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Luke 6:39-49

19th Message

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HEARING THE MASTER'S VOICE

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

Last weekend my attention was caught by a news item on the BBC website: the resignation of another German cabinet minister over allegations of plagiarism. I say "another" because in 2011 the defense minister, Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, resigned after his doctoral degree was revoked because of plagiarism. The German press called him Dr zu Googleberg of the Cut-and-Paste department. This time it was the education minister who was caught; her doctoral degree was revoked for plagiarism.

Every teacher is on the lookout for plagiarism. Google has made it much easier to plagiarize, but also easier for plagiarism to be caught. Why do people plagiarize? Kids plagiarize because they want to get their homework done quickly without the time and effort to do the hard work. Why do German cabinet ministers plagiarize? Stephen Evans wrote in an analysis piece for the BBC:

These cases occur in Germany partly because of the German obsession with titles. German politicians take them very seriously, seeing them as a mark of intellectual respectability. It is not uncommon, for example, for a professor with two doctorates to expect to be called 'Professor, Doctor, Doctor'.¹

More than half of the German cabinet have doctoral degrees. They want respectability and access to higher office. The degree is simply a means to that end; they weren't pursuing the degree for the sake of the learning. Sadly this sort of thinking has affected the church.

What is the point of education? There are several reasons why plagiarism is wrong in the current academic environment. One of them is that it short-circuits the learning process. The point of education is to learn, not just to get a qualification at the end. Here in Silicon Valley PhDs are a dime-a-dozen. Many hi-tech companies hire PhDs, but what they're after is not the titles but the learning and the ability to conduct research that those with PhDs bring with them. The titles themselves don't matter, and so titles are rarely used here in the valley. I used to work at what is now the SLAC National Accelerator Laboratory, where pretty much everyone on the physics side has a PhD but titles are not used. We have several PhDs on the elder board, but you would never know it; the degree is irrelevant to the functioning of the board.

Another reason plagiarism is wrong is that we value originality of thought. At its highest levels education is supposed to prepare people for independent original work. A PhD is awarded for original work. Plagiarism passes off the work of another person as your own, making a hypocrisy of the claimed originality. In some fields it is getting increasingly difficult to find a topic on which there is original work still to be done. The highly specific nature of some PhDs illustrates the difference between a philosopher and a scientist: a philosopher knows less and less about more and more until he knows nothing about everything; a scientist knows more and more about less and less until he knows everything about nothing.

But there is another set of people for whom there is no conflict between plagiarism and education. For these people the goal is to com-

pletely plagiarize the teacher, to have so learnt from the teacher that the student's thoughts become indistinguishable from the teacher's. The Chinese education system, for example, founded on Confucian principles, works this way. Originality is not prized but distrusted. This can lead to a culture clash. In the 1990s I was teaching assistant to the academic dean at Regent College. One topic we discussed was what to do with students from Asia that viewed plagiarism not as cheating but as showing respect.

Education in the ancient world worked this way. In first century Judaism young men who wanted to pursue God attached themselves to a rabbi and became his disciples. For example, Saul of Tarsus moved to Jerusalem to study under Gamaliel, one of the most prominent rabbis of his generation. These disciples sat at the feet of their rabbi, gradually imbibing his learning and thinking, a journey which took many years. Some of these disciples would eventually become rabbis themselves around whom the next generation of men would gather as disciples. The root verb behind "disciple" is learn; a disciple is one who learns. He learns to be like his teacher.

This is the world in which Jesus moved. We read of rabbis and their disciples throughout the Gospels. Jesus himself was recognized as a rabbi with disciples. But there were a few differences. The disciples did not seek Jesus out; they didn't approach him and ask to sit at his feet as disciples. Instead, he sought them out, calling them to leave their professions, to leave their fishing boats and tax booths. Jesus called specifically twelve to be his disciples, but he had a larger circle whom he allowed or invited to sit at his feet, even including women such as Mary. The Pharisees and the scribes partially accepted Jesus as a rabbi with his disciples. He was functioning in a recognizably similar manner, but what he was teaching upset them considerably.

Today we come to the third and final section of the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:17-49). A large crowd of disciples had gathered around Jesus—not just the Twelve, but many more who wanted to hear him. They were joined by a great crowd from Judea and Jerusalem, from Tyre and Sidon, who had also come to hear him. What were they listening for and what would they do with what they heard?

What they heard was a sermon in three sections. It began with a prophetic pronouncement (20-26): a four-fold blessing on those walking in the right way, and a fourfold woe upon those walking in the wrong way. The middle section is a collection of exhortations (27-38): I count 17 commands or prohibitions. Jesus called them to "love your enemies" and to "be merciful as your Father is merciful." Jesus told his listeners to be like God; their reward would be to be known as children of God, as those who are like God. The third section (39-49) is introduced with the words, "He also told them a parable." A parable is a metaphor, a word picture. In the next 11 verses Jesus presents not just one metaphor but several. A parable uses images that were familiar, drawing on events, customs or characters

that were immediately recognizable. We often reduce the parables to moral tales, but they are more powerful than that.

We can delineate these metaphors into three sections: about followers, about fruit, and about foundations. A common characteristic of all the metaphors is that they each feature a pair: there are two blind men, a disciple and his teacher, two brothers each with something in their eye, two trees bearing fruit, two men speaking from their heart, and two men each building a house. They present two ways: two ways of living life, two ways of responding to Jesus, two ways of using the ear. Several of the metaphors are hyperbolic, over-the-top. Jesus must have made the crowd laugh several times; they still make us laugh today. They are like cartoons and lend themselves well to depiction in cartoon format.

Followers

He also told them a parable: “Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit? A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother’s eye.” (Luke 6:39-42 ESV)

In his first metaphor Jesus asks the listeners to imagine a blind man leading another blind man. Can he lead? Of course not! If he insists on leading what will happen: will they not both fall into a pit? Of course they will! In our mind’s eye we see the two of them march headlong and unknowingly into the pit. Artists have put down on canvas what they saw with their mind’s eye. Pieter Bruegel the Elder imagined this scene in his painting *The Blind Leading the Blind* (1568), featuring a line of six blind men. The leader has already fallen into the village pond, the second is falling on top of him, and it is clear that the other four will follow them into a heap. Similarly James Tissot, in his painting *The Blind in the Ditch* from his series *The Life of Christ*, portrays a line of nine men, caught in the act of falling headlong after their leader.

Is it just that the men are falling into a wayside ditch from which they will be able to pick themselves up and stumble on again? Jesus describes them falling into a deep pit, which in the Old Testament is used as a metaphor for judgment and destruction. These two blind men are marching unknowingly to judgment. It’s bad enough that the leader is headed there, but much worse that he is leading another there as well.

Jesus is drawing on the familiar Biblical metaphor of eyes that do not see and ears that do not hear. When the Lord called Isaiah, he gave him a surprising message to proclaim to his people:

And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.” And he said, “Go, and say to this people:

**“Keep on hearing, but do not understand;
keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’
Make the heart of this people dull,
and their ears heavy,
and blind their eyes;
lest they see with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,**

**and understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed.” (Isa 6:8-10)**

The people had refused to use their hearts, ears and eyes to respond to the Lord. Therefore he handed them over to further blindness, deafness and hardness as they headed towards judgment. These verses are quoted multiple times in the gospels, for the problem remained the same: God’s people refused to use their eyes, ears and hearts to respond to the Lord; they refused to turn to the Lord and be healed. Who were the blind guides of Jesus’ day? The Pharisees, who thought they saw clearly.

What point is Jesus trying to make? This is clarified by the next verse: “A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher.” In the ancient model of a teacher with his disciples, the disciple could not progress beyond the teacher. He was not doing original, independent research on the side. He was listening to everything the teacher said, and watching everything he did, in order to eventually rise up to his level. The goal is for the disciple to become fully like his teacher; when this is achieved he is fully trained. Since this is the goal, it behooves the disciple to choose the right teacher into whose likeness he wishes to be shaped. The wrong teacher will lead the disciple in the wrong direction. Again it seems clear that Jesus has the Pharisees in mind; Matthew makes this explicit (Matt 15:12-14). The Pharisees are blind guides. They themselves are headed for the pit of judgment and they are leading all their disciples unwittingly into the same pit.

Jesus presents a second metaphor, which we are to read in conjunction with the first and with the statement about a disciple and his teacher. This time Jesus asks us to imagine two brothers, each with something in his eye. Again this is hyperbolic and lends itself to cartoon portrayal. The log is not a two-by-four or a piece of firewood, but the main beam of a house or a roof beam, so we should probably imagine a four-by-twelve GluLam beam. This isn’t simply a moral tale warning us to examine ourselves before we judge other people. Again it seems best to read this parable in light of the Pharisees. As we’ve seen in previous weeks, the Pharisees were preoccupied with the minutiae of the law. They were trying to keep not only the 613 commandments in the written Torah, but the even larger number of commandments in the oral law which they had constructed as a fence around the Torah. Confident that they were keeping Torah they looked carefully at others to see if they were doing so also. Jesus had come under their scrutinizing gaze as they looked to see if he would heal on the sabbath. “You hypocrites,” Jesus called them. The word was originally used for an actor; in Greek drama actors wore masks, so their external projected self was different from their inner real self. Jesus accused the Pharisees of such a dissonance. Trying to catch others out for the least infringement they failed to notice their own massive infringement. Their biggest disobedience was failure to recognize Jesus, failure to use their hearts, eyes and ears to turn to the Lord. Jesus had many harsh things to say about the Pharisees, their attitude to the law, and the burden they laid on people. He pronounced a woe upon them,

