

Matthew 12:33-37

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[0 : 00] No, my name is Dave, I'm one of Shoreline's pastors, and I get to open up Matthew chapters! 12 beginning in verse 33 with you this morning. If you don't have a Bible, I'd encourage you to grab one on the back table. I'm really excited about this passage. I'm really excited about this sermon. I might fall completely on my face. We'll see how it goes. The first 10 amendments in the United States Constitution protect our civil liberties as individuals. They're called the Bill of Rights, the right to free speech, freedom of religion, to not be subjected to unreasonable searches. And the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution, Rob is going to be flashing up here, we're not going to read the whole thing. There's one section of it that says that no person shall be compelled in any criminal case to be a witness against himself. This is the provision against self-incrimination.

And that's what you're hearing every time on Law and Order someone says, I plead the fifth. Now, I hope that you will never have to sit in the dock and plead the fifth yourself, but I am quite certain that one day you will stand before a judge. And on that day, you won't have the option of pleading the fifth. Don't take my word for it. Let Jesus tell you.

Matthew 12, 33. Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad. For the tree is known by its fruit, you brood of vipers. How can you speak good when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. The good person, out of his good treasure, brings forth good. And the evil person, out of his evil treasure, brings forth evil.

I tell you, 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.

[2 : 08] On that day, you will not be able to plead the fifth. The star witness, in your case, will be you.

And you will give an account, a comprehensive account of your whole life, even down to the careless words you speak. All will be made known.

I hope that thought weighs heavily on you. And I hope it drives you to prayer. Let's pray. Lord, will you open your words to us.

Will you, by the power of your spirit, make your son known to us. And Lord, will you conform us to his image. We pray that in his name.

Amen. I'm going to give you a quick overview of how this sermon is going to be structured, and how it's going to work. I was listening to some Beethoven this week. I recognize something about classical music.

[3 : 15] The songs that we hear on the radio, like Pop Top 40 station, that kind of stuff, it's all pretty, like each song is pretty consistent internally. The introduction, the chorus, the verse, the bridge, they all sound pretty much the same, just variations on one theme.

But if you listen to classical music, a single piece of music has several sections or movements to it, and they sound very different.

There's such a huge variety within each piece that each is closer to what you and I probably would call an album than a single song. And this sermon is a bit like that, a classical piece of music.

It has three distinct sections or movements to it. I plan to begin as we opened pretty heavy. I want you to feel the full weight of Christ's words.

This first movement is filled with ominous, uncomfortable minor chords, met by top-down notes of condemnation. And it ought to make us feel uncomfortable.

[4 : 23] That's the point. But every good piece of music has some contrast to it. And so the second movement, the horns and the lighter strings will come out as hopeful notes and then triumphant ones.

The second movement will come as a relief. There is a wonderful comfort in this passage if we will have the eyes to see it. And at its end, this piece of music will transition most unexpectedly. The triumph leads us into action. That is, we are going to be given a challenge, marching orders. There's something that we must do. There is something we must become.

So that's how I hope this strikes you. Condemnation, then comfort, then challenge. This week I consulted a composer who told me that this structure most closely resembles not a symphony, not a concerto, but a sonata.

And so since Christ's analogy speaks of fruit trees, let us call it the sonata in the orchard. So, cue the first movement.

[5 : 38] Dark tones of the strings, deep rumbling drumbeats, foreboding chords meant to set you ill at ease. Jesus begins his discussion with an analogy.

Verse 33, either make the tree good and its fruit good or make the tree bad and its fruit bad. For the tree is known by its fruit. What does that mean? Well, he explains immediately, verse 34.

Out of the abundance or the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks. And so the tree's fruit represents our speech. And where do our words come from? The tree itself.

Our person, our hearts, our souls, our inmost being. That's the tree that supplies the sap for the branches to produce the fruit of our words and our deeds.

In other words, our words and deeds aren't caused by something outside of us. Certainly, we respond to circumstance, but our words and deeds come from within.

