

“From Thorns in the Crown to Branches on the Vine” | Luke 6:43-45 (The Sermon on the Plain)

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I. Introduction

“You’re a bad apple, Shane,” my fifth-grade teacher Mrs. Jones would proclaim in a cold, stern voice, in front of the whole class. This woman was feared by all, from kindergarten and on. Her legend loomed heavy through halls of Veteran’s Memorial School. Some children fear ghosts, or monsters, or Bigfoot, or Godzilla. We feared Mrs. Jones.

Shane had made the mistake of getting on the bad side of Mrs. Jones from day one of the school year. He would often become the scape goat for her frustrations.

He was the kind of kid who wore converse **Chuck Taylor high-tops** and **ripped jeans** before they were cool. He:

- passed notes,
- talked during the lesson,
- didn’t stay ‘single file’ in line on the way to the cafeteria,
- and occasionally whipped the ball too hard at someone in dodgeball at recess.

He was one of the first kids in the neighborhood to attach a **baseball card to the spokes of his Huff** to make our normal bikes sound like motorcycles as we made our way across town in the endless New England summers.

Shane was cool, and, he was my friend. He wasn’t actually a “bad apple” at all. No more than any of the rest of us could occasionally be. It’s just that we got caught less. Infrequently enough, I guess, to be considered, “good trees” rather than “bad apples.”

Mrs. Jones liked me. She thought I was a good tree. What she didn’t know was that I was also the class clown. Sometimes when she would be writing something on the chalk board, I would stand on my chair and flap my arms like a bird behind her back. This would then start a wave of other students who would copy me,

standing on their chairs and flapping their arms too. Eventually, Mrs. Jones would twist around as quickly as she could, which wasn't very quick. And she'd just stare, **her gaze like the evil eye of Sauron**, waiting for one of us to break, but we never did. To this day she mistakenly believes I'm a good tree, rather than a mix of good and bad apples, and sadly the occasional thorn.

In today's passage, Jesus tells us, "No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit." "The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil."

The teaching sounds so very cut and dry.

It seems like Jesus is saying: you're either all good or all bad, all fruit or all thorns. Whatever kind of tree you are; that's the kind of fruit or life you produce. But that didn't make sense to me. It didn't make sense of my own experience, **as a Christian**, a person who **believes the gospel but who nevertheless still falls into sin** just like every other human being.

And, it didn't make sense of my experience of others, especially non-Christians who frequently exhibit genuine, admirable virtue, sometimes rivaling or even exceeding that of Christians.

I kept trying out the logic:

"Well I must not be a good tree because I sometimes produce bad things, and Jesus said a good tree cannot produce bad fruit."

"But, on the other hand, I can't be bad tree, because I sometimes I produce good things, and a bad tree cannot produce good fruit."

You start to feel like you're a version of that character **Vizzini from the Princess Bride**, wherever you land: **"Inconceivable!"**

It's only confusing, until we realize—Jesus isn't giving us a philosophy; he's giving us a parable.

- A philosophy invites us to calculate and categorize ideas; it's a parable's job to *confront* us.
- It's not simply about what a parable is **saying** to us; it is about what a parable is **doing** to us.

The parable of the good and bad trees—if we really enter in to it—forces us to re-evaluate ourselves and others again and again, **like a spiritual MRI**, every time we come to it.

- We're not meant to think of it like Mrs. Jones thought of Shane, "a bad apple today, a bad apple always."
- Nor are we meant to come to Jesus' teaching thinking "I'm a Christian therefore I'm forever a good tree."

If you feel you already know the answer when you come to the parable, then the passage becomes like **a smoke alarm that has had its batteries removed**. You know what the thing is meant to do; but it no longer really performs its function on you.

If we really let the parable do its work, though, it forces us to ask ourselves: is the product of my *current life* good or evil?

Am I a thorn-bearing bush or a fruit-bearing tree?

The challenge of the parable is that the answer could change, on any given day or season—even for Christians.

This requires us to ask two questions.

- First, **what does it mean to be a thorn-bearing bush?**
- Second, **how do we go from being thorn-bearing bushes to fruit-bearing trees?**

I. What does it mean to be a thorn-bearing bush?

1a. What do thorns represent in the Bible?

"figs are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush"

If we're trying to understand what Jesus is saying here we should first ask: what do thorns represent in the Bible?

It turns out that thorns frequently represent sin and judgment in the Bible.

- In Genesis 3:18, “thorns and thistles” are part of the curse of the Fall, after Adam and Eve sin.
- Later, in the Book of the prophet Hosea (10:8) “thorn and thistles” represent **the sin and judgement of Israel** in forsaking obedience to God. This continues in the writings of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.

In the New Testament:

- it is the “thorns” that “choke out” the word of God in the Parable of Sower.
- And thorns make up the cruel crown that Jesus is forced to wear as he is mocked and beaten before his crucifixion.

