

~Other Speakers G-L: Harry Ironside:

"When thou shalt besiege a city a long time, in making war against it to take it, thou shalt not destroy the trees thereof by forcing an axe against them: for thou mayest eat of them, and thou shalt not cut them down (for the tree of the field is man's life) to employ them in the siege: Only the trees which thou knowest that they be not trees for meat, thou shalt destroy and cut them down; and thou shalt build bulwarks against the city that maketh war with thee, until it be subdued." (Deut. 20:19,20)

H.A. Ironside Many are the salutary lessons which the Holy Spirit has put before us by means of the instruction given to Israel. We are familiar with the fact that the things which happened unto them were for types, and written for our learning. And such is the passage quoted above. Just as, when God commanded Israel, saying, "Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn," He had His own servants in mind (as so clearly shown us by the Apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 9:9-14), so here, may we not see pictured by the "trees good for food," these same servants in another aspect, and made the objects of the Lord's particular care?

The people of Israel were admonished against all recklessness and waste in felling standing timber when they besieged the cities of the land. They were careful to ascertain the character of each particular tree before venturing to lift an ax against it. All fruit-trees were to be spared, because they were part of God's gracious provision for ministering food to His people.

And may we not say that God would have us make the same distinction today? There are trees, to the very roots of which the ax must be laid; trees that are either mere cumberers of the ground, or producing only that which is noxious and poisonous. Such are the present-day advocates of human righteousness as a basis of acceptance with God, or the propagators of wicked teachings that deny the very foundations of the faith. Soldiers of the Lord of Hosts may be assured of His approval when they use the ax against these "exposing their fallacies." "Every plant," said the Lord Jesus, "that My heavenly Father hath not planted shall be rooted up." To fearlessly oppose such evil teachers and denounce their doctrines and practices, is in accord with the spirit of the Lord Jesus and of His apostles. None reproved hypocritical pretensions more scathingly than Christ Himself. No modern controversialist, with any claim to piety, would be likely to use stronger words than those of John the Baptist when he sternly arraigned the "generation of vipers" of his day. Tremendously telling are the denunciations of the Apostle Paul, when necessity compelled him to meet the errors of false teachers troubling the early Church. John, Peter and Jude hesitated not to decry the antichrists, the purveyors of damnable heresies, and the ungodly men "turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ" (Jude 1:4), who were creeping in among the saints, and seeking to overthrow their most holy faith.

But, be it noted, those so solemnly accused and vigorously combated, were not erring saints, or brethren with mistaken views, but they were relentless "enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly ... who mind earthly things" (Phil. 3:18,19). And wherever such are found today, and manifestly proven to be such, they should be dealt with in the same way.

But there is grave danger lest the ax be lifted up against another class altogether "the fruit-bearing trees" whom the Lord has forbidden our judging or condemning. Every fruit-tree is the object of His tender solicitude. Such are truly born of the Spirit, and genuine lovers of our Lord Jesus Christ. They may at times, in their zeal for God or their earnest passion for the souls of lost men, over-step bounds and use methods of which their more conservative or better-instructed brethren disapprove, but they are the Lord's servants, who has said, "Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth" (Rom. 14:4).

The spirit of criticism may lead to very unhappy results, and oftentimes one is in danger of finding himself arrayed against men and movements which God is owning and blessing. The utmost care is required to distinguish things that differ "that what is of God and what is of Satan may not come into the same sweeping condemnation. And our Lord Himself has given us the rule whereby we may make this distinction. He has said, "By their fruits ye shall know them" (Matt. 7:20). A corrupt tree produces corrupt fruit, whereas a good tree brings forth good fruit. In either case the fruit may not always be the same in quantity or quality, but it will be either deleterious or "good for food." Because healthful fruit is sometimes small, or not up to the standard, one does not necessarily chop down the tree, but rather, wisely uses the pruning-knife and purges it that it may bring forth more and better fruit.

And this pruning process is one that all God's fruit-trees have at times to undergo; and often He uses one servant to correct and help another; but this is accomplished far better by a kindly personal admonition, or a

brotherly effort to instruct, than by unkind criticism and a hard judging spirit. A beautiful example of this gracious care for one of God's fruit-trees is given us in the book of Acts, in the case of Apollos, whose earnestness and love for the Scriptures appealed to the hearts of Priscilla and Aquila, though he was not at all up to the standard of New Testament truth. He had not got beyond the baptism of John. But this godly couple, instead of exposing his ignorance to others, or roundly denouncing him as a legalist without true gospel light, take him into their home, and there in true Christian love expound unto him the way of God more perfectly. What precious and abiding fruit was the result!

It is to be regretted that the same gracious spirit does not always characterize us when we meet with, or hear of, those who are manifesting similar devotedness, while ignorant of much that we may value. How senseless the folly that leads us oftentimes to array ourselves against such servants of Christ, in place of manifesting a godly concern for them. We thoughtlessly lift our axes against God's fruit-trees, and would destroy where we might save. Many a one who is ignorant of much precious truth, is nevertheless bearing fruit in the salvation of souls and the refreshment of the spirits of believers; while, on the other hand, one may have a very clear intellectual grasp of divine principles and understand much that is called high truth, who produces very little of this same blessed fruit.

Oh, beloved brethren, let us keep our axes sharp for the deadly upas trees of sin and fundamental error that abound on every side; but shall we not seek grace from God that we may have spiritual discernment to refrain from damaging in any way trees that are good for food?

Satan and his emissaries can be depended upon to bestow enough abuse on real Christians and true servants of the Lord Jesus, without their fellow-servants joining in the same unworthy business. Let us not forget the words already quoted, "Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? To his own master he standeth or falleth." And the Holy Spirit goes on to say, "Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand" (Rom. 14:4).