

The Sure Signs of a Genuine Disciple

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[0 : 00] I wonder whether you know of people who are good at faking things or bluffing their way through life. You may be one of them yourself.

Well, I'm sure most of you would know friends in the past who are great at faking illness in order to wag school. You know, Mom, I'm really sick today.

Tummy's not feeling well. I don't think I can make it to school. And then miracle of miracles, when Mom says, all right, it's okay, you can stay home. And all of a sudden, they're immediately better. And they spend the rest of their day, you know, playing computer games, getting high scores even. Or take another example, the things people put on their resume. They've only spent six months on the job. And yet somehow, judging from that resume, they've single-handedly turned the company around.

They claim credit for securing that \$1 million-plus client, when in reality, they're just one of the team members. Or they claim to save the company half a million dollars with a fantastic innovation.

[1 : 10] But then they neglect to save it. It's actually half a million over 20 years. That's \$25,000 a year. Some years ago, there was a movie called Catch Me If You Can, where Leonardo DiCaprio played a true-life con artist by the name of Frank Abagnale, who scammed people out of millions of dollars by posing, amongst other things, as an airline pilot, a doctor, a prosecutor.

And all this before he turned 19. This is actually a true story in the 1960s. Well, tonight, in Jesus' conclusion to his sermon, we learn that there is one thing you cannot fake.

And that's being a disciple of Jesus. To be a disciple of Jesus isn't easy. It's tempting to look for shortcuts, to bluff your way through it. But it doesn't work.

Sooner or later, it'll become clear if you're a true disciple of Jesus or not. So Jesus explains this in verse 43, when he gives us a few horticultural examples by saying, No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit.

Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thorn bushes or grapes from briars. A good man or good person brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart.

[2 : 36] And an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. Now, you who are gardeners out there will know that sometimes it's hard to identify a tree until it fruits.

You may guess, but it's only when it starts to fruit for the first time that you have definitive proof. So, for example, and I've checked this with my wife, so it's correct.

There are two kinds of persimmon trees, right? There's an astringent type where you can only eat the fruit once it goes really soft. And then there's the non-astringent kind, which you can eat even when it's crunchy.

Both trees, however, look the same. And it's only when you get the fruit for the very first time that you can tell which kind of persimmon tree it is. And so this was true with the bushes and the trees in Galilee as well.

So from afar, a fig tree, such as this one in the picture, can look like the other thorn bushes on the landscape. Likewise, the grape plant, which is a woody climbing vine, looks similar to other bras, from which there are no fruits that come out of it.

[3 : 54] In each of these cases, it's only when you see the fruit that Jesus says you can know for sure what kind of tree it is. And so it is with people.

The way to tell their true nature is to look at their fruit. That is, to look at their conduct, which over time also reveals their character. You see, just like a tree, no person can fake their character forever.

They may for a while, though, because sometimes people can talk a good talk. They can talk a good game. They can quote the right Bible verses, even attend church or Bible studies, or even prayer meetings faithfully.

Now, none of these things are bad, right? They're actually good things to do. But just as the Pharisees in Jesus' day could do religion well, so too can so-called Christians.

It's only when we start to observe their daily lives, how they treat their spouse, how they treat their elderly parents, how they are privately when they think no one is looking, that's when we see if they're true disciples or not.

[5 : 06] If a person is evil, Jesus says, then they cannot fake being good forever. And likewise, someone's good character always shines through in the end.

And that's particularly so because life brings its fair share of tests and temptations. An evil person, for example, may play nice for a little while, particularly if it's to his or her advantage, you know, like that new recruit that's trying to impress the boss.

But it's only a good person who will consistently be good, even when things are not going their way. Their goodness will be there even under pressure because it's part of their character.

It's who they are. And this is especially true when it comes to looking at leaders and pastors. So you see a pastor like me, I can stand up here each Sunday and preach great sermons.

I can explain the Bible well, have great illustrations, have well-targeted application. But at the end of the day, it's by my fruit or the fruit of leaders that we are to assess their discipleship or my discipleship to Jesus.

[6 : 23] Is there humility and grace? Is there patience with all? These are the things that tell us what he or she is really like. You see, the danger with a leader is that there's never any danger with a leader who's a bad teacher, is it?

Like if he preaches falsehood, you know, that Jesus was not the Son of God or something, we'll be able to spot that right away, wouldn't we? And we'll stay away. But the real danger for us is with the leader who appears good at first, can even talk well, but then we feel themselves not to be figs, but to be thorn bushes.

And what applies for individuals and leaders applies to churches as well. So again, it's very easy for a church to say they follow Jesus. You know, you can look up their website and their mission statement might say that.