[6 : 44] Fruit comes from a fruit tree. It doesn't get hung there. And Jesus tells us that there will come a day, the day of judgment, when the Lord will examine each of us individually as a vine dresser would examine his vineyard or orchard.

Now, where once the tones of this sonata were ominous and foreboding, a dreadful note here breaks that tension. The Lord will set his eyes like a flame of fire squarely on you.

On that day, you will see him on his throne. And his eyes, before which nothing is hidden, will see you down to the marrow.

All of you. How will you feel when you are laid bare? Isaiah was a very holy prophet by human standards, and he was brought into the Lord's throne room in a vision.

And here is how he felt. He said, And how did Isaiah, a holier man than you or I, react to that?

[8 : 11] He said, Every person who has ever lived will stand before that throne.

And Jesus says they will give an account. There will be no hiding. There will be no postponement. There will be no petitions or motions or amicus briefs. It will be you and the king.

The king before whom even the most holy men say, Woe is me. I am lost. That's the first dreadful note of this opening movement.

You will stand alone before the king. And the judge sitting on his throne. His eyes will be set on you. His gaze will penetrate into the deep waters of your heart, and all will be laid bare.

And the second note, The king doesn't play it. The second note will be played by you. There will be no pleading the fifth.

[9 : 34] Your words, my words, are the notes, are the score. Your words, my words, will be brought out and played before the king.

What tune will they play? Not just the words that you've polished that speak in front of people. Not just the words you speak when everything's going your way.

Not just the words you speak among nice church people. What melody will your words make? The words behind closed doors.

Gossip shared among nice church people. The words muttered under your breath. The words you weren't able to think twice about and just came straight from the heart.

The words you write on social media. What melody will your words sing? What melody do they sing? And then the judge will render a verdict on the basis of our fruit, our words, that either we are good trees or bad.

[10 : 49] What will your own testimony say of you? First, what will the topics you discuss say about you?

Now, I'm not condemning joking and fun and talking about work and the things that you have to do each day. One of my favorite quotes about Jesus comes from Leon Morris, and he said, Jesus' whole ministry was a protest against the killjoy attitude of the Pharisees.

He enjoyed life and must have laughed often. Right? I'm not saying that we need to become monks and only speak of religious things, but are the things of the world the only notes your song will play? Will it be a thin and hollow song composed of only two or three notes? That's an empty sonata. I think we will be judged for the notes we ought to play and don't.

How much of your speech had to do with things that are commanded and encouraged in Scripture? How much was praise on your lips, not just in church, but in your life?

[12 : 05] How many words built up the saints around you? How much of it was being slow to speak? How much of it was evangelism? How much was prayer?

What kind of music will your words make on that day? If all we do is, you know, kind of stamp out the foul speech, you know, we know we need to behave, but don't do any of the many commands to build up as fits the occasion may give grace to those who hear.

How empty will that sonata be? How often will we hear the notes of Christ, His church, praise, encouragement, comfort, and how often will we hear the notes of self?

Do, re, mi. Whether it's prideful notes or shameful ones, whether it's materialistic chords or hedonistic, and I don't just want to ask which notes you played, but also how did you play them? With what tone? How did you season your speech? How you choose to say it communicates just as much as the words you choose. Every passive-aggressive person knows this.

[13 : 20] With bright, beautiful notes, with love, truth, thoughtfulness, and wisdom, or with sour notes filled with envy, judgment, and anger. Now, you might be saying here, isn't God cheap?

You know, shouldn't God judge us on our deeds, not our words? Well, it's certainly true that from the overflow of our hearts we also do or act. Well, the Scriptures also say our works will be judged. But here, Jesus focuses on our words. And perhaps because talk is cheap, they can reveal even more than our actions.

It doesn't cost us anything to say words, so we can show our hearts more readily, much more easily. Our words can relay our real intentions even when we aren't able to act on them, and it's the thought that counts.

Words muttered under our breath reveal more about our character than the actions we do while we're muttering.

