

Introduction

I like using a straw whenever I eat out. It gives me a little more confidence I won't get a disease from the last person who used the glass. But have you noticed that plastic straws are getting a bad rap these days? Straws are a small part of a major concern called plastic pollution. Plastic takes hundreds of years to decompose. And straws are particularly problematic. Because of their size, sorting machines cannot separate them out and they end up in landfills. But straws are not the only plastic problem. As a whole, plastics that are not recycled contribute to a real mess, especially in the oceans. I watched a video this week of a plastic straw being pulled out of the nostril of a sea turtle. It seems plastic pollution is a real misfortune. Pollution is also at the center of our text this morning. Jesus is carefully instructing the crowds and his disciples about the ultimate source of the worst of all types of pollution.

[Read Text; Pray]

I would like for you to make a mental list of your 3 biggest problems. We all have problems. Every day each of us deal with a HOST of problems. Anyway, make this mental list, and I will come back to it before we close. If we were to go around the room sharing just these three concerns, I strongly doubt any of us would be talking about pollution. But we should. I am not talking about air pollution or noise pollution or water pollution. No, there is a pollution far more insidious than any of those. And it is this pollution with which our text is greatly concerned. Jesus meticulously and vividly and compellingly explains the nature of human contamination. And he demonstrates that this polluted uncleanness is a huge problem for you and for me. In fact you could say that this contamination is your biggest problem. I want to show you four aspects of your biggest problem this morning.

I. The GRAVITY of Your Biggest Problem

A. When I speak of the gravity of the problem, I mean to say that it is weighty. It is important. It is significant. You cannot afford to miss the exigency of this problem.

B. Jesus conducts himself in such a way as to communicate this exigency to the people standing around. Now get this. These big-wigs have come from Jerusalem, and everyone knows it. And they have come in the midst of the most glorious demonstrations that Jesus has come from God. He has fed 20-something thousand. He has walked on the water, and people from all over the district have been healed by simply touching the tassel of his garment. And here they are. Corporate headquarters of Judaism has dispatched its finest and best to seek to discredit Jesus. And the best they can come up with is that his disciples ate without washing their hands according to an unbiblical tradition.

So Jesus denounces their worship as vain because they hold their man-made traditions over the law of God. Then look what he does. He calls out to the people. "Hey! Folks! Come here! Come here! I have something incredibly important to tell you! Come here! Hear and understand what I am about to say!" What is Jesus doing? He is expressing the gravity of the matter. If ever they needed to listen, they need to listen today. If ever they applied their hearts to understand, they need to do it today. If ever they were to apply their hearts to think carefully about a matter, they need to listen to what Jesus is about to say. And I would say to each of us, we need to do the same. If Jesus called the people to him and said to them, "Hear and understand," we should not do less as we sink our teeth into this text.

II. The Essence of Your Biggest Problem.

You see the essence of your biggest problem in two places in this text. It appears in what Jesus said to the crowd and then it comes again when he explained it in greater detail and with unequivocal clarity in response to Peter's request.

A. The subject at the center of the debate is defilement. This is your biggest problem—defilement. Synonymous expressions for defilement include pollution, corruption, contamination, profane, blemish, and stain.

The word that Jesus used here actually literally means common or ordinary. It is the Old Testament descriptor of things that were considered unholy, unhallowed, unclean, not set apart. It is a condition of being unfit for the worship of God and unacceptable to him. He is holy, holy, holy. That which is defiled is NOT HOLY. It does not meet the standard. It is polluted, corrupt, profaned, contaminated.

Defilement is the issue at the center of the debate, but the question now being debated is how? HOW are people defiled? Basically, there are two points to Jesus' instruction. It is NOT what goes in but what comes out of your mouth that defiles you.

B. First, it is NOT what goes in. This point is a direct contradiction of what the Pharisees and scribes were teaching. When they pointed their fingers at the disciples of Jesus and asked why they ate without ceremonially washing their hands, their insinuation was that it is what goes in that defiles a person. Their teaching was that eating with un-rinsed hands imparted uncleanness to the food. Therefore, when they were eating that unclean food, they were eating uncleanness or defilement to their being. The result was that they were unclean and unsuited to worship God. But Jesus says, "No. No. No. That is simply untrue. You are not rendered unclean because you eat with un-rinsed hands. Food comes in and goes out. It does not even remain with you. It is expelled. It does not make you unclean. That is NOT your problem."

C. Second, it is not what goes in your mouth but what comes out your mouth that is your problem. Food goes in. Words come out. Words come out your mouth. Actions come out of your life. And it is these that defile. It is not what goes through you but what comes from you that defiles you. Jesus explains that the things you say, and by implication, the things you do that reveal your heart. Jesus explains the things that come out originate within the heart. That is what makes man polluted, corrupt, and repugnant to God.

Jesus is specific. He mentions evil thoughts. The natural man plans and schemes to do evil things. He likes what defies God's law and he dreams and fantasizes of doing it. He relishes revenge and dreams what it might be

like. He plots a strategy to take advantage of others in order to benefit himself. He stores up anger towards those he dislikes. He thinks how he can lie and get away with it, how he can steal and not be caught. He dreams of adulterous selfish fulfillment sexually and relationally. But the natural person not only thinks evil thoughts, he also says and does evil as well. He murders with his tongue as well as with a weapon. He commits adultery and sexual immortality in mind and body. He steals. He cheats. He lies. He speaks evil of people. He slanders them. All of these evil actions, