

July 6, 2008

Romans 8:5-11 / I Corinthians 6:9-11 / Luke 6:43-45

The Nature of the Tree Determines the Fruit it Bears

It's only right that a passage on determining the "fruit" in a person's life (that is, the moral and spiritual fruit) should follow our passage from last week where Jesus forbids His disciples from ever judging others.

Why? Because people who heard His words about judging (and heard them incorrectly), might be led to think it's wrong to make any moral judgments or evaluations at all!

That is, it could make God's people afraid to even suggest that there are some things we should do and some things we should not do / some things that are just plain right, and others that are just plain wrong.

And as R. Kent Hughes wisely points out: *"If one can make no moral judgments, there can be no morality."* If I am forbidden from evaluating any actions, or the fruit (the cause and effect results of certain lifestyle choices), then I effectively do away with any basis for personal morality and social ethics, and everything does indeed become relative (which is, by the way, the basis for postmodern ethics).

That, I believe, is why Jesus follows His prohibition on judging or condemning others, with a passage that helps avert the misconception that somehow we are to make no moral judgments or evaluations at all.

We must! Everyone does every day! Which is why Jesus speaks in definitively moral or ethical terms of things that are GOOD and things that are BAD — something He COULD NOT DO if simply making moral judgments or ethical evaluations was in and of itself wrong.

It's Jesus way of assuring us that there is a WORLD OF DIFFERENCE between the task of making good and necessary moral evaluations and the forbidden attitude of being judgmental; between a self-righteous, snooty, "holier-than-thou" attitude of moral superiority, and simply holding to or expressing the need for ethical standards that help us distinguish between right and wrong.

Thus we see the immense wisdom of Jesus. He condemns both the attitude and the practice of looking down upon others in a self-righteous and judgmental fashion, yet at the same time affirms the need both to have and adhere to ethical absolutes.

Modernism (which started with the Enlightenment and reached its zenith in the 1950's and was passing away by the mid-1980's) erred in the first regard (of being judgmental and condemning)... and Postmodernism (the seeds of which began in the 1960's and have grown to full expression in the present) has habitually erred in the second regard, often refusing to acknowledge there are indeed some things that are just plain right, and others that are just plain wrong.

The Gospel way is a middle way which calls us to make ethical judgments based on moral absolutes (such as the 10 Commandments), but at the same time forbids us from being like the Pharisees and using those moral absolutes in a self-righteous or judgmental way.

So, today, let's consider what Jesus has to say about FRUIT — GOOD FRUIT (that is, words and deeds which when judged by the divine moral standard are GOOD) and BAD FRUIT (which are words and deeds which when judged by the divine moral standard are EVIL.)

So, **FIRST** Jesus tells us that the condition of the moral or spiritual "**FRUIT**" a person produces depends on the nature of their "**TREE**." The tree in this parable is us, and the fruit (as far as we can tell from the immediate context) refers to the things we as people say and do — our words and our actions — the audible or visible evidence of what is going on in our hearts.

And in equating us as people to trees, Jesus says, "No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit." Or in other words, "The nature of the tree determines the condition of the fruit — a bad tree (in accordance with its bad nature) produces bad fruit, and a good tree (in accordance with its good nature) produces good fruit."

And **LISTEN** (this is very important)! ***JESUS IS NOT IMPLYING HERE that some people are by nature born good and thus grow up to do good, while others are by nature born evil and thus grow up to do evil. That's not what this metaphor means!*** Neither is He suggesting (as is common nowadays) that everyone is born good and pure and innocent, but that over time they somehow (as a result of their life experiences and choices) either remain good or turn evil.

The Bible does not teach that we become sinners by choosing or doing bad things, it teaches that we are born sinners! "Surely I was sinful from birth," says King David after sinning with Bathsheba, "sinful from the time my mother conceived me."

There was a sense, David says, in which the nature of his tree was "bad" from the very start! And the Bible teaches that what he says of himself is true of everyone (except the Lord Jesus). The transference of Adam's fallen nature to us (what some call original sin) makes the nature of every tree bad from the start — tainted and infected with sin from the start.

And there's one other thing I need to clarify: In Scripture, the terms sinful, bad, evil are often used synonymously or interchangeably, just as the terms good, godly, and righteous are often used synonymously or interchangeably (as we see in this passage).

And thus what Jesus is speaking of is the same thing Paul speaks of when he also divides humanity up into two basic categories:

What we are by nature and what we become by the grace of redemption. / Those whose nature remains entirely fallen and therefore continues to bear the likeness of the First Adam and those who now (by virtue of God's saving, renewing and restoring grace) have been made new creatures in Christ, and therefore now bear the likeness of the Second Adam — Jesus.

Those are the only two natures people can have in this world — the OLD NATURE we are BORN WITH and inherit from Adam, and the NEW NATURE we are NOT BORN WITH and need to receive from God by virtue of experiencing the new birth. What we **ARE** by birth, and what we **BECOME** by virtue of being BORN AGAIN.

You see, what Jesus is speaking of here is NOT people born bad and remaining bad versus people born good and remaining good. What He's speaking of is, "How to discern whether the sinful nature we've all received from birth, has been changed by God's renewing grace in a person, or whether it has not and remains what it was from birth.

