

Faith, Followers, and Failures – The Root of Failure
From the Series, “The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe”
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Introduction

At one point in my life, I had an activity that was one of my favorites - Apple picking. Perhaps some of you have done it? You drive to an orchard that specializes in public access. You walk up to a tree. You start to pick apples. It's a great time. On many days, there's sunshine, fresh air, and nature at its best. A lot of families do it. I would often see whole families bring little wagons to carry all the apples they picked.

Now, you may have noticed that I mention this in the past tense. This was ***at one time*** one of my favorite activities. What changed? One time, after driving 20 or 30 miles to an orchard, and after paying the admission fee, and after spending all afternoon picking apples, and after paying for the apples by the pound, I put all my apples into the trunk and drove home. Along the way, I stopped at a supermarket to pick up a few things. Man does not live on apples alone. You know what I saw the minute I walked in the door? Apples! I was in the produce section, and I saw lots of apples. Those apples looked better than the apples I picked. When I looked at the price, I was surprised to see that they were cheaper than the apples I just picked - And that was before factoring in mileage and the admission fee. After that experience, apple picking was no longer one of my favorite activities.

But apple picking is still popular for many people. One of the things that makes it fun is this: Someone else takes care of the trees. Someone else takes care of the property. Someone else deals with the weeds and the animals that want to eat the apples before any customers can see them.

And trees are complex. It's not only what you see above ground - What's underground matters too. A good farmer is concerned about the roots as well as other parts of the tree. Taking care of trees is a lot of work. In the case of the apple orchard, we can all be happy that someone else does it.

Today, we're going to learn that our spiritual life can be very much like fruit trees. In this article, we're going to learn about: The root of failure.

When our lives spiritual lives fail, there's a source. Along the way, we'll learn about the roots of success as well. Let's read what Jesus has to say:

33 “Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. 34 You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. 35 A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. 36 But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. 37 For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.” (Matthew 12:33-37)

Our discussion today will have two parts:

- I. What is the problem?
- II. What do we do about it?

I. The Problem

Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. (Matthew 12:33)

If you read the last article in this series, you saw the religious leaders of Israel commit the ultimate failure: Jesus performed an amazing healing, and they told people that it was through the power of the Devil. They failed so badly, they may have been beyond forgiveness. That was terrible. In that article, we saw Jesus respond by warning them harshly about the gravity of their error. However, he didn't stop there. In this article, we'll see Jesus go on to explain what they needed to do.

That brings us to this text. What was the problem? Bad trees. Why are bad trees bad? Because they produce bad fruit. We want good trees, because they produce good fruit. Now, is Jesus worried about trees? Of course not. However, trees are a good symbol for the human heart. Jesus goes on to show us that:

You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. (Matthew 12:34-35)

Look at that: The Pharisees are a “brood of vipers.” “Viper” is a scary word. There's a story about a woman who moved into a new apartment. One of the first things you do when you move is set up your phone. So, she did that. Then, she heard the phone ring. She figured it was probably a salesperson, so she let it go to voice mail. Later she checked it. It was a voice that said, “I am the Viper. I will come tomorrow at 2 o'clock.” She thinks to herself, “My goodness - I've only had the phone working for a couple of hours and I'm already getting crank calls.” It was an unsettling experience. The next morning, she went out to run some errands. When she got home, she checked her voicemail. The same voice was there. It said, “This is the Viper – I'm

calling to remind you that I'm coming at 2". This was a little more unsettling. Worse yet, she looked at her watch, and it was just a couple of minutes before 2. She thinks, "What should I do? Should I call the police?"

Just then, she hears a knock at the door. "Knock - Knock – Knock." She runs over and locks all the locks and puts the chain on the door. Then, she called out, "Who's there?" She looked through the little peephole in the door. There, she saw a man in overalls holding a bucket. He said, "Hello - I'm the Viper – I've come to vipe your vindows."

OK. When we think of vipers, we don't think of bad jokes. We think of this: A dangerous kind of snake. Vipers are one of the most poisonous snakes out there. They were all over the place in the days of Jesus.

Here's how people thought of them. The apostle Paul wound up once on the isle of Malta after a shipwreck. Here's how the story goes:

2 The islanders showed us unusual kindness. They built a fire and welcomed us all because it was raining and cold. 3 Paul gathered a pile of brushwood and, as he put it on the fire, a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand. (Acts 28:2-3)

So, here's Paul. He just made it through a shipwreck. It's a miracle he's alive. Instead of sitting around, he decides to be helpful by gathering wood for the fire. And all of a sudden, he's got the most poisonous snake known attached to his hand - It was hanging on by its teeth.

Let's read on:

When the islanders saw the snake hanging from his hand, they said to each other, "This man must be a murderer; for though he escaped from the sea, the goddess Justice has not allowed him to live." (v 4)

These snakes are so deadly, the islanders all assume this man Paul must be some kind of low life. He must be the worst kind of criminal. Because of that, this must be a supernatural act of justice. This killer is going to die, for sure.

But that's not what happened.

5 But Paul shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects. 6 The people expected him to swell up or suddenly fall dead; but after waiting a long time and seeing nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and said he was a god. (v 5-6)

So, you see what happened here. Vipers are so deadly, Paul was supposed to drop dead in a few minutes, but he didn't. Surviving something this deadly was absolutely amazing. It was so amazing, the locals figured Paul must be some kind of immortal being.

That's how everyone thought about vipers in that day.