[Transition] Beyond how thorns function in the Bible, thorns are universally easy to understand. We all know how thorns work. Even a child quickly discovers their piercing purpose while playing out in the garden.

1b. What are the characteristics of a thorn?

Yesterday, as I was editing this sermon, I decided it was a beautiful day to be outside doing some yard work/teaching my kids about this parable through actually pulling weeds. So, I told the kids it would be a way to earn allowance for chores. My daughter immediately began bargaining with me. She saw an opportunity and she went for it: ‘I’ll do it for thirty dollars’ she said with a straight face. “Five dollars, tops,” I replied. My son interjected like a true Washingtonian, ‘Five dollars, that’s not even minimum wage!’

Once outside I asked my daughter, ‘why do you think the plants have thorns?’ She answered, ‘to protect themselves.’ Exactly.

Both thorns and the Word of God pierce, but for different purposes.

There is no grace in the pierce of a thorn; only the sting of self-preservation.

- **Thorns pierce to inflict pain without the possibility of redemption;**

+ but **the Word of God pierces like a surgeon's scalpel** by whose incision the Spirit can administer what the early Christian Fathers called 'the medicine of immortality,' the Gospel.

[Transition] With all this in mind, we can then ask:

"how do I know if I am a thorn-bearing bush or a fruit bearing tree at any given moment in my life?"

III. How can I identify thorn-like qualities in myself?

The parable invites us to the **long-obedient work** of being a **spiritual gardener** ridding the soil of our souls from the noxious weeds and thorn-bearing plants that cause us to cease bearing spiritual fruit.

- The hasty gardener sweeps through the Garden with a weed-wacker,
 - leaving the weeds shorter but no less rooted in the soil,
 - giving the appearance that they have been eliminated, but actually just buying them time to proliferate and claim more land, and eventually to easily regrow.
- + The careful gardener gets down on his hands and knees and meticulously weeds the land.
 - He identifies some small weeds, easy to pull out at the root, and removes them with merely the gentlest pluck.
 - Others have grown deep and tall; **they've been here a while**, hiding behind the healthy plants, slowly taking over the garden.
 - Their leaves are as sharp as razors,
 - their stock covered in prickly white stabbing hairs,
 - and their thorns easily able to pierce the gardener's glove.

These require great skill to weed out, and they require a struggle to remove at the root.

This parable is a tool that helps us **identify sin at the tip of the thorn**, where sin is most sharply piercing into our lives and into the lives of others.

Identifying sin at the tip of the thorn requires us to let the Word of God slowly examine us, so that the Word might help us “discern the thoughts and intentions of our hearts,” as the author of Hebrews puts it.

So often, we approach Scripture as a quantitative exercise: how much did we read in a given year. But **the gardening of the soul requires a more meditative strategy**.

- one that spends hours tilling a small portion of land
- experiencing it close up
- becoming familiar with every grain as they sift through our fingers,

Revealing our souls deepest habits and affections through the hands-on working of the heart’s soil.

With time, **the Gospel applies a gracious piercing**, one that goes “to the division of soul and of spirit,” as Hebrews says.

The spiritual gardener develops the spiritual discipline and ability to identify other, more deceptive weeds. Weeds that appear to be healthy plants, but are actually toxic from the flower to the fruit all the way down to the root.

In the natural world, these are plants like the ***atropa belladonna***, commonly known as ‘**the deadly nightshade**.’ The berries of the *belladonna* appear to be good fruit, but they are incredibly lethal if consumed.

To come to this parable assuming that we are always and only ever good trees, is to run the risk of allowing a deadly spiritual nightshade to pose as good tree in the garden of our heart. The careful gardener of the soul is able to spot the belladonna and to ensure that it is transformed from a bush of poisonous berries into tree of good fruit.

But how? How do we go beyond merely identifying the thorn-bearing bush to seeing it transformed into a fruit-bearing tree?

II. How do we go from thorn-bearing bushes to fruit-bearing trees?

The answer can be found in the words of John the Baptist to the Pharisees and Sadducees in Matthew 3:8. There John tells them to “bear fruit in keeping with repentance.” Elsewhere, in the Book of Acts, Paul tells us to “repent and turn to God” and to “perform deeds in keeping with repentance” (Acts 26:10-20). This repentance is more than saying, “I’m sorry.” Listen to the prayer of absolution that we pray each Sunday to get a sense of what true repentance is like. The minister says, “The Almighty and merciful Lord grant you absolution and remission of all your sins, true repentance, **amendment of life**, and the grace and consolation of his Holy Spirit.

This amendment of our life, is what the Book of Acts means by “performing deeds in keeping with repentance.” These deeds do not earn our eternal salvation; but they do ensure and facilitate our ongoing sanctification, our holiness, our transformation into the likeness to Christ.