Every "tree" comes into this world stained in its core by sin. We are all "sinful from birth," as David said, and that sin nature causes us to bear bad fruit UNLESS the nature of our tree changed by the sovereign and supernatural grace of God which comes to us in the new birth and the application of the Holy Spirit to our soul.

So what is Jesus point? The nature you have (the nature of your “tree”) determines the fruit you will produce in your lives. If your tree remains what it is from birth, it will produce bad fruit, and only if it’s renewed by the saving grace of God, it will produce good fruit.

And that tells us something else: Since it’s our nature that needs to be changed, simply trying to change our words and actions (outward behavior modification or simply trying to become more moral) isn’t the answer! Because what we need is a new nature!!! Simply changing our words and actions will not alter our nature!!

To produce good fruit, ISN’T simply a matter of trying to be more moral or making resolutions and promises and then gritting your teeth and trying harder to keep them! It’s NOT a matter of simply making better moral choices! That’s what many people do, only to fail miserably!

In fact, that’s precisely why so many people who “try Christianity” give up on it after a short while. **WHY?** Because they think being a Christian is merely a matter of changing what they say and do! It’s NOT! It’s a matter of having God change who you are — change your nature or the internal bent and inclination of your heart and soul!

That’s why Jesus is so adamant and unbending when He says three times in the span of a mere 8 verses (in John 3:1-8) ***“You must be born again.” “You must be born from above.” “You must be born of water and the Spirit.”***

What does He mean? He basically means you can’t enter the kingdom, or live the life of a Christian unless God does a miracle of grace in your heart and changes your nature! That’s the only way anyone can ever live the life Jesus calls us to live!

A person who tries to do what Jesus commands without first having their sinful nature altered by the grace of rebirth, is simply setting themselves up for habitual failure! It can’t be done! Why? Because a bad tree can’t produce good fruit!! That’s what many people miss when they hear Jesus say, “You must be born again.”

They fail to understand it’s in the passive voice in the Greek! That is, its Jesus way of assuring us we need God to do something inside us! ***Being “born again” is not something WE DO, it’s something GOD DOES TO US!*** The new birth is God altering our nature by making us a partaker of His divine nature!

It's God moving upon us (by a sheer act of free, sovereign and supernatural grace) and imparting to us His Holy Spirit which washes and renews and transforms and sanctifies and alters our entire nature by making us new creatures in Christ Jesus.

That's why Jesus says: "You must be born again!" Because it's in the new birth that God takes our bad tree and so alters our nature that we become a good tree and thus produce good fruit instead of bad fruit!!!

You see, many people in churches across America, and the world, are trying to produce the Fruit of the Spirit before they receive the Holy Spirit! They are trying to produce the fruit of a renewed life while their nature is still unrenewed! And it can't be done! They're trying to produce nice red juicy apples on a tree that is only capable of producing hard, gnarled, dry, bitter apples.

They're like the man who had an apple tree out in his back yard, which from the external appearance it looked fine — lots of leaves, no deformities, and no apparent rot — yet each year it produced nothing but gnarled, dry, bitter apples.

Why? Because something was wrong with the tree. The nature of the tree was bad, so even though it looked good from the outside, the fruit it bore was always bad.

Yet he couldn't bring himself to cut it down, or wait the years it would take for a new tree to reach maturity and bear fruit. So what he did instead, was to go to a local orchard, buy 3 bushels of the biggest, juiciest, tastiest apples he could find, polish them up, and then proceed to hang them all over the tree with fishing string! After all, that's the only way a "bad tree" will ever produce "good fruit"!

And that's exactly what people in churches all over the world try to do. Instead of looking to God to make them a new tree, so they can produce good fruit, they let the bad tree remain and simply try to hang on it fruit that looks like it came forth from within them, when it was merely outward religious things that didn't flow forth from a changed heart at all!

How about you? Does the fruit you display flow forth from a changed and renewed heart, or is it simply outward things you hang there to make people think so? (Fruit you hope they don't examine too closely, or take a second look at, or try to pull from the tree because it doesn't flow from within, but is merely tied there with fishing string!

Then **SECONDLY**, after telling us it's the nature of the tree that determines the type of fruit the tree produces, Jesus then goes on to tell us that that is precisely why we are also able to recognize the nature of the tree by the fruit it produces.

If a plant produces grapes, it's a grape vine. If it produces figs it's a fig tree! Because thorn bushes don't produce figs, and briars don't produce grapes. Why? Because it's contrary to their nature to do so!

It's just another way of saying that when you hear a person claim to be a grape vine, but see only briars, or claim to be a fig tree, but see only thorns, you can be pretty sure something isn't right! Common sense would tell you something isn't right!

"You shall know them by their fruit," says Jesus. And that's not being judgmental! If a person claims to be Christian, there should at least be some degree of Christian fruit growing in their life — not necessarily big, ripe, juicy, mature fruit — but there should at least be some buds or flowers or something to indicate what their nature is, or you can be pretty sure they are not what they claim to be.

For instance, the Apostle Paul tells us in Galatians 5 the type of fruit produced by the sinful nature (or the bad tree). It is:

"Sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, spreading discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions (that is, exclusive little cliques) envy, and drunkenness.

And elsewhere he adds the "fruit" of foul or belittling language, greed, boastfulness, pride, abusiveness, the lust, disobedience to parents, lack of love, gossip, slander, unforgiveness, lack of self-control, abusiveness, treachery, sensuality, rashness, ludeness, laziness, and love of pleasure rather than love of God...."

When we see a person whose life is characterized by those things (not someone who struggles and resists those things, but is characterized by those things — people who bear that kind of fruit continually), we can be pretty sure we are dealing with a person whose nature is still controlled by sin, and has not yet been renewed, just as when we find a plant continually producing grapes, we can be pretty sure it's a grape vine!

Likewise, if we find a tree whose nature has been changed by the grace of God and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, we should find fruit like this growing on it: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control.

Hanging on its branches (and not tied to its branches with fishing string!) would be: The fruit of edifying words, uplifting language, encouraging grace-filled words (gospel words), compassion, empathy, caring concern, a willingness to help bear the burdens of others — the fruit of a non-judgmental, non-condemning, generous, and forgiving spirit as we saw last week. The fruit they bear would bear an amazingly similarity to Jesus whose Spirit dwells in them, and works to produce His likeness in them.

And **LISTEN**: *To say all that is not judgmental in the least! It's simply to make a logical deduction by evaluating the "fruit" produced in that person's life.*

It's the same thing anyone does when they come across a certain type of plant in a field. They look at the fruit (a blueberry or a raspberry or a strawberry) and merely deduce from the fruit what kind of plant it is — which is by no means being judgmental. *"By their fruit you will know them,"* says Jesus.

Then **LAST**, Jesus assures us that the fruit produced in our lives (the things we say and the things we do) is merely the outflowing, or the overflow of what is really in our hearts. Which means that regardless of our profession, or what we say is in our hearts, it's what comes out of our mouths in our private, unguarded moments — it's what we say and do when no one is around or watching, that reveals what's really in our hearts.

Our actions and our words (and especially our secret or private actions and words) are the truest self-revelation of the condition of our hearts — the truest expression of what really dominates and controls our inner thoughts, desires and affections.

The more I get to know someone and watch someone / The more I listen to how they speak or what they speak about / The more I watch how they act and interact with other people / The more I see what is important to them, what dominates their conversations, what they love to do or secretly want to do and would do if no one were around, the more I get to know what their heart is set on. Those things merely reveal what's in their heart.

It wouldn't come out if it wasn't within! That's why I don't go by mere outward profession or mere church attendance or put much weight in what people do in a public setting. Those can simply be apples tied by fish string to a bad tree!

No, my friends, I look at the fruit, for "by their fruit you will know them." "Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks." I look for the fruit of faith, or the fruit of unbelief / the fruit of praise, or the fruit of blasphemy / the fruit of tenderness, or the fruit of abusiveness / the worship of Jesus, or the worship of idols / a spirit of generosity, or a spirit of greed / a judgmental spirit, or a compassionate and forgiving spirit.

When I want to know one's nature, I evaluate what they say and what they do / the content in their conversations and their actions / for those things, says Jesus, are merely the outward evidences of what's "stored up" and is overflowing from their heart.

So, what's Jesus word to us today? You can do all you want to change your speech, your deeds and your actions, but it will never really happen until God changes your heart, for the things you say and the things you do are merely the "overflow" of what's "stored up in your heart."

Or in other words, if you want to change your actions and the words that proceed from your mouth, don't focus on your actions and your mouth, focus on your heart, because that's where the problem lies, according to Jesus.

When your heart is transformed, your words and actions will follow suit! In fact, when your heart or nature is changed and renewed, you won't even have to "work" at changing your actions, for they also will simply be the overflow of the good that is stored up in your redeemed heart. They will flow forth naturally from your changed heart.

And listen carefully: If they don't flow forth as the overflow of what's stored up in your heart, maybe it's because your heart still remains in its natural condition under sin —unregenerate, and thus in desperate need of being born again.

"But I raised my hand when I was 12," you say. "But I went forward when I was 10," you say. "But I prayed a prayer at that crusade," you say. Yes, but that's not the point. The point is have you been born again? Not have YOU done something, but rather, has GOD done His miracle of grace in you? Not have YOU tried to modify your outward behaviors, but has the HOLY SPIRIT modified your inner nature?

"You must be born again," says Jesus. Are you?

"You must be born of water and the Spirit?" Have you been?

The goal is not to adorn and hang apples on a bad tree, but become a new tree—a new creation in Christ. Have you?

Have you received the new covenant promise of a new heart and a new spirit?

If not — if there is no evidence of the new birth in your life — then I urge you to look to Christ in faith. Plead with God to save you. Cease from all your futile attempts to change yourself through "outward behavior modifications," and simply pray that God, in free and sovereign grace, would bless you with the gift of the new birth — a new heart, a new spirit, and a renewed nature.

Only then will any true change ever take place.