Now, there's only one thing worse than a viper - A brood of vipers. Imagine that one day, you walk out in your back yard, and you see a snake. You try to decide, should you kill it, or leave it be? That's bad enough, but imagine that your whole property, front and back, was filled with these things. You wouldn't want to dare walk out the door.

Why are we spending so much time on this? Because that's what Jesus is saying about the Pharisees. We all need to understand the evil of these people. They're don't just hurt themselves. They're toxic. They're poisonous. They're dangerous. And they're all over the place. No one is safe.

After saying all this, Jesus is going to tell us how the Pharisees got this way.

You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. (Matthew 12:34)

That's the answer: It's all a matter of the heart. The heart is where spiritual failure starts. Make a note of that, because the heart is where we'll find the solution in just a little bit.

A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. (Matthew 12:35)

This is the explanation for the evil behavior of the religious leaders of ancient Israel. It's a question of what was in their hearts. If they were good, they would have good things in their hearts - And good things would come out. Because they were evil, evil was in their hearts, - and evil things came out. This is why they said so many evil things about Jesus. This is why they eventually crucified him.

Evil words can lead to evil deeds. Before they committed the horrible act of crucifying the Messiah though, they started with words. So, Jesus warns them about the importance of words.

But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned. (Matthew 12:36-37)

This is an important principle: **Words matter**. God is aware of our words. He's aware of the words that we speak in public. He's aware of the words that we speak behind closed doors. And not just one word or two words - every word. That includes even the empty ones; the ones we give no thought.

So, that's the problem: The Pharisees were evil men with hearts full of evil. Their hearts were exposed by their evil words. The evil words would later lead to evil deeds.

It's like a tree. The tree has the part above the ground where the fruit grows. But it also has roots - The part hidden underground. Our hearts are like those roots. They're hidden to the world, but they're revealed by our thoughts, our actions, and certainly, our words.

II. What Can We Do About It?

Now that we understand the problem, let's ask the question, "What can we do about it?" Here are some steps that we all need to follow:

A. Recognize that the problem involves the heart.

First, we need to recognize that this problem involves the heart. "For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of." (Matthew 12:34) This is a theme throughout the Scriptures. Do you have trouble in your life with bad habits that you can't get rid of? It starts with your heart. Do you say things and realize that you've hurt others with your words? It starts with your heart.

B. Make a choice!

Next, everyone needs to make a choice. Jesus said, "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad." (Matthew 12:33) The Pharisees were the way they were because they chose to be. If we don't make the right choice, we may wind up like them.

C. Ask God for help.

The next thing we need to do is ask God for help. The psalm says "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me." (Psalms 51:10) Do you struggle with behaviors in your life that you can't seem to control? You've tried to stop, but you can't? That's because you can't do it alone. We need God's help. We need him to cleanse our heart. So, ask him for help. He'll gladly give it.

D. Recognize what needs to be cleaned out of the heart: Sin.

What needs to be cleaned out of the heart? Sin. The prophet Jeremiah said: "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? (Jeremiah 17:9)"

We need to recognize this. It's why we need God's help. We can't deal with our own sin. Only the blood of Jesus that was shed on the cross can heal us from our sin. We need God's supernatural power to do this.

As a side note, a moment ago, I mentioned that sometimes we say things that hurt others, and we don't realize it. I'm afraid that there is little Pharisee in each of us. That's because everyone's heart is deceitful and wicked.

E. We need to guard our hearts.

When God starts cleaning out the junk in our hearts, we need to be careful to avoid letting more in. We must guard our heart. The proverb says, "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it." (Proverbs 4:23)

Like I said earlier, this is a theme all over the Bible. We have to be active guardians of our hearts and our minds. That means be careful of what you watch on TV. That means be careful of what you read. That means be careful of what you download from the Internet. That means be careful about who you hang around with. Some friends say good and wise things. Some say bad and foolish things. Guard you heart.

F. Allow good things into your heart.

Once God starts to take out the bad things, we need to put in good things. Paul wrote to his friends in his letter to the Philippians: "...whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things." (Philippians 4:8)

This is the opposite of our last point. You can watch things on TV, just watch good things. You can read, just read good things - Things like devotionals and books about God. And certainly, read the Scripture! Learn about God's love for you and the amazing things he offers.

Choose friends who encourage you in your faith. Watch good things. Read good things. Think about good things. It's good for your heart.

F. Commit to the Lord.

Once our heart is working right, we need to commit to the Lord. The Psalm says: "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." (Psalms 73:26) If we move on our strength, we fail. If we allow God to be the strength of our hearts, we will succeed. So, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own

understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight. (Proverbs 3:5-6)

Let's pull this all together.

Conclusion

Today we've learned that we have something in common with trees. The tree has parts that everyone sees. It also has roots – the things no one sees. We have parts that everyone sees. And we have a part that's hidden – our hearts.

Jesus tells us to take good care of our hearts. The heart can be the root of spiritual failure. Or it can be the root of success. If our hearts are full of good things, good things will come out. If our hearts are full of bad things, then like the Pharisees, bad things will come out.

So, ask God to help you with your heart. Confess your sins to him and seek his cleansing. Commit yourself to him.

The apple orchard is full of fruit because someone takes care of it. Ask God to make you part of his orchard. He loves you. There is no one better to take care of your heart.

Thanks for reading! Here are some helpful links:

Trinity Church: TrinityTeaneck.org

Phil's Site: PhilBrainerd.com

To learn how to begin a new life with Jesus Christ, visit Billy Graham's site: PeaceWithGod.net