[14 : 25] Every parent knows this. We often act against our desires, right? Due to our obligations or social pressures or whatever.

But we can still register our opposition, our true heart, on the matter with our words. Perhaps our words are more revealing because they're cheap.

And many times our words can't really be separated from our actions, right? Making a promise is an act that consists of words. And we will be judged on the promises we make and do not keep by the ones we make without the intention of keeping.

And those words will condemn us. All our lives, small and large, are actions, and they consist in words. Again, making excuses is an act that consists in words.

And it's normally connected to our past action or inaction. We make allowances for our sin. We seek to justify it. How grotesque are those words?

[15 : 29] Those notes. Twisting the truth. Accusing God of being wrong while we call evil good. And even when we speak words that we regret.

Words that surprise us. Words that we say, oh, we don't mean that. Perhaps that reveals more about us than we want to admit. Let's say you're in an argument.

And you say something awful. Something that you truly don't believe. Something you don't even agree with. Perhaps you tell a loved one, I hate you. It's false.

And you both know it. Right? Now, you can apologize and say, I didn't mean that. And that's true. But what does it reveal? Even though you don't hate them and didn't when you said it, you wanted them to hear it.

What note does that play? Maybe you don't mean it even in the moment, but you'd like them to feel as if you did.

[16 : 35] Maybe you want them to feel condemnation and the words are just a tool. That's very revealing. Maybe you say it instead of something you'd rather say or do that's even worse.

And that's revealing. Now, is every word, every fruit from every tree always bad? Of course not. Christians and non-Christians alike do and say genuinely loving things all the time.

But if we're honest, our words, especially the ones spoken or thought in secret, are far darker than we would like anyone to know.

Mine are. And I guarantee yours are. And second, Jesus tells us that we bring out our words from what our hearts treasure.

If you bring out evil notes, it means that you treasure evil. It's not just that we do and say it. It's that we love it, which is darker still.

[17 : 51] Think back to Isaiah's vision of the throne room and the sight of God's awesome holiness. Could you imagine playing even one evil note to that king?

A single unrighteous note condemns us in the face of his furious holiness. And that becomes the third and last dreadful note of the first movement.

The verdict. The final note is a note of condemnation. It is the sound of the orchard's trees being uprooted, torn asunder, and cast into the fire.

John the Baptist already played this note, sounding the alarm in chapter 3. Even now, he said, the axe is laid to the root of the trees.

Every tree, therefore, that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Hell is real. It is terrible.

[18 : 57] Terrible beyond imagining. And whether you feel like it or not today. On that day, when you stand before that king, in glory you have not conceived.

You, like Isaiah, will say, I am undone. Remember, in Isaiah's vision, it's Isaiah chapter 6, if you want to go read it.

The Lord doesn't even say anything. Confronted with God's unspeakable holiness, Isaiah condemns himself.

Which means that we will agree that the fire is our just reward. Our words will sing the song of our lives, and it will be met by the chorus of God's just judgment.

And like Isaiah, our voices will join and sing the note of condemnation against ourselves.

[20 : 17] So ends the first haunting movement of the Sonata in the Orchard. It is called Condemnation. And for those who are apart from Christ, the song ends here.

But as we began the Sonata, I told you that the second movement was named Comfort. What I didn't tell you is that the hopeful note, the comforting note on which the second movement is built, has already been played.

It appears in the very first line. In verse 33, a single note of hope rang out. Look with me and see if you can spot it. In verse 33, Jesus says, Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad.

For the tree is known by its fruit. Do you see hope in there? Do you hear a faint note of expectation? See a ray of light? Perhaps not right away.

But let's coax it out. That solitary note will bloom into a hopeful chord and become the bright, beautiful second movement. The hopeful word, the encouraging note, is the word make.

[21 : 40] Why is that so hopeful? Because it means that change is possible. There is a way out.

We can avoid the terrible judgment, the final ruin of the first movement's condemnation. The fruit shows that there are no good trees.

The notes our words play demonstrate there are no acceptable songs, but maybe there is a way to be made good. Cue a soft flourish of the flutes.

