jerk. Why do we talk the way we do? It is not because we suffer from some disorder, it is because the root is rotten. A rotten root produces rotten fruit. That is the big idea that Jesus is making here, particularly to the men who just accused him of being in league with Satan.

I. **A tree is known (identified) by its fruit.** (33, 35)

In verses 33 and 35, Jesus uses two examples to underscore his point; trees and treasure. If you have a good tree, it will bring forth good fruit. If you have a good treasure, (that is if you treasure that which is good) then that will be made evident. If you have a bad treasure (that is if you treasure that which is bad), then that will be made evident. I have a tree in my front yard that is dying. I initially thought that because we had such a harsh winter that I lost a portion of it. But about every week, I have to get a ladder and my saw and take down another branch. And as I do that, I can usually see another section of leaves that are curling up. Pretty soon they will be brown. Then they will fall off and I will have to cut off that branch as well. Right now, my tree looks like it got a really bad haircut, but the truth is, the tree is diseased and is dying.

We understand this easy enough when it comes to trees. If I painted the brown leaves green, or cut a healthy branch off another tree and duct-taped it to my tree so that my tree would look better, you would think that I was an idiot. But, even though we understand this with trees, we do not seem to understand this with life.

For example, let's say that your son, Cletus just turned 3 and you are having a birthday party for him. Uncle Sid is there and your kid is slightly terrified of Uncle Sid, but Uncle Sid got Cletus a birthday present and you tell Cletus to go over and tell Uncle Sid, "thank-you." Cletus is not going to come within 15 feet of Uncle Sid and refuses to go and he refuses to say thank-you. So, we have a little war of wills that has just broken out at a birthday party. What are you going to do? Are you going to say, "Uncle Sid, you really freak Cletus out. In fact, I only invited you to this party because I felt like I had to, but if I was being honest, I didn't want you to come because you really weird me out too. So, you can understand my dilemma right now. Cletus is only acting out what he really believes and it is what I believe, but here I am trying to force Cletus to do something that I really wouldn't want to do either. I feel like a hypocrite, because I am. I am demanding something of my son that I put him in the middle of and I am forcing him to do something that I know he doesn't want to do and I don't blame him, but I am

forcing him anyway and he is really confused. So, if he doesn't come over and say "thank-you" I don't want you to feel like I just left you hanging out to dry, which I did, and I don't want you to feel rejected, though you are. I just want this whole situation to go away and for us to go on, like none of this ever happened." Are you going to say that? No! What are you going to do? You are going to demand that Cletus goes over and says "thank-you" to Uncle Sid. Is Cletus thankful? No! Is this 3 year old sitting at his birthday party thinking, "Here I am, just 3 years into life, surrounded by a family that does not have to feed me, clothe me, shelter me, care for me and love me and yet they do. Day after day after day, I have food that I did not buy, clothes that I did not wash, a bed that I did not purchase and love that I do not deserve. It is amazing. And now, it is my birthday and they are throwing a party for me to celebrate the fact that I have been alive for 3 years. What have I done to earn this? The only thing that I have done is take more time, more money and more attention from adults and they want to give me a party? This is really overwhelming! And what's more, people are bringing me presents. I don't get this! This is really over the top. People are actually bringing ME presents. There is a cake with my name on it. Candles for me to blow out. And they are singing a song to me. Plus, they are giving me presents. I don't need presents. What else could I possibly want that I don't already have? Does your 3-year old think like that? You are probably a better parent than me, but mine never thought like that.

Our children are not naturally thankful, are they? Our children are not naturally grateful. Overwhelming appreciation is not the fruit that is being produced on the branches of their lives. Why not? Their root is rotten. Rotten roots produce rotten fruit. So, what do we do? We try to spray paint the leaves, don't we? We pull Cletus off to the side and we tell him that he has to go over to Uncle Sid and tell him thank-you and that if he does not, that you will take every one of his toys away from him, as well as food for a year and a half and dessert until he is seventeen. So, Cletus, under protest and terrified, pouting and trembling takes a step or two in Sid's direction, and mumbles a thank-you, which is accompanied by relief, aaaaahs and of course, grandma's applause. But, hold the phone. Is Cletus thankful? No! But, we don't care, we settle for pretend. We settle for image. We settle for the approval of others. Going through the motions of being good, is good enough as far as we are concerned, but it is not good enough as far as God is concerned.

A rotten root produces rotten fruit, and duct-taping plastic fruit on the tree will not change the identity of the tree. So...

II. How can you pretend to be good? (34a)

Look at verse 34. Jesus says, "You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil?" Notice two things: 1) The label. Jesus calls them a brood of vipers. The other day, Cathi and I saw about 40-50 Vipers on I-75. In the middle of the pack was a State Highway Patrolman. But, Jesus is not talking about a car. He is talking about snakes. You brood of vipers means, your words are poison. What you are saying is toxic to those around you. 2) The question. Do you notice what Jesus is asking? He is asking, how is it possible that you can speak good when you are evil? You can't! These men are not speaking good. They are speaking evil because their hearts are evil.

But notice that this is the opposite of how we respond, isn't it? Have you ever been caught saying something embarrassing? Have you ever posted something on-line or sent an email, or text that was just plain hateful? And as soon as you hit send, you thought, "Oh-no, that was not a good idea." How do we react? We say things such as, "I can't believe that I did that! That is so not like me. That is not who I am. I don't know where that came from." We act as if we, the good, the nice, the pure, the wonderful, were suddenly overwhelmed by some alien who inhabited our body for a moment and caused these terrible words to come out or that someone else hacked our email or phone and sent these words. We act shocked when it is discovered that we have done and said some really bad things. Jesus is talking to the Pharisees and he is asking them how can they say anything good?

Do you see his point? You guys are saying evil things about me, because you are evil. You are pretending to say something good, but what you pretend to be good, is in reality evil. The problem is not that the fruit is putrid, but the root is rotten. If you do not do something about the root, then you will spend your entire life trying to paint the leaves green and duct-tape plastic fruit on to your tree.

Most religion is simply a historical, organized, ceremonial, and, at times, sophisticated effort of fastening plastic fruit on dying trees. Do you see what I mean? Most religion is behaviorism. If we can get you into our group, then we will control the way you behave by peer pressure. We use others to shame bad behavior and affirm good behavior as a way to control your life. Jesus did not come to the earth and die on the cross so that we would live a life of shaming each other into not doing bad things, or rewarding one another like Pavlov's dogs as a way to get good behavior. Most religion is behaviorism because most religion is false religion. Behaviorism is all they have because they do not have the gospel.

We try to impress each other with how much plastic fruit we have verses others. We try to impress each other with the size and color of our plastic fruit. But, the tree is dead! The root is rotten! You need a new tree. You need to become a new person.

III. **Your words are your fruit.** (34b, 36-37)

"For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." Whatever is in the well will come up in the bucket. Jesus then talks about treasure. His point is this: your words will reflect what is in your heart and your heart is that which you treasure. What you treasure in your heart will be reflected in your words. In verse 36, Jesus talks about "careless" words. He is talking about reactive speech, thoughtless speech, unguarded speech, off-the-mic speech, that is, things you say but you never think anyone else is going to hear them, or things you say without calculating the consequences. These are the things that you say when you are tempted to go, "Oh, I didn't mean that." What Jesus is pointing out is that when we say, "Oh I didn't mean that" that we are not being truthful. What we really mean is that "Oh I didn't mean for you to hear that because what you just heard is what I actually mean, but I didn't want you to know it." What is it that you would say if

you did not think that anyone would ever hear, or that you would never be caught? Those are the careless words. Those are the words that reveal what you treasure.

Your heart is a factory. Inside of your heart is a production line. What is coming off the production line are the things that you savor, that you worship, that you focus on, that you desire, that you put your hope and security in. So, what exactly did these men say? These men cursed Jesus. These men attempted to damn Jesus. These men accused Jesus of using the power of Satan. These men accused Jesus of being evil. Jesus is simply pointing out that their words are the fruit. Their words revealed a heart that is evil.

What about your words? The Pharisees are not the only ones who speak evil. And keep in mind that Jesus is saying that the biggest problem is not the words themselves. The biggest problem is the factory of the heart that is producing those words. You could get cancer of the tongue or the throat and have the ability to speak taken away. But the fact that you cannot speak does not mean that everything is now solved. What do you do about your heart? There is a day of judgment. People will give account for every careless word they speak. What does that mean? Let's start with what it does not mean. Jesus is not saying that the only thing that matters is the words that you speak, as if your belief and your deeds can be separated from that. He is saying that what we are (the root) is the issue and that the words that we speak (particularly the ones spoken carelessly or the ones spoken in private, or the ones spoken anonymously) reveal our heart. They reveal what we actually treasure. That is why our words will be the evidence of our justification or evidence used in our condemnation.

Let me give you an example. When I prepare to speak, I write out what I plan to say word for word. I give thought to what I am going to say. However, I have not planned out what I am going to say when something does not go my way later this afternoon. We can manage our words, to some degree based upon our audience and based upon our preparation. But, what we really are is not so much when the mic is on, but when the mic is off. When I preach, I wear a microphone, so you can hear me. What would you hear if I wore a microphone all day long and my words were being synched to a website that you could access? Better yet, what would you hear if I wore a microphone all day long, but did not know that I was wearing a microphone and my words were being synched to a website that you could listen to? Even better yet, what would you hear if the microphone was able to interpret the thoughts of my heart and put them into words? And, what would others hear from you?

Let me try to put all of this together by first looking again at the Pharisees and then looking at ourselves. The Pharisees were driven by self-righteousness. The factory in their hearts treasured respect and power. Initially they were guarded in their words because the people respected Jesus and they did not want to lose the respect of the people. But, because Jesus was exposing their sins, they had to make a choice. If they were going to respect Jesus, they would have to give up their pursuit of self-righteousness and personal respect and power. So, they turned on Christ and plotted for his destruction. When Jesus did not cooperate with their treasuring of themselves, they turned on him. What we have in the previous paragraph is a reaction that reveals their hearts. These are

the words that expose their hearts to the public. These are not good, religious, slightly misguided men who mean well. Their words condemn themselves. They want to destroy Christ. They did not need to learn to keep quiet. They needed a new root and tree.

What about you and your words? What do your words reveal about what your heart treasures? Do you treasure Christ? Do you treasure the gospel? How do your words reflect that? I am not asking you if you do it perfectly, because we don't, yet. But, is the general condition of your heart a desire to treasure Christ? In other words, when you are with believers and we are worshiping the Lord, are you free to sing, are you free to proclaim, are you free to confess, are you free to worship? Is this what you long to do, what you were re-born to do? Or, are you way out of your comfort zone with other believers and find yourself having to be careful about everything that you say for fear that the "real you" may be exposed? Controlling your words around others will not change anything about you, except your image. Genuine Christianity is not about image, it is about reality. Perhaps, you need a new tree, root and all.