

The Pharisees spent their lives studying the old laws. They had compiled libraries filled with stacks of scrolls, specifying all of the legal details of what was required for someone to live a godly life. And, they detailed the many different penalties that had to be paid when one of those details was not followed. When Jesus spoke to people using parables, the simple little stories that stuck in his listener's minds and made God's expectations appear to be so very clear, the Pharisees were horrified. How could he dare take the formal and complex details of the laws of God, and turn them into picture stories like the ones you tell the children at bedtime? It was nothing less than blasphemy, and the man could not be allowed to continue corrupting the minds of the people. (Had they remembered there was an ancient Hebraic tradition of picture stories).

But instead of retelling the people words they would find in the old scrolls of Leviticus, or Numbers, those old rules and laws the Pharisees held so highly, Jesus told them about two men walking down the road, one leading the other by the hand. He told them that the man being led by the hand was blind. Then he told them that the man who was leading him was also blind. They immediately saw it. They understood. How helpful was it for a blind man to be led around by another blind man? Where would they go? What would they run into? They saw it happening as clear as day.

They understood.

Jesus asked them if any of them had ever known someone who had got a piece of sawdust caught in their eye and they tried to help them get it out. Most of the group nodded their heads. He asked them how easy it would be to help take that speck out of that person's eye if they had a two by four sticking out of their own eye? In my imagination, some of them winced when they saw that image in their mind, partly because of the idea of having a board in their eye, and partly because they understood what he meant and it hit a bit close to home.

They understood.

And he asked them how many of them had grown fruit trees. Many of them nodded. He asked if they had ever ended up with a bad tree that bore fruit that was not good enough to eat. They nodded again. Then he asked them if, every year, they went back to those bad trees expecting to pick good fruit from it? They laughed. They could see the trees. 'Of course not,' they said, 'we would have cut those trees down and burned them.'

They understood.

Today's passage says that after Jesus told the people these stories, he then took a moment to go back and explain what they meant. But my guess is that they already understood. The images they held in their minds were clear.

Build your life on a solid foundation. Follow the one who knows where you need to go and is able to lead you there. Clean up your own life before you attempt to help others with theirs. Be like the tree that produces good fruit.

The stacks of scrolls filled with details and penalties were all summed-up in the collection of images floating in the minds of those people on the hillside. But instead of needing a Pharisee to interpret them, they were perfectly clear.

Parables are a wonderful thing. Sometimes I wonder what kind of parable Jesus might tell if he was standing in front of us on a hillside today.

Maybe he would tell us about the person that has the faulty GPS system in their car that keeps malfunctioning. Somehow it either keeps losing its signal or just gets confused and ends up taking them places they hadn't planned on visiting. Many of us here would nod our heads, just like some already have. Maybe you have ended up in the middle of a field, or at a dead-end next to a lake, or got to your destination and learned that you drove an extra 37 miles because your GPS didn't seem to know about that short-cut everyone always takes. We understand about following things that don't always know the best way to get where we need to be.

Maybe Jesus would say something the techie people would relate to. Maybe he would tell us about the person who relies on the algorithm her computer uses to give her the information she needs to do the work she needs to do but there is a bug somewhere in the code of that algorithm. And she knows about the bug but she still continues to rely on and trust what that little program decides she needs to know and does not need to know. Those here who understand things like algorithms might be shaking their heads because they understand.

It seems that Jesus liked telling parables, and he told many of them. And when I come across those times he does, I often wonder why he does it. Why does he tell the parables he tells, and why now? As I think about today's collection of picture-stories, I keep coming back to two main reasons I think Jesus may have had in his mind. Maybe you see them too.

Firstly I think Jesus was reminding those people that we have to remember that as one of his followers, we need to build a strong foundation and follow those who can take us where we need to go, and produce good fruit, and make sure we aren't doing things that stick out like a two-by-four, that make it clear we are not actually who we say we are. The truth is that while you will never know who most of them were, as you live your life, you are going to teach many other people how to live their own lives. Jesus is reminding us to remember that truth.

But second, I think Jesus is also telling us that we need to pay attention to who we may be following and be sure of where they are leading us. Pay attention to whatever signals or algorithms we are using to help guide us and make our choices as we are living our lives. As we all know, we live in a day when algorithms have tremendous power. They watch us constantly. They watch what we do, where we go, what we purchase, how much we sleep, what we eat, what we throw away, and what we write and say. Then they use their formulas to make decisions for us about what to buy, when to go to bed, who to talk to, what news to read, all intended, we are assured, to save us time and improve our lives.

I have nothing in principle against algorithms and am not suggesting they are something bad. But I am simply hearing Jesus reminding us to remember that a disciple of Jesus Christ is more than a collection of results from a complex algorithm. Being a disciple is not a complex thing. It comes down to a very simple and clear choice and does not require a great deal of tracking or processing.

There's a proverbial saying that you know a tree by its fruit. Likewise a person will produce good or bad fruit depending on what is sown in the heart. As it says in the gospel: "The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks." It is said "Sow an act and you reap a habit. Sow a habit and you reap a character. Sow a character and you reap a destiny."

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