That indicates hope. There are soft notes because this is still a fragile hope, but we see a ray of light. This song is not over yet. Now, you might be wondering, how can a bad tree make itself good? That's a question the Scriptures have asked over and over in many different ways. Jeremiah 13 says, Can a leopard change his spots? No, of course not.

[22 : 42] A pine tree will never become an oak. A leopard can never turn itself into a lion. Bad trees cannot make themselves good. That's not a capacity they have.

And it's not one we have. We can try to turn over a new leaf. We can try harder next time. But that's only working on the fruit. It doesn't change the tree at all.

That's the problem of the Pharisees. They did try harder. But Jesus still calls them whitewashed tombs. Externally, respectable, but internally.

Foul. This isn't a job we can do. And not only that, even if we could, we still have a crop of fruit, our whole life's harvest behind us.

Years and decades of sad songs played to the king. If we can't change our heart in the present, how much more powerless are we to change the past? So, if we can't change ourselves, and if we can't change our past, how is the word make a hopeful note?

[23 : 57] If we listen carefully to it, we will note that it is a descending scale. Why? There is only one good tree, and he came down to us.

His name is Jesus, the one good tree. And he offers something incredible. Two things, really. Two truths, each with a scriptural metaphor.

The first is union with Christ, for which the scriptures use the metaphor in grafting, one tree into another. And the second is regeneration, or new birth, for which the scriptures use the metaphor of being made new, or being tied to the vine.

And it's this idea of union with Christ, the ingrafting. That's the hope and the triumph of the second movement. And it will be the regeneration and new birth that will become the third movement.

So, Jesus offers us this idea, union with himself, that idea is all over Paul's letters with the repeated refrain, in Christ. Christians are in Christ.

[25 : 09] We are blessed in Christ. We are forgiven in Christ. And what we mean by union with Christ is simply this. When the Lord makes us aware of our desperate, sinful state, and beckons us to call to him for mercy, and we do just that by faith, call on the name of the Lord, he takes bad trees like us and ingrafts them into his branches.

We don't make ourselves acceptable in the judgment he does because he is the one good tree, because he is able, and because he is graciously willing to do it.

And when he ingrafts us, two things happen. First, when the notes of God's just wrath against our evil fruit, our evil song, descend on us.

And again, those are notes that we, along with Isaiah, agree with. The weight of that cord does not fall on us, the cord of judgment, because we stand united to Christ.

The wave of justice crashes and breaks on his shoulders, not our heads. That is the story of the cross. And because he, the Son of God, the Son of Man, can in his person bear the force of that blow, you and I emerge unscathed.

[26 : 41] And once those notes of condemnation are extinguished forever, he takes the harsh tune our words once plays, once played, and intermingles his pure melody.

Our part fades away, and it is overshadowed as his song of triumph crescendos. All that's left is the one beautiful song of the Savior.

The timid, hopeful note now gives way to resounding chorus of triumph. Crown him with many crowns, the Lamb upon his throne. Hark how the heavenly anthem drowns all music but its own. So when we stand before that throne, and the Lord demands we give account, we will be laid bare. Knowing and agreeing that all we deserve is wrath.

But another song will rise, overshadowing our song, extinguishing our foul notes. And we will point to Christ, and with a glad shout, we will say, I was a rotten tree in an unrighteous orchard bearing rotten evil fruit.

[27 : 58] But the one good tree took me to himself, grafted me into his branches, and now his fruit and song are mine. And we will be judged on the basis of his fruit, his song, not our own.

Oh, the sweet melody of Christ's good works overshadowing our own. But his song doesn't simply crank up the volume and drown ours out.

Jesus doesn't say, you know, keep going, however you're living your life, keep speaking evil, I'll drown it all out in the end.

That's not how it works. May it never be. He changes us. His song changes us, which is why, in the third movement, his song becomes our own. And here's where the sonata changes once more to challenge us.

