

GOOD TREES BEARING GOOD FRUIT, BAD TREES BEARING BAD FRUIT
Lenten Midweek 6 + April 1, 2020
Psalm 148; Galatians 5:1, 13–25; Matthew 7:15–20

People sometimes have trouble picking out produce at the grocery store.
Is that avocado not ripe enough, or is it too ripe?

Will that orange be juicy?

Is the texture of that apple going to be mealy?

Standing at the store,

we are primarily concerned about the fruit in front of us
and not so much the tree it came from.

Yet, the quality of the fruit depends on the quality of the tree!

As we heard the Lord Jesus say in the Second Reading,

**“every healthy tree bears good fruit,
but the diseased tree bears bad fruit”** (Mt 7:17).

So, as we continue our Lenten sermon series,

“Living among the Bible’s Trees,” we consider good trees bearing good fruit
and bad trees bearing bad fruit.

CONSIDERING GOOD TREES BEARING GOOD FRUIT AND BAD TREES BEARING BAD FRUIT,
WE REALIZE THAT, THOUGH BY NATURE WE ARE BAD TREES BEARING BAD FRUIT,
GOD CHANGES US INTO GOOD TREES BEARING GOOD FRUIT.

The Lord Jesus’ words in the Second Reading
come in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount,
but he is recorded speaking similarly both later in St. Matthew’s Gospel
and in St. Luke’s Gospel account.

And the passage from St. Paul’s divinely inspired Letter to the Galatians
that we heard in the First Reading
likely draws on both Jesus’ words and other similar teachings
about faith and its fruit.

The idea of finding grapes on a vine and not on something like a thornbush,
of finding figs on a fig tree and not on something like a thistle plant,
may seem for us to be a no-brainer.

But what is important for us
is to recognize the good or bad nature of the tree by its fruit
and the good or bad nature of the tree
as the cause of the quality of the fruit.

In the Sermon on the Mount and in the other places

where Jesus speaks in a similar,
the Jewish leaders as false teachers in particular
seem to be the target of what Jesus says.

For example, in that Second Reading, Jesus says to beware of false prophets,
and, later in St. Matthew's Gospel in this context,
Jesus calls the Jewish leaders a "brood of vipers" and says they are evil.

They are no different by nature than we are.

Out of the abundance of our hearts, our mouths also speak,
and Jesus says that **"on the day of judgment
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"** (Mt 12:36–37).

Our words give evidence either to the faith that is in our hearts
or to the lack thereof (cf Rom 10:9–10).

That focus on words is not even to mention
what probably are the thoughts that precede the words
and the deeds that follow the words.

As for the works of the sinful flesh,
St. Paul lists for the Galatians and us

**"sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife,
jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness,
orgies, and things like these"** (Gal 5:19–21).

He warns the Galatians and us

that **"those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God"** ^(v 21).

Rather, as Jesus said, **"Every tree that does not bear good fruit
is cut down and thrown into the fire"** (Mt 7:19).

That judgment is not only on some far-off Judgment Day,
but, as John the Baptist said before Jesus,

"Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees" (Mt 3:10).

The Lord Jesus says that **"a healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit,
nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit"** (Mt 7:18).

So, Jesus says, **"Either make the tree good and its fruit good,
or make the tree bad and its fruit bad"** (Mt 12:33).

But we can hardly make literal trees good or bad,
much less ourselves as figurative trees.

John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus
call for fruits in keeping with repentance,
and both John and Jesus' disciples baptized for that purpose ^(Mt 3:8; Jn 4:2).

For the sake of the Lord Jesus' death on the cross,

God himself, working through his Word in Baptism and all its forms, changes us from being bad trees bearing bad fruit to being good trees bearing good fruit, fruit in keeping with repentance.

In the First Reading, Saint Paul says that we are called to freedom and that Christ has set us free (cf Jn 8:36).

Christ sets us free by the truth of his Gospel (Jn 8:32)—his Gospel that he, true God in human flesh, died on the cross for the sins of the whole world, including your sins and my sins.

Christ substituted himself there on the cross for us.

Unless we reject God's enabling call to repent, God frees us from our slavery to sin, death, and the power of the devil.

God forgives our evil sinful nature and all our actual sins of thought, word, and deed.

God makes us bad trees good, so that instead of bearing bad fruit, which brings condemnation, we bear good fruit, the fruit of justification and eternal life.

God's Word read and preached to us all as a group brings about and continues that change, as does God's Word applied to us individually in Holy Baptism, in private Absolution, and in the Sacrament of the Altar, where bread is the body of Christ given for us, and wine is the blood of Christ shed for us.

In all these ways, those whom God has sent bring out of their good treasure what is old and what is new (Mt 13:52), and those of us who are served by them can do the same.

As Saint Luke uniquely reports, John the Baptist to some extent tailored his teaching about the good fruit in keeping with repentance to the different vocational groups that were baptized by him, such as tax collectors and soldiers (Lk 3:10–14).

So, we know that we likewise have fruit of good works that we do in keeping with our vocations.

There is also fruit of good works that we have in common. For example, our Psalm calls all to praise the Lord,

even mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars,
all peoples, princes and all rulers,
young men and maidens, old men and children.

With the author of Hebrews,
we can say that our sacrifice of praise
is the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name (Heb 13:15).

And St. Paul in the First Reading specifically lists
as our common fruit of the Spirit these things:

**“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,
goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control”** (Gal 5:22–23).

When we fail in any way to bring forth such fruits of repentance,
good works in keeping with our vocations,
and fruits of the Spirit—as we will fail—
then we live in daily repentance,
and so we are daily comforted with God’s forgiveness.

As we have continued considering our “Living among the Bible’s Trees,”
we today specifically considered good trees bearing good fruit
and bad trees bearing bad fruit.

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AND BAD TREES BEARING BAD FRUIT,
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God has called us to repentance and forgiven our sins
by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

From various sources,
you can learn from your experiences, your senses, and your reason
to pick literal good fruit of good trees—
avocados, oranges, apples, and the like—in the local market.

But only by the power of the Holy Spirit,
reaching past your experiences, your senses, and your reason
to your hearts through his Means of Grace,
can you ever be a figurative good tree yourself—
bearing the good fruits of the Spirit
that Saint Paul describes in the First Reading.

And you become a good tree bearing these good fruits of the Spirit,
because you have been forgiven all of your sins
in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.