And yet, at the same time, the good news of the Gospel is not to that we have to do the impossible and **transform ourselves** from a thorn bush into a fig tree in order to be accepted by God. Rather, the Gospel is that through repentance and trust in Jesus Christ, **God transforms us** through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Self-examination by the Spirit through the Word identifies sin at the tip of thorn; repentance rips sin out by the root.

God uses that repentance and faith to unite us to Christ who alone is the singularly good tree in whom we find life.

Conclusion—From Thorns in the Crown to Branches on the Vine

Still, as we conclude, we must ask: where is the rest for our souls in this constant shifting? One day a fig tree, the next a bush of thorns.

As Paul writes of all humanity in Romans 3,

“None is righteous, no, not one;

¹¹ no one understands;

no one seeks for God.

¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;

no one does good,

not even one.”

Again, I say, **where is the rest for my soul?** I'm seemingly just as likely to turn up a thorn judgment day as a fig.

You, me, and every other imperfect person, standing before a righteous and holy God, with **a heart full of thorns** and **a hand full of figs**.

And as if this is not heavy enough, we suddenly realize that

- **not only are there thorns in our hearts,**
- and not only are we **thorns in each other's' sides;**
- we are thorns in the crown.

As Matthew's Gospel says,

"and twisting together *a crown of thorns*, they put it on his head and put a reed in his right hand. And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!'

My sins, your sins, and the sins of the whole world brought him to that day.

The book of Zechariah says,

"And they will look upon the one they have pierced."

Pierced, brothers and sisters, not just with the spear of a Roman centurion; but with the thorns of sin— **my sins, your sins, the sins of the whole world**.

And yet the Bible says that,

- Jesus "is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2).
- And again, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him might not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16)."

When we stand before our Lord on that final day, we need not worry that we won't be an acceptable enough tree. We never could be, we never will be, but Jesus is.

- **There is one tree of life** who is who is singularly good—his name is Jesus.

- **There is only one vine** who is singularly good— his name is Jesus, and he beckons to you to grab onto him in repentance and faith.
- **There is only one olive tree** who is singularly good—his name is Jesus. And into him are engrafted from every tribe, nation, and tongue, all people who place their trust in him as Savior and Lord.

Jesus, the tree of life. Jesus, the one true vine. Jesus, who bore our thorns upon his brow and bore our sin upon his shoulders. Jesus, pierced for our transgressions. Jesus, risen for the life of the world. **Thanks be to God for Jesus Christ, who takes from being thorns in the crown to branches on the vine.**

Discussion Questions

(1) In the sermon we heard that self-examination by the Spirit working through the Word helps us to “discern the thoughts and intentions of our hearts.” It does this by identifying sin at the tip of the thorn, where sin is most sharply piercing in our lives and in the lives of others, working all the way down to the root, before skillfully removing it. As you consider Jesus’ teaching, what are some areas of your life that the Spirit is revealing to you as piercing thorns, sins that involve you in potentially disobeying God or sinning against others with the gracelessness of the thorns puncture?

(2) We heard, on the one hand, that we constantly must assess whether our current life is like a thorn-bearing bush or a fruit bearing tree. This is the way that the parable ‘works’ on us, leading us to growth in sanctification. On the other hand, we concluded by recognizing that all fall short of God’s glory, whether the season is yielding thorn or fruit. No-one is righteous, no not one, says Paul in Romans. Jesus alone is the good tree, and salvation is through faith and trust in him alone. What is the balance here that avoids both works-righteousness (i.e., feeling we need to earn our salvation) and spiritual immaturity or lethargy (i.e., it doesn’t matter how I live, because I’m saved by trusting Jesus)?

(3) In the Book of Acts, Paul tells us to “repent and turn to God” and to “perform deeds in keeping with repentance” (Acts 26:10-20). Paul’s talking about walking the walk, and not merely talking the talk. Saying “I’m sorry” but changing nothing in our lives yields not spiritual progress but spiritual presumption. What are some examples of what the prayer book calls “repentance and *the amendment of life*?”

Where is that missing in your own walk in such a way that confession feels like too little of a thing, with no change or consequence, or “amendment” to life?

(4) What are some of the more deceptive sin areas, that like the *atropa belladonna* (‘the deadly nightshade’) appear to be good fruit, or virtues, but are on closer look, poisonous sins polluting ourselves, our families, and our communities?

(5) As a biblical follow-up to the sermon read Genesis 3:22-24 and Revelation 22:1-5. Bearing in mind that the Tree of Life has vanished from Scripture after Genesis 3, appearing only again here in Revelation 22, at the end of the Bible, ask yourself the following questions: Theologically, what is the significance of the tree in Revelation 22? How does Jesus help us regain access to the tree of life? What is the purpose of the leaves on the tree according to Revelation 22? And, lastly, what does the tree say about fruit that might be pertinent to our passage today in Luke 6:43-45?