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe the mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!” (Matt 23:23-24)

Another vivid metaphor: straining out a gnat but swallowing a camel! Elsewhere Jesus said that their traditions, the tradition of the elders, built as a fence to protect the commandments of God, were instead keeping them from keeping these commandments, were keeping them from God.

So, the point of this first set of metaphors is to be careful whom you follow, be careful whom you want your life to be shaped to. The Pharisees are shaping the wrong sort of people. In the exhortations of the previous section Jesus had called his listeners to be like God: be merciful as your Father in heaven is merciful. Then your great reward will be to be known to be like God. The Pharisees cannot themselves do this, nor can they help their disciples become like God. Instead they just turn out more blind, deaf, hard-hearted people whose hearts, ears and eyes don't work.

Fruit

“For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.” (6:43-45)

The second set of metaphors moves on to look at the fruit borne by a shaped life. A tree bears fruit according to its kind. After the general principle Jesus gives the example of figs and grapes. These are not just randomly chosen. Apart from being fruit common in Israel, they were used as symbols for Israel itself. But they had failed to yield the right fruit. In the song of the vineyard, the Lord describes Israel as a vineyard which he planted and lovingly cared for. When it was ready “he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes” (Isa 5:2), sour unripe grapes that were good for nothing; the Septuagint (Greek translation of the OT), translates the word as “thorns,” the same word used in the parable. In Jeremiah the Lord says, “When I would gather them, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree” (Jer 8:13). The Lord's people were barren and useless. They yielded no fruit. Even worse, they yielded the wrong sort of fruit.

Again it seems obvious that Jesus is likening the Pharisees to thornbushes and brambles. Nothing good can come from them. Israel cannot be fruitful when it has become the wrong sort of tree. The Pharisees will bear fruit, but that fruit will be just more Pharisees, who will be just as useless as their teachers. The tree of Israel has gone bad and will continue to bear bad fruit. But if there is once again a good tree, it will bear good fruit. So how can the tree be restored into being a good tree again?

Jesus presents the significance of the metaphor by moving from trees and their fruit to hearts and their fruit. Just as a tree produces fruit according to its kind, according to its inner nature, so a person produces in accordance with his nature. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and vice versa for the evil person. The heart is a treasury, a thesaurus, filled with good or evil. It is the storehouse at the core of a person. The mouth is the overflow channel for the heart. When the heart is filled to overflowing, the overflow spills out through the mouth. Whether the speech is good or evil depends on what is in the heart. What comes out of our mouth is a good indication of what the heart is filled with. As our proverb says, “Better to stay silent and be thought a fool than to speak up and remove all doubt.”

Foundations

“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you? Everyone who comes to me and hears my words and does them, I will show you what he is like: he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. And when a flood arose, the stream broke against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not do them is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the stream broke against it, immediately it fell, and the ruin of that house was great.” (6:46-49)

Jesus' final metaphor is probably the most famous of this string of verbal pictures: the parable of the two builders. We're most familiar with Matthew's version where a wise man builds his house on the rock while a foolish man builds his on the sand. At our worship planning meeting I suggested that for the offertory we sing “The wise man built his house upon the rock,” but no one bought the idea. Again this parable lends itself well to the exaggerated depiction of a cartoon.

Luke's account differs slightly from Matthew's. It emphasizes the hard work of the first man: he dug, and he dug deeper until he got down to bedrock, on which he laid the foundation. The second man did no hard work; he did no preparation; he did no digging; he laid no foundation. Instead he built his house directly on the ground. In no time he had moved in and was settled in his house. A flood suddenly arose—in the Ancient Near East this would be a flash flood roaring down a wadi, a normally-dry creek bed, the sort of flash flood that periodically kills people caught unawares in the desert. The floodwaters of this raging torrent beat against both houses. It could not shake the first house, but it brought the immediate and total collapse of the second house.