They want to be disciples of Jesus. But again, the real test comes in how we live together, how we treat one another, week in, week out.

Are we generous and kind to all? Are we welcoming even of those who are not like us? Or are we loving just to those people who are like us from the same background or culture?

[7 : 42] Well, Jesus was gracious to all, wasn't he? And so if we are to be true disciples of Jesus, then we need to be like him too. That is the mark of a true disciple.

Now, Jesus then turns in verse 45 to one specific aspect of behavior, which is especially good at revealing a person's character. And that's the area of our speech.

So he says in verse 45, for the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. Now, I actually like the 1984 NIV version better because it's a bit more vivid. It says, for out of the overflow of his heart, his mouth speaks.

Now, I know I just said that some people can talk a good game even when they're not genuine as disciples. But I don't think this is what Jesus is referring to here. He's not talking about guarded or deliberate speech.

But he's talking about spontaneous speech, words that are said off the cuff. These are the ones that reveal what's truly in the heart of the speaker. You see, when someone is under pressure or when they let their guard down, what's in their heart then bubbles up to the top and it comes out of the mouth.

[8 : 56] Now, those of you who know me well enough, you may realize that I'm actually quite prone to teasing people. Now, most of the time, I think or I hope it's all harmless.

It helps to break the ice with people. And I try and make as much fun of myself as I do others.

Although, I have to admit, I don't keep track. And usually, I pick on those people that I think can take it.

So, people like Victor or Vijay. You know, thick-skinned people. And it's sort of a very Aussie thing to do, isn't it? We sort of show, really, that we love people by picking on them.

But, of course, this can be fraught with danger, can't it? Because it only takes this one slip of my tongue and I end up hurting someone, even when I don't mean to. So, I remember some time ago, I was quite affected by this when I was young.

So much so that I thought to myself, I'm going to stop teasing and joking so that I would not run that risk of hurting anyone. I said to myself, I'm just going to be serious all the time.

[10:07] Which, you guys know, is probably not possible. Yeah. Anyway, looking back, I have to say that although this was not necessarily a bad thing to want to do, after all, the Bible does say, you know, be slow to speak, to use your tongue to bless and not curse people.

But the problem with it was that I was merely focused on biting my tongue and that was not enough. Because Jesus said that it's out of the overflow of the heart that the mouth speaks.

So, if I was capable of demeaning someone, then I didn't just have a speech problem. I had a heart problem as well. I had a problem with pride because some of my insults showed that I thought I was better than others.

Besides, it wasn't effective. because Jesus says that what's in the heart will overflow from the mouth. If there is pride in my heart, then, sooner or later, it will reveal itself in what I say.

So, simply just focusing on behavior modification, and that's my point, isn't enough. We need to address our heart's motivation and desires as well.

[11:18] And what I say about my mouth applies to other aspects of our behavior as well. So, if we have a problem with a bad temper, let's say, then just working on anger management techniques, while being useful to some extent, ignores the real problem, which is with our hearts.

Which shows, for example, that we cannot trust God to be in control. That's why we get angry at things, or it shows that we're selfish, that we always want things our way, and we can't stand it when others do it another way.

And so, the way I see it, when we focus solely on behavior modification, it's like a fruit grower that finds that his oranges are sour, or not juicy enough.

And you know what he does? He takes a syringe, and he injects it with a glucose solution. It's been done before in some other countries.

But what he's done is he's pumped his fruit up with an artificial additive, when what he really should be doing, and most, you know, reputable fruit growers would do, is to address the root cause of the poor fruit.

[12:25] You know, whether the tree itself has enough nutrients or water or fertilizer. That's what you need to do, not pump up the fruit. Well, in the next section, from verse 46 onwards, Jesus teaches us how to tackle the root cause.

That is, how to become a true disciple. And he also shows what we become of them if they are, as opposed to a false disciple. So look with me, verse 46.

Jesus says, Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not do what I say? As for everyone who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice, I will show you what they are like.

They are like a man building a house who dug deep and laid the foundation on rock. When a flood came, the torrent struck that house, but could not shake it because it was well built. But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation.

The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete. So if you compare the two outcomes, it should be clear what makes a true disciple, isn't it?

[13:35] You see, both the true and the false disciples are capable of calling Jesus Lord, Lord. both may even hear his words. But as Jesus says, it's only the true disciple who practices what they hear.

They are the ones who respond to Jesus' words by putting them into practice. And in fact, I think Jesus is saying it's only when you put his words into practice that they are actually any value to you. Just hearing it is not enough. Now of course, there are some today who might even call themselves Christians and not even bother to hear God's word. Either because they think they already know it all or they don't think they get anything out of it.

