

A few years ago, there was an ad on the radio which said, "People judge you by the words you use." It was for a program intended to help build one's vocabulary. Now many of us do assume that someone who uses four or five syllable words in conversations is very bright and intelligent, even if they don't really know what the words mean.

For example, if I say, "I think panmillination would be good for our local economy," some folks would think I was a pretty smart fellow, even though I just made up that word. On the other hand, if I hear someone say, "I ain't got no time to do dat no more," I might assume he is not very bright. Though in reality he might be a nuclear physicist with an IQ much higher than mine. We give an impression about ourselves to other people by the words we use.

What we say also tells God something about who we are. Or more accurately our words confirm we are exactly who God knows we are. This morning our journey through Matthew takes us to a very interesting part of the Bible. We're in Matthew 12:33-37. Here Jesus tells us that, yes, the words we speak really are important. In fact, God will judge us based upon things we say, **Matthew 12:36, 37 I tell you, on the day of judgement 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.**

Now, maybe those words seem kind of scary, but I think the Lord has important things to say to us in our text, so let's pause and pray that He would help us hear, understand, believe and obey His words today.

Jesus is the one speaking in the verses, so let's start by looking at His message. First, He tells us about trees and fruit. **Matthew 12:33 "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."** If there are only a few apples on a tree and they taste really terrible, we say it is a bad tree. "A tree is known by its fruit."

But it is not the apples that cause the tree to be bad. It is the other way around. A bad tree makes

bad apples. If we can make the tree a good one, maybe by pruning or fertilizing, then it will automatically produce good apples. The quality of the tree determines the quality of the fruit, and the quality of the fruit helps us determine the quality of the tree.

But Jesus is not giving a horticultural lesson. His concern is the relationship between people's words and their character. **Matthew 12:34a You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil?** Now, calling people a bunch of snakes is not a compliment in any culture.

Maybe you are surprised Jesus would use such language. But He is addressing the Pharisees in the crowd, and they are not very nice men. Just a few verses earlier, they had accused Jesus of being the devil himself. However, He is not simply exchanging insults. These are religious, but wicked men, who have done real harm to people's souls. Their words of blasphemy spoken against Jesus are intended to drive people away from Him and the salvation He offers. "Brood of vipers" is an appropriate label for them.

Matthew 12:34, 35 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. This last verse parallels verse 33. Just as the quality of the tree determines the quality of the fruit, so the quality of a person, what he/she is really like, determines what that person says or does.

When Jesus speaks of the heart, His is not talking about the organ that pumps blood, but the center of human personality, who we really are. The words that come out of our mouths reveal what is in our heart. They show what we really like. Thus, Jesus says it is no surprise that false and evil words come from mouths of the Pharisees. They are rotten on the inside, so rotten things show up on the outside.

Matthew 12:36 I tell you, on the day of judgement people will give account for every careless word they speak, the Pharisees corrupt

nature, doesn't excuse their words in any way. As human beings, we will one day be held accountable for everything we say, even things that seem insignificant. Why? Because God is aware of every word we speak, and each of those words is a reflection of what we are really like. **Matthew 12:37 For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.**

Though all words matter, Jesus says the most important words are what we say about Him. That is the most important test of a person's character. That will be the basis upon which God's judgement will be made. It is not Jesus who is being assessed when people proclaim Him Messiah or accuse Him of being demonic. Rather it is the people who speak those words who are being evaluated by God, and by their words they will be judged.

Okay, these are interesting verses, but what is their significance for our lives today? I see two important implications for us.

First, words matter. What we say is important. Sometimes we forget this. Actions, not words, are usually our emphasis. We often hear, "Talk is cheap" or "that when it has all been said and done, there will be a lot more said than done." Talk is plentiful. It is estimated that most folks speak enough words in a week to fill a 500-page book.

Yet that doesn't mean what we say today is unimportant. This is something the Lord reminds us of in other parts of the Bible as well. For example, James 3 tells us that even though the tongue is a small part of the body, it is a very powerful part, able to do great good or horrible harm.

One way that happens is when our words impact other people. Karen Carpenter was a very popular singer in the olden days, when I was in high school. She died in 1983 at the age of 32. Her premature death was brought on by a struggle with the eating disorder, anorexia. Why was an extremely successful celebrity obsessed with her weight? It apparently started when a music reviewer referred to her as "Richard Carpenter's chubby sister."