Who are these two men? Matthew's Jesus describes them as a wise man and a foolish man. In both Matthew and Luke the two men are distinguished by what they do with the words of Jesus. Both men had heard the words of Jesus. They had heard his teaching. They had heard his prophetic pronouncements of blessings and woes, describing those headed in the right direction and the wrong direction. They had heard his exhortations to love enemies, and to be compassionate as God is compassionate. They had heard his several parables. What would they now do with what they had heard? Jesus presents a choice: between doing his words and not doing his words. It's a choice between hearing and not hearing because the Biblical idea of hearing involves doing; hence the verb “hear” is often translated “obey.”

Behind this, what will they do with Jesus? If they call Jesus “Lord, Lord” they should do what he says. If they don't do what he says, why do they call him “Lord, Lord”?

This set of parables began with eyes that do not see, and ends with ears that do not hear. It began with a blind guide headed to destruction, and ends with a deaf builder building a house that will collapse in total destruction. A common theme in the Old Testament is Israel's failure to hear. They had ears but did not hear, eyes but did not see, hearts but did not understand. God sent them prophets but still they didn't hear. Now he has sent his final prophet. Will they hear? Not simply will the words go into their ears but will the words go into their hearts so that they will act?

We smile and laugh at the vivid word pictures Jesus paints. Jesus tells these stories to catch us off-guard, to tell us something so

outlandish that we are forced to think. The crucial points Jesus is making are not in the word-pictures themselves. These are more than simply moral tales. There are two primary points that I want to reflect on in closing: “everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher” (40), and “the good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good...for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks” (45).

On Friday evening I received an email from a student at a university in Ohio. He was working on a book review, and, thanks presumably to Google, had found that I had written a review on the same book, which I had put online. He wrote asking for permission to use my work—a timely request since I had already decided I was going to start today by talking about plagiarism. I gave him permission, but also told him I hoped my review would help him really read the book rather than merely pad out his bibliography. The book he was reviewing is *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*. The author contrasts two attitudes to learning: the monastic and the scholastic. The scholastic wanted to acquire knowledge and pursued it by attempting an objective analysis of all his questions. The monastic, by contrast, wanted to know God, pursuing him by a subjective analysis of his own self and of Scripture.

The scholastic approach is typified by the debate over how many angels can fit on the head of a pin. For monastic culture, the love of learning and the desire for God go hand in hand. The reason I chose that book to review was because of its title.

This is what Christian learning is all about: becoming like the teacher, becoming like Christ, the imitation of Christ. It is about knowing God and knowing self in the context of knowing Christ. It’s about spiritual formation. In some circles the idea of spiritual formation raises eyebrows. But it is really a recovery of the monastic attitude to learning: wanting to know God. One of the tools is *lectio divina*, sacred reading. This is not speed reading of as much literature as possible to acquire information, but slow, repeated, meditated reading in order to be shaped. The goal is not to know the book, but to know God, the Lord Jesus Christ, and self. The result is that we are formed to become like Jesus.

PBCC values education, the serious study of the Scriptures, and an educated ministry. But we care not an iota about paper qualifications, about degrees. We do not hire anyone based on paper qualifications. It’s not even possible to apply for a job here. We don’t accept applications. Instead we hire people based on our knowledge of their character and gifting over a long period of time. So when we sense a need to bring a new person onto the pastoral staff we don’t call for applications. Instead we look around to see whom the Lord has been shaping. We don’t hire pastors to do a job, to fill a job description. Instead we hire them to minister out of the overflow of their heart. This means that they need to keep replenishing their heart. They need to keep studying. It’s not any degrees that they might have that qualify them for ministry. It is what is going on in their heart as they seek to become like their teacher.

What fills your heart? What is overflowing? We don’t do things to try to earn our salvation, nor out of guilt, nor to impress. We do things because our hearts are overflowing when we’re being shaped into the Lord Jesus Christ. We do things because we hear the voice of Jesus. The key to doing is to get the heart full to the state of overflowing. When we do this we will avoid what Neil Postman calls the Low Information–Action Ratio which makes us liars.²

When it comes to teaching and preaching we look for it to be out of the overflow of the heart. It doesn’t come from books. We read books, but not so that we can turn around and regurgitate them, but so that we be formed.

We are disciples, called to be like our teacher. We are called to listen to him with open ears, to see him with open eyes, to understand him with open hearts. May he so fill our hearts that they overflow, and that the good things that come out of this overflow reflect him into whose likeness we are being formed.

1. Stephen Evans, “Analysis,” accompanying BBC News, “German minister Annette Schavan quits over ‘plagiarism,’” 9 February 2013. Online: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-21395102>.

2. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Viking, 1985).