

March 12, 2023

Reframe: Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?

Luke 6:43-49

Jeff Marian

Last month I went to the doctor for my annual physical. I didn't want to go. I like my doctor, but I knew what she was going to say. And I was right. I got on the scale and when she saw my weight she said, "Didn't I tell you to lose some weight when you were here last year? You're up four pounds." Then she took my blood pressure, and because my weight is up, so is my blood pressure. She didn't say anything. She didn't have to. She just gave me the "I told you so" look.

And then she looked at my blood work. And because my weight is up, so is my cholesterol. And that's when she took her glasses off and gave me the "You're not getting any younger and you need to do better" lecture. I was so depressed after that appointment I went to the coffee shop and had an apple fritter and a medium light roast with heavy whipping cream.

Like I said. I didn't really want to go to the doctor this year. I know she wants the best for me. I want the best for me too. But for reasons I don't fully understand, I don't always do what I know is best for me. Can you relate?

Reminds me of something that St. Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans. He said,
"I want to do what is right, but I can't. I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway....I have discovered this principle of life—that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong."

That's the reality of life. And it's a reality that Jesus addresses in today's scripture reading. These verses from Luke's Gospel are the conclusion of Jesus' great Sermon on the Plain. Let's listen,
"A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can't produce good fruit. A tree is identified by its fruit. Figs are never gathered from thornbushes, and grapes are not picked from bramble bushes. A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart. What you say flows from what is in your

heart. "So why do you keep calling me 'Lord, Lord!' when you don't do what I say? I will show you what it's like when someone comes to me, listens to my teaching, and then follows it. It is like a person building a house who digs deep and lays the foundation on solid rock. When the floodwaters rise and break against that house, it stands firm because it is well built. But anyone who hears and doesn't obey is like a person who builds a house right on the ground, without a foundation. When the floods sweep down against that house, it will collapse into a heap of ruins."

This is the word of God for the people of God.
Thanks be to God.

Truth be told, I like these words of Jesus almost as much as I like going to the doctor! And for pretty much the same reason. My doctor looks at certain indicators...like my weight, blood pressure and cholesterol...as a way to measure my health or to point to potential dangers. And it's almost always bad news. And that's exactly what Jesus is doing here. But Jesus is focused on our spiritual health. We can think about these verses as a spiritual checkup.

Jesus begins with a metaphor about trees. He says that you can tell a good tree from a bad tree by the fruit that it bears. In the same way, Jesus says, you can tell a good person from an evil person by the words that flow from their heart. In other words, my words are an indicator of my heart, my spiritual health. All of which raises the question, "If I look at the words I speak, am I a good person with a good heart, or an evil person with an evil heart?" And the answer, of course, is "Yeah".

In the span of an hour, I can use my words to comfort and encourage, and to gossip and slander. And I do. And so do you. That's our nature. Brilliant and beautiful one moment; callous and cruel the next. Or, as Martin Luther liked to put it, we are at the same time both sinner and saint. And then, as if to rub our noses in it all, Jesus talks about not just listening to his teaching, but putting it into practice. You know, loving our enemies, doing good to those who hate us, giving generously to those who don't deserve it, forgiving those who offend us. Seriously Jesus? Most days it's hard enough to love the people we actually like. Sheesh!

Now, it's important to read Jesus' words carefully here. This is not about whether Jesus loves us or forgives us. It isn't about whether we're saved or not. He's simply saying that our lives will be stronger and healthier if we obey Him, if we follow His commands. Just like my doctor would say that my life would be stronger and healthier if I obeyed her advice. But here's the difference – and this is important. My doctor expects that I can obey her advice. Jesus knows I can't obey all of His advice. That's right. Jesus knows that not all our words are "good fruit". And Jesus knows that we are, by nature, incapable of fulfilling all His commands. And He knows that because He knows that we are sinners. Which, of course, raises the question, "Why give us commands that we can't possibly fulfill?" So glad you asked. Let me offer two reasons.

First, to use good, Lutheran language, the law drives us to grace. That is to say, when we come face-to-face with our inability to obey Jesus commands, we realize how desperately we need the Spirit of God to be active in our lives. We realize that God's love and forgiveness are gifts and not something that we could ever earn. All of which allows us to remain humble. St. Paul put it this way in his letter to the Ephesians, *"God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it."* And not only do we have no room for bragging; we have no right to judge others when they fall short.

The second reason that Jesus gives us these commands is because they chart the pathway to living well. Even though we can't fulfill Jesus' commands perfectly, that doesn't mean we don't try with all the grace that God provides. Loving our neighbor, working for justice and peace, practicing generosity, forgiving others freely...all of these things serve as a solid foundation upon which we build our lives. And when we fail to do these things...and we will...we confess it, recommit to doing better, and press on, confident in the Spirit's power and presence in our lives.

So, how about giving yourself a little spiritual checkup this week. Pay attention to the words you speak this week. Be honest...what do they say

about the health of your heart? And how about your actions? How do they align with Jesus' commands as best you understand them? I was driving home a few days ago and passed by the home of someone who's been less-than-kind to me. And before I knew it my mind was spinning with thoughts of retaliation and revenge. Suddenly I found myself lost in a fantasy of confrontation in which my words did all the cutting and wounding. When I finally came to myself I realized that high cholesterol isn't the only heart-health issue I need to tend to.

Whatever is you find amiss, confess it, know that you're forgiven, and ask the Holy Spirit to continue to be at work in your, shaping your heart and your life more and more into the likeness of Christ.

Since my doctor's visit, I've lost eight pounds. If I keep it up maybe next year I'll see my doctor smile instead of scowl. You see, when it comes to dealing with my doctor, IF I do what I'm supposed to, THEN she'll be pleased with me and pleased *for* me.

How different it is with Jesus. Life with Jesus isn't IF I do this THEN Jesus will do that. Instead, life with Jesus is BECAUSE I'm forgiven, loved and cherished, THEREFORE I can try, and fail, and try again. And that, my friends, is Good News.

I'd like to close with a meditative prayer, using the words of Psalm 139. These words set our intention for the week to come as we reflect on Jesus' words. So, let me invite you to close your eyes. Take a few slow, deep breaths, and now allow these words to fill you up.

Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.

See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.

Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.

See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.

Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.

See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.

Amen.