But here, Jesus is speaking to those who do hear his words, who may attend church regularly, who are part of a Bible study group, and yet, in spite of all these opportunities to hear, they don't put what they hear into practice.

Which means they're not much better off than those who don't hear at all. Now friends, I think we need to realize something important here. Often we think that when it comes to relating or speaking with God that the initiative lies with us.

[14 : 47] You know, we're the ones, we've got all the questions and we've got the problems and we're coming to God and we're asking him for help. And so we ask for answers to questions like, Lord, what should I do with my career?

Lord, how can I fix this relationship in my life? Or Lord, how can I improve this or that area of my life? But friends, that is not really how it works.

Rather, the initiative lies fully with God. He's the one who actually draws himself or draws us to himself. He's the one who actually desires to speak to us in the first place.

In fact, when he does, that's how he expresses his love for us. That's how he shows he cares for us. God's by speaking to us out of his free will, out of his own initiative as individuals and as a church.

And so while it's okay to have questions for God to answer, we actually need to realize as we hear these words that it is God's agenda that Jesus is talking about.

[15 : 51] We need to realize that God has a separate agenda which is more important than all of these questions that we may have of him. I mean, this sermon that we've been looking at, the sermon on the plain, is a case in point.

See how Jesus is the one, he gathers his disciples and then he speaks to them about his own agenda. He speaks to them on rejoicing while being persecuted for his namesake, for loving their enemies.

Are these topics, do you think, that are on the minds of the disciples as they come to Jesus? If they're anything like me, probably not. And yet, when Jesus talks about coming to him and hearing his words and putting them into practice, he's talking about these very topics in the sermon.

He's referring to his own agenda which he set for them, rather than the answers that we may have, the questions we may have of him. I'm not saying by this that we don't ever ask Jesus any questions or God any questions and that he wouldn't care to answer.

No, true discipleship is about putting into practice Jesus' words based on his priorities and his agenda, not ours. And the thing is, when Jesus speaks, he goes to the heart of things.

[17 : 06] He's not focused solely on behavior modification. Rather, his aim is to change us from inside out, from the heart outwards, so that what we say and what we do is an overflow of what's in our hearts.

That's why, for example, we major on expository preaching here at Holy Trinity, where we work through books of the Bible, whether on Sunday or at our Bible studies.

It's the best way to let God set his agenda. That's why we don't often do topical series, because the risk with that is that we simply choose our favorite topics.

We're selective in what we want to hear, and we neglect the weighty things that God wants us to hear. Expository preaching, on the other hand, or teaching, allows God's Word to speak for itself. Week in, week out, we study each passage in its context. We let God's Word shape us, set the agenda for us. And so over the course of the year and over the course of years, we cover different parts of the Bible so that we encounter the whole counsel of God.

[18 : 16] We pick difficult books so that we hear everything that God wants to say to us. So for example, this term, we study the Gospel of Luke. And then at camp, we'll do a bit of prophecy with Joel.

And then later in the year, we'll do some Hebrews and we'll do Genesis. Genesis. And as we hear God's whole counsel and we put it into practice, then over time we become these good trees that have the right balance of watering, nutrients, fertilizer, whatever it takes for good trees to bear good fruit.

It's all balanced, you see. Now, if you recall our reading of Psalm 1 tonight, that's exactly how God described it there in Psalm 1. So I've got the verses back up on the slide.

blessed is the one, it says in verse 2, who delights in the law of the Lord and meditates on it day and night. He or she is like the tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in due course.

It's secure because it's rooted in God's word. That's the streams of water. Meditating on it by night, feeding, delighting in it by doing it and putting it into practice.

[19 : 27] And can you see from those verses that the fruit really isn't the focus, is it? It's just the result. It says the tree yields its fruit in season.

It's just a natural thing that happens when the blessed person obeys the Lord. And so it's not as if we try and, so for example, I've got bad temper, I'm going to have to fix it this month, and we try and fix it this month, and then next month we go, oh, I've got a problem with greed, so I'm going to focus on greed next month, and then whatever, whatever, and then months to go.

God's word doesn't sort of work like that. There's no shortcuts or quick fixes. Rather, God changes us slowly and steadily over the course of our entire lives as we are soaked in his word, as we put what we hear into practice.

Or to switch the imagery now and go back to Luke, what's happening is that we are building deep foundations into the rock, that's Jesus, so that our house will stand firm and be unshaken through the fiercest storms.

Now, I wonder when Jesus talks about this house in verse 48, what actually comes to your mind? What do you think the house represents? Well, you may think it's your life, and in particular, all the good things about it.