My mother told me, "Sticks and stones may break your bones, but names will never hurt you." That was one of the few times she was wrong. Names and other words can hurt a lot. When a friend of mine was in high school his dad would often call him a "good for nothing, bum." He says he spent the next 12 years trying to live up to the label. Then he met the Lord and his life was transformed. He has now been a Christian for over 25 years, but he says the wounds from his father's words can still hurt.

Yet, our words can have a very positive impact as well. As J.R. Tolkien was writing "The Lord of The Rings" trilogy he felt overwhelmed by the immensity of the project. But he credited the encouraging words spoken to him by C.S. Lewis for helping him to preserve and complete the novels. When one of you tells me God used a sermon to help you grow in your relationship with the Lord, I feel encouraged. It helps me to be enthusiastic about preaching from this pulpit. Yes, it's the Lord who enables me to proclaim His truth, but He often uses your words to help me do that. Our words can have a powerful impact on others.

And as verse 37 implies the words we speak about the Lord are important. **James 3:10 says Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.** The Lord is pleased with our words when we sing worship songs or pray before a meal. Yet, when gossip or profanity comes from our mouths it dishonors the Lord.

A pastor was building a wooden trellis in his yard. As he pounded away a little neighbor boy was watching him. The youngster didn't say a word so the pastor just kept working. Finally, the pastor asked, "Well, son, is there something I can help you with?" "No," he replied, "I'm just waiting to hear what a preacher says when he hits his thumb with a hammer."

Well, what a preacher or anyone says, when they hit their thumb with a hammer does matter. Oh, I know profanity and crude language is very common these days. Even some pastors think it is no big deal to swear a little. But our standard should still be what the Apostle Paul says in **Ephesians 4:29a Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths but only what is helpful for building others up according to**

their needs, and Ephesians 5:4 Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place.

Yet, our most important words are the ones we speak to others about Jesus. The Pharisees sought to drive people away from Jesus with their words. We, however, should try to speak words the Holy Spirit will use to draw others to Jesus. Now, words by themselves are seldom enough. Our actions, the ways we show concern and compassion for others, are an important part of how we communicate the gospel to other people.

But that doesn't mean we don't need to use words. Remember what **Romans 10:14** says, **How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching to them?** In other words, no one is going to become a believer in Jesus unless someone tells that person about Jesus.

Now this doesn't mean you need to become some type of street preacher, or even a Chisholm Baptist preacher like me. It just means you should be speaking words of truth about Jesus to your family members and friends. You can let them know who Jesus is and what He has done for us through His life, death and resurrection.

I remember going to the funeral a number of years ago in Superior for Floyd Peterson, my friend Pete's father. During the service the pastor asked the people in attendance to raise their hand if Floyd had talked to them about Jesus Christ. Probably about 200 of the 250 in that room put their hands up. Floyd was not a pastor. He was a school janitor. He was an ordinary fellow, but Floyd loved Jesus and he told other people about Him. Like all of us, his words mattered. And his words honored the Lord and had a very positive impact on other people.

The second implication of our text is that the words we speak reflect our character. Words don't just pop out of thin air. As Jesus tells us in **Matthew 12:34b For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.** Or as the NLT puts it **Matthew 12:34b For whatever is in your heart determines what you say.** Our words reveal the type of person we really are.

This is true of the words people say about Jesus. In **1 Corinthians 12:3 Paul says, Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God every says "Jesus is accursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except through the Holy Spirit.** The old Living Bible sought to clarify that a bit by saying, "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' and really mean it, except by the Holy Spirit."

Certainly, it is possible for a non-believer to utter those syllables. I have heard folks talk in a mocking way about "believing in Jesus" or "getting saved." Yet Paul is making the same point as Jesus. The words that come out of our mouths reflect what is in our hearts. If our hearts are full of what is good, true, and beautiful, that will be reflected in our speech. If the words we say don't reflect these characteristics, it may be because they are not really present on the inside.

This means that being a Christian involves speaking certain types of words. Some folks think that if a person claims to be a Christian, it doesn't matter what they say or do, because God must let that individual into heaven. Yes, salvation comes to us by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone. Our words and actions contribute nothing to our salvation.

But if someone truly trusts in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit then indwells that person. The Spirit works in that individual's life and begins to transform his/her words and actions. Friends, if you are gossiping and criticizing people rather than encouraging them, if profanity is coming out of your mouth instead of praise, and if you are never telling people about Jesus, you have a problem on the inside. The bad fruit is indicating you are a bad tree. You have a heart problem that is more serious than a clogged artery or an irregular beat. For some reason you are not experiencing the transforming work of God's Spirit in your life.

So, what do you do when there is a problem on your inside? What do you do when the wrong type of words keep coming from your mouth? Ask yourself, "Why is this happening? Why is my character not being changed by the Holy Spirit?" There are two possible answers to that question. #1, the Holy Spirit is not and has never been present in your life. You maybe claim to be a Christian and even thought you were a Christian

for years. However, you have never truly trusted in the Lord Jesus and thus have never been born of God.

Now, don't misunderstand. True Christians can still say some very hurtful thing to other people; they can still use some pretty nasty language when they hit their thumb with a hammer. And they can still, like the Apostle Peter, deny any connection with Jesus when the subject comes up. As Christians we still sin with our mouth sometimes. We still say words we should not say. As **James 3:2 (NIV)** says, **We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.**

Folks, no one I know is there yet. But if the words that come out of your mouth reveal a heart that has no love for the Lord and no love for other people, then a flashing red light should be going off in your mind, warning you that your soul may be in grave danger.

If your heart is rotten, it may be because you are *not* really a Christian. If that is the case, your sins have not been forgiven, and you are in danger of having your words condemn you on the day of judgement.

The second possible reason why it doesn't seem the Holy Spirit is changing your character is because even though you are a Christian, "*quenching the Spirit.*" Paul uses that phrase in a little different way in 1 Thessalonians 5, but I just mean you are preventing or inhibiting the spirit from working in some way.

A genuine Christian can not do that totally and permanently. But I believe we sometimes get in the way of God transforming our hearts and our words in the way He desires, and He chooses not to force changes in our character and vocabulary.

How do we do that? How do we keep the Spirit from working as He desires? Maybe by getting stuck in a particular sin and not confessing it to the Lord. Or by neglecting to read and study God's word regularly, or by failing to spend time in prayer, or by not meeting together with other Christians for worship and fellowship.

When we fail to do these things, we obstruct the Holy Spirit's work in our lives, and often our

hearts become weak and sick. And the fruit of our lips, the words we speak, share that sickness.

So, if your words are not what they should be, what do you need to do? Well, you need an inside solution. Making New Year's resolutions to stop saying nasty things to people, stop using profanity, stop gossiping, and start telling people about Jesus is not really the answer.

Oh, we can make resolutions, but on our own we will really struggle to keep them. Because, again, if rotten words come from our lips, we don't have a mouth problem, but a heart problem. We need to experience the transforming work of God's Spirit in our lives. We need an inside solution.

That means if you are not a believer in Jesus and the Holy Spirit is not present in your life, you need to put your trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Instead of trusting in yourself and thinking you are good enough the way you are, you must acknowledge you are a helpless sinner, and by God's grace receive the salvation Jesus offers.

If you do that, the Holy Spirit will then begin transforming your heart and mouth. Slowly but surely encouraging words, praises to God, and testimony about Jesus, will start coming from your lips. If you are not sure what it means to trust in the Lord Jesus, please talk to me or one of our other pastors.

Those of you who are believers in Jesus, but have a problem on the inside, need to stop quenching the spirit. Pray and ask the Lord to restore your spiritual health and get you back on track. If you have not been reading your Bible, ask the Lord to help you be disciplined in doing that. If you have not been praying, ask Him to give you a desire to do that. If you have been skipping church, ask God to help you stop making excuses and get the fellowship you need.

Folks, if I huff and puff when I walk up the stairs, if sharp pains shoot across my chest, and my pulse starts racing, there may very well be something wrong with my physical heart, the organ that pumps blood through my body. It would be foolish not to go to the doctor and get things checked out.

If hurtful and nasty words come out of your mouth, it is a sign there might be something wrong with your spiritual heart, with your soul. It

would be foolish not to ask the Lord to forgive you and to transform your life and the words from your lips. May the realization that every word we speak counts, move us to do just that.