

Prayer

Help me listen, Lord Jesus.

May I clearly hear what people say to me

May I pay attention to the truth I find in Your Word

May I be influenced by the stories of the lives of the saints

May I respond to the call of Christ which is found in the Gospel

And may I never stop listening to everything you are saying to me.

AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Life at Home

For some people, home is a difficult place. It is where some children are abused and marriages fall apart. Pray for those who do not or cannot have a happy life at home.

On-going prayers

- Pray for those who suffer because of extremes of weather
- Pray for people who struggle with incapacity
- Give thanks for the benefits of the technology we use

Meditation

Breathe on us, Holy Spirit; breathe.

Let us feel the fresh rush of air which comes from heaven,
And breathe more deeply of the things of God.

Let us accept the unconditional peace and love of our Father,
Which sweeps away all our troubles and fears.

Let us rejoice in the awesome power and potential of the Spirit,
To achieve what may otherwise appear to be impossible.

Let us receive the gifts of God which are given unconditionally,
The guarantee of our faith and the means of our ministry.

Let us be comforted by the presence of the Spirit in our midst,
And know His power to heal is always available to us.

Let us wonder at the mysteries of the Spirit's works of power
And be caught up in things much greater than ourselves.

Breathe on us, Holy Spirit; breathe.

Bible Study - Matthew 12:33-37

³³ 'Now if the tree is good, then its fruit will be good; and if the tree is bad, its fruit will be bad; for the tree is recognised by its fruit. ³⁴ You snakes! how can you who are evil, speak good? For words come from what fills the heart. ³⁵ The good man produces good from his good store, and the evil man produces evil from his evil store. ³⁶ I tell you, a person will have to account for every careless word they utter on the Day of Judgment; ³⁷ for by your words you will be set right with God, and by your words you will be condemned.'

Review

Yesterday, we read about the 'sin against the Holy Spirit' (12:31,32). Jesus spoke about this because the Pharisees had just accused Him of being in league with Beelzebub (12:24), but the whole exchange raises questions about the nature of sin and evil. After such a difficult verbal confrontation with Jesus, most of the Pharisees would have left, but in our passage today, Jesus continued to talk about good and evil, relating this to what had happened. Some of the scribes and Pharisees stayed to listen (12:38), which must have been hard for them (especially when Jesus called them 'you snakes' - 12:34), but the fact that they stayed and continued to engage with Jesus suggests that some were genuinely concerned to learn more from Him and about Him. Things were moving on, however, and the question behind Matthew's Gospel narrative was beginning to change, as Jesus moved towards teaching more and more about the Kingdom of God, including what was right and wrong according to the Father.

Our passage is all about what is good and bad behaviour, concentrating on speech. In verse 33 Jesus taught using an illustration about good trees and bad trees, and their fruit. If you think you have heard Jesus say this before, you are right. During the Sermon on the Mount, He gave virtually the same teaching found in verse 33 after warning about 'false prophets and teachers who come "in wolves clothing"' (7:15-17). The point Jesus made in the Sermon was that people's true character was shown through what they did (7:20). Returning to our passage today, we realise that Jesus has moved on and changed his use of the illustration, which He now uses to speak about the use of words; He says, 'How can you who are evil speak good? For words come from what fills the heart ...' (12:34).

Jesus was concerned to reveal the truth behind what was being said in His exchanges with the Pharisees. He was speaking from the heart of God and they were speaking from a heart of evil. So when Jesus called the Pharisees 'you snakes' (12:34), it was not just prophetic flair like that found in the preaching of John the Baptist (3:7), it was the truth. People perceived snakes as cunning and wily, and they represented Satan in popular thought. The Pharisees had shown their cunning by trying repeatedly to trap Jesus (9:3,32; 12:2,22), and they had shown their evil by vocally opposing the Kingdom of God and describing Jesus' works as those of Beelzebub (9:34). Jesus accused them of being 'snakes' with good reason!

Verse 35 firmly identifies the heart as the inner store from which we show our true character. Jesus said that the words we speak and the character we project to others all comes from what is happening in our hearts. To explain this, He painted a picture of a man producing goods from the store of his house. Yet again, He had used this illustration before in the Sermon on the Mount (6:19-21 - the illustration clearly meant a great deal to Jesus because he also used it later on in His ministry when challenged the ritual laws of cleanliness - Matt.15:17-20). The inner store of the house is like the heart of the human soul, which Jesus knew could harbour all manner of hurt, damage and evil, and which He knew Satan could use. We like to think that our hearts are private and that we can hide our true thoughts, feelings and problems. But as Jesus made clear, what is inside us will always affect our words and deeds. Jesus did not believe that our hearts were fixed, and gave many illustrations to suggest that with God's help, the heart can change for the better (as was prophesied by the prophets - e.g. Jeremiah 31:31-34)

The very next verse (12:36) makes the whole point even sharper as Jesus identifies even 'careless words' as indicative of a state of heart, and the subject of God's judgement. We often notice the smallest of remarks made by other people and make assumptions about their mood or temperament. Now, if we do that ourselves, how much more should we be aware that others will be watching our own hearts through what we say! We read each

other as a matter of course, sometime getting it right, and sometimes betting things very wrong; but more than that, God knows the truth within our hearts!

The whole passage from (12:33 - 37) is a powerful warning to us about the way we use words. Jesus is clear that we will have to account to God for our actions (7:15-20) and we will also have to account for our words (12:36), especially when used carelessly. None of us would wish to be condemned before the throne of grace for any loose words we may have said without doing our best to address the source of the problem, and the only way we can do this is through Jesus' help. Only Jesus can mend the heart by removing the remaining elements of pain, worldliness and evil which linger there, but we must know what we want, and ask the Lord to do this. Too many people have on-going problems because they are unwilling to address the hurts and damage deep within which corrupts they say and do; in truth, all of this must be submitted to the Lord. It is the only way forward.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Is it easy to judge a person's character by what they say? What other measures should we use?
2. Discuss in your group the picture you have of what the Bible calls the 'heart'. How different is this from popular usage?
3. How can we help each other to ensure that our speech is wholesome and godly?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

Speech is a troublesome issue, and I have found myself in despair at times when attempting to deal with my own shortcomings. By the grace of God, I know that only He can save us from our tongues! I have also been heartbroken by the devastation wrought on people by the inappropriate use of words by people at church, or by family members or those in the work environment. Great experience and persistent faith is needed to overcome such things.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *In what ways can you improve your own use of words. Over the course of a week, do your best to watch both your words and the reactions of other people to what you say. If you can do this with integrity, you will find this can be very revealing, and a great spiritual aid.*
- *Pray for the members of your own family, and especially for those who you know have been hurt badly by things which have been said and done. Ask the Lord to show you how to repair the damage of unhelpful words.*

Final Prayer

Jesus, my Saviour, speak words of grace into my soul, and remove from me those moods and temperaments of mine which dishonour You because of their effect on my speech. I ask You, Lord, to change my heart and make it worthy of Your presence, so that all I say may be worthy of Your Name, this and every day. AMEN