[20 : 46] You know, the social status you enjoy, the material blessings you have, maybe even the cherished relationships and friendships that you've got. And so the picture in your mind of this house may look something like this, a luxurious waterfront mansion.

It's by a stream, isn't it, of water, so it seems right. No doubt the foundations of this mansion would be pretty good as well. I see there's all these rocks by the side. But is this really Jesus' promise here?

That if we obey his words, he will protect all the things, all these good things that we want from floods and torrents? Because if you look at the verse, Jesus says nothing about the size or the comfort of this house, does he?

And if you read the rest of the sermon and all of Jesus' words, it's highly unlikely that that's what Jesus is talking about. Rather, this house that Jesus talks about is actually our life of faith.

It's our citizenship in heaven, in his kingdom. And the floods and torrents that he speaks of are the test to that faith. So it's not just the natural adversities in life, like sickness, but it includes the temptations and the persecution as well that seek to draw us away or shake our faith, draw us away from him or shake our faith.

[22 : 07] And so perhaps a better image of this house might be this lighthouse in the middle of a raging ocean. There's nothing comfortable about it, is there? I don't think, yeah, there's no swimming pool, no, although you can swim in the ocean.

So it's austere, isn't it? And yet it's rooted on the rock. It's absolutely immovable. I mean, I don't think, yeah, it's withstood wave after wave from the ocean.

Whatever test life throws at it, life throws at us, if that's our house, it will withstand those tests. It will not fall.

And at the end of the day, that is what really counts, isn't it? This house of faith, what we want is for it to still be standing on the last day when God comes to judge each of us.

We need to be able to account for what we've done in life. Will our house of faith still be standing because we've come to Jesus, we've heard his words, and we've put them into practice.

[23 : 18] Faith is that one thing, isn't it, that ties all those three things that Jesus talks about together. It is by faith that we come to Jesus, but then it is also by faith that we move from just hearing what he says to practicing it.

And so, brothers and sisters, if I were to summarize things tonight, true discipleship isn't really that complex, is it? Essentially, according to Jesus, there are only three steps.

Step one, come to Jesus. Have you done that? Do you call him Lord and Savior? Then step two, hear his words. Do we have good routines week in, week out, day in, day out to do that, to read through the Bible, to study it with others, to hear God's agenda for us as a church and for us as individuals?

And then step three, putting them into practice. And here's my biggest challenge, I think. I don't know about you, but here's my biggest challenge because I don't actually have a problem hearing God's word, I don't think.

I rather enjoy it, actually. I rather like coming to church and hearing sermons when I don't have to preach and readily saying amen to it. But then I leave church and guess what?

[24 : 35] I fail to put it into practice. It's so easy, isn't it? The moment we step out of that door, how often do we still have God's word ringing in our ears the day after or maybe even that night, let alone in the days to come?

But the point is that when I fail to do that, it actually shows a lack of faith on my part. It shows that I don't really believe what Jesus is, not enough to know that it is the best thing for my life, that is the most important thing for me to attend to, to change my life, that I need to put into practice even when it means suffering or discomfort for me now.

But that's the crucial step, isn't it? Because as I said, what's the difference between the house that is washed away and the one that stands, between the bad fruit and the good fruit, or the bad tree and the good tree?

It is putting God's word into practice. read those two verses again. The only difference, both here, but one puts into practice and the other doesn't.

And so friends, I want to urge you, it's easy because we just want to stay in our comfort zone, don't we? We can hear God's word, we can say yes, we can say amen, but it's so hard for us to just move out of our comfort zone and just do what God says.

[25 : 59] God's word into God. And so I would like us to first of all pray that God will help us to do that. All three steps, but especially the third and final one. And then as we pray, we need to act on what we've prayed about, because that's what God wants us to do.

So we'll start tonight, we'll pray, and I'll let God help you to do the rest. Let's pray. Father, we thank you that you're speaking God, and in your Son, you've spoken your final word.

We thank you for Jesus, that he's come to speak to us and then to lay down his life for us so that by his spirit, we're able to do and put into practice what you teach us and tell us to do.

Father, we confess that often we're good at hearing, not so good at doing. Help us not to be lazy. Help us not to be discouraged or to lose heart.

Help us even when we fail the first time, to do it again. Help us to keep hearing and then putting it in practice. And we ask that by your spirit then, you will shape us and you will bring forth from us the good fruit that you've promised.

[27 : 15] And then at the very last day, we will remain standing because we have this sturdy house of faith, faith in Jesus. We pray this in Jesus name. Amen. Amen.