

Condemnation of Israel's Leaders**Matthew 12:33—37**

All through Matthew the leaders of Israel have contended with Jesus. We first see the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to John while he's baptizing outside of Jerusalem. John, by the Holy Spirit, calls them a brood of vipers. We then see the Pharisees complaining that Jesus is eating with publicans and sinners (Matthew 9:11). When Jesus healed the demon-possessed man who was mute in Matthew 9:32 the Pharisees accused Him of casting out demons by the power of Satan. This contention between Jesus and the Pharisees only intensifies as the time for Jesus to be crucified approaches. It was their desire to destroy Jesus (Matthew 12:6; Luke 6:11; Mark 3:6; John 8:59; 10:39) because He was taking the people away from them and they felt they were losing their power and authority over the people (Mark 11:18; John 11:48).

As we studied in our last lesson Satan had taken Israel captive (Luke 11:21—22). Satan was fully armed ready to defend his possessions (Israel). The stronger man was Jesus Christ who was able to bind the strong man and take back Israel for Himself. This is why we are seeing so much demonic activity throughout Israel in the Gospels. Everywhere Jesus went He was casting out demons. This was a spiritual battle to reclaim what was rightfully His. The final battle is played out during the Tribulation when Satan is finally defeated and locked up for 1,000 years (Revelation 20:1—3).

Everything happening in the Gospels is preparing the earth (and Israel) for the coming of the Millennial Kingdom. This is why Jesus says in Matthew 12:28 that if He is casting out demons by the Spirit of God (instead of by the power of Satan) then the Kingdom of God has come upon them. This shows how close the Kingdom was to Israel—it was right in their midst (Luke 17:21).

Bad fruit, Vipers, Whitewashed tombs

The leaders of Israel revealed the true condition of their heart every time they opened their mouth. Outwardly they were perceived as holy, righteous and worthy of their position but their hearts were far from God. They were self-serving, self-indulgent, prideful and full of conceit (Matthew 23). Every word they spoke was spoken in blasphemy against Christ. Fortunately for them blasphemy against the Son of Man was a forgivable sin (Matthew 12:32). As Jesus was hanging on the cross He asked God the Father to forgive Israel of her sin because they did not know what they were doing (Luke 23:34). Although there were Pharisees who believed Christ to be the Messiah (Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea), the Leaders of Israel needed to accept Jesus as their Messiah as a whole because God set these leaders over Israel and where the leaders go, so goes the country.

Fruit

Jesus makes it clear that the reason the Pharisees spoke out against Him was because their hearts were evil. Verse 33 says a bad tree will produce only bad fruit and that a tree is known by its fruit. This is expanded upon in Matthew 7 where we find out the destiny of those producing bad fruit. Verse 19 says the trees that do not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. The only way that good fruit could be produced is by abiding in Christ (John 15:2—8). Those who believe in Jesus as the Messiah and do those things pleasing to God will produce much fruit. Those who are self-righteous, depending upon themselves, will produce bad fruit or no fruit at all. These verses apply only to Israel. The Body of Christ is not in view here. Every branch is connected to the vine, Christ. Some of those branches will be cut off and thrown into the fire and burned. All of Israel was connected to God. Individuals within Israel will be cut off if they are not producing fruit.

Israel is pictured as four plants in the Bible; a vine, an olive tree, a fig tree and a bramble bush. The vine represents national Israel, or the physical nation of Israel (Psalm 80:8; Isaiah 5:1—7; Ezekiel 15:6; Hosea 10:1). The olive tree is a picture of spiritual Israel (Romans 11:17). We have been grafted into Israel's spiritual blessings (Romans 15:27) but not into the vine, or her physical blessings. The fig tree represents

religious Israel. God gave Israel a series of religious remedies to perform to cover their sins. This was all contained in the Mosaic Law. Christ cursed the fig tree in Matthew 21:19 because it had no fruit. He was seeing Israel ignoring the rules and regulations contained in the Mosaic Law and therefore they had no fruit to show after being under the Law for over 1,500 years. They were going through the motions of obedience but their hearts were not in the right place (Matthew 9:13; 12:7). They were to be merciful and not mechanical in keeping the Law. Finally Israel is pictured as a bramble bush (Judges 9:14). This was apostate Israel, who had turned away from God. (Read Judges 9:7—15 to see Israel portrayed as these four trees.)

The Pharisees were trying to bear fruit on the fig tree by trying to follow the Mosaic Law to the letter. They had even instituted their own set of laws so they could be even holier. The problem was that they had no spiritual fruit. The olive tree was barren. The only way they could be fruitful religiously was by being fruitful spiritually. They were trying to bear fruit spiritually by being fruitful religiously. That never works.

Vipers

The Pharisees were trying to present themselves as something they were not on the inside (definition of a hypocrite). Jesus first calls them bad fruit and then a bad tree. Now He calls them vipers. The snake is always presented as an evil creature, going back to when Satan presented himself to Eve as a serpent. These Pharisees were instruments of Satan, doing his work.

This actually goes back 600 years to Isaiah's time when he addressed the Jewish leaders as adders (Isaiah 59:1—8). When Jesus calls them an evil and adulterous generation He is not referring only to those who were alive at this particular time. The Greek word actually means offspring or progeny. These leaders of Israel were the offspring of many before them. There is a little play on words here because the fruit of the vine is literally the generation of the vine. The Pharisees of Jesus' day were the fruit of a whole line of evil leadership that actually goes back at least 600 years.

Idle words

I'm sure we have all heard about speaking an idle word. This is usually interpreted to mean all the casual, careless or coarse joking around and every little thing said in jest will be brought back to us in judgment. Jesus warns the Pharisees of speaking idly in verse 36. In context, the Pharisees have just blasphemed Jesus, accusing Him of working under the power of Satan. This certainly seems to be more than saying something in passing that may not be edifying to the other person. This was an out-and-out malicious slander of Christ. The Greek is literally saying these words were spoken out of laziness. I see this as unwillingness on the part of the Pharisees to search the Scriptures to see if Jesus is who He claims to be.

In John 5, verse 18 indicates the Jews sought even more to kill Jesus because he healed the man at the pool of Bethesda on the Sabbath and then put Himself equal with God. In verse 39 He tells these Jews that they are searching the Scriptures because they think they will receive eternal life by doing so. Jesus then continues by saying that these same Scriptures testify about Him. In other words, if they would diligently search the Scriptures they would know who Jesus was. They were too lazy to do so and therefore their actions will condemn them.

John 5:37—40 ³⁷ And the Father himself, which hath sent me, hath borne witness of me. Ye have neither heard his voice at any time, nor seen his shape. ³⁸ And ye have not his word abiding in you: for whom he hath sent, him ye believe not. ³⁹ Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me. ⁴⁰ And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life.

Not only was Christ condemning these Pharisees but their actions and words will also condemn them on the Day of Judgment. This Day of Judgment will be the Great White Throne judgment as depicted in Revelation 20:11—15. This judgment has nothing to do with the Church, the Body of Christ and therefore we will not be a part of the judgment Jesus says the Pharisees will experience for their "idle words." The only judgment we will go through will be the Judgment Seat of Christ when our works will be evaluated and any work built on the wrong foundation will be burned up while those works that were built on Pauline doctrine will be rewarded (Romans 14:14; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 1 Corinthians 3:10—15).

For previous notes and additional mid-Acts materials please visit www.MidActsTruths.com