Christ's melody shifts. First, the change is subtle, and then it becomes dramatic. It changes subtly because while it's definitely still his melody, the instrumentation has changed.

[29 : 10] Our voices begin to sing the tune with him. In the first movement, our voices joined in the song of condemnation. Woe is me, I am undone, I am condemned.

But now they join the song that saved us. And it changes more drastically because it doesn't stand still.

There's emotion and movement to it. There's a new beat and purpose in Christ's song. It's the kind of music you react to physically begins to pattern our steps. It becomes a march, which I don't think

is proper sonata form, but if to save us, Jesus engrafted us into his branches, what happens to a tree that has been grafted into another?

The sap of the main tree flows into and animates the other. That's what Scripture calls regeneration, new birth. And here's how Jesus put it in John 15.

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine dresser. For every branch in me that does not bear fruit, he takes away. And every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes that, that it may bear more fruit.

[30 : 26] What he's saying is that if there is new birth, there will be new life. If we have been grafted in, we will produce new fruit. If his song becomes our song, we will march to his beat more and more.

Sinclair Ferguson said, there is no such thing as a justified person who is not also a sanctified one. And that's basically what the whole book of 1 John is about. John says, by this we may know that we are in Christ.

Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he also walked. And that has been Christ's warning, has it not?

In chapter 7, he said, beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes or figs from thistles?

So every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. So Jesus definitely wants us to see in that first movement our need for salvation.

[31 : 35] And then in the second, he offers us his salvation. And finally, we can't read this passage and think that he doesn't want to change us, right? No honest reading of this passage could just leave it at, you know, oh, and he'll save us.

Great. He intends to shape us, our words, our fruit, our song, as we live this new life united to him. And the scriptures are clear.

Christians will still have to give an account for our words and deeds on that last day. Yes, we will be covered in Christ and his righteousness, but the new fruit of our march with Christ will still be assessed, not for a guilty, innocent verdict.

That was taken care of in the second movement, but there will still be an accounting not to condemn us, but in God's grace to reward us. This life we lead, it matters.

This life counts. The pastors and elders of the church, Hebrews 13 tells us, will give an account to God for the church members entrusted to us.

[32 : 45] James says that teachers will be judged more strictly. And in 1 Corinthians 3, we understand that all Christians will have their deeds pass through fire where they will be judged by God.

There will be still for Christians an accounting of our words and deeds, this time not for a verdict, but for a reward. Now, we aren't given great detail of what that looks like, but Jesus has already hinted at it in chapters 5 and 6 and 10 when He spoke of rewards for suffering or working for His kingdom. On top of salvation, on top of being united to Christ forever, the Lord also will give rewards for our faithfulness on that day. These rewards are nothing that we have earned.

They are simply gifts of grace. The Lord gives us commands and we owe Him obedience to them just because He's God. But He also chooses to reward us for our faithfulness.

It is purely an act of grace. So trust in the Savior as you are united to Him. Let your song not be a hollow three-note tune and look forward to gifts of grace and march onward with our Savior.

[34 : 03] The great gift is this, we will be with Him. And the march is actually walking with Him. Will you do it? Will you walk with Him because it's beautiful? Marching with the Savior means we will receive rewards of grace in the judgment.

Marching in step with the Savior means we will be on the blessed path. Right? He doesn't give us arbitrary commands. They're for our own good. But every command He gives us is a blessing. Right? The command against adultery is to preserve good marriages. The command against, the command is to build one another up for, well, those are for our own good.

If you're interested in human flourishing, be interested in the word of life. Marching in step with the Savior means we're with Him. Marching in step with the Savior means we're relying on Him.

And that's why He said, I am the true vine. Abide in me and I will abide in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.

[35 : 10] Will you hear the sonata in the orchard? Will you feel the true weight of the first movement? Condemnation.

One that we will sing ourselves. against ourselves. And then will you rejoice in the triumph of the second movement, saved by a descending scale that came down to us and stood in our place.

And will you be united to the one good tree and march to the beat of His song? Let's pray. Amen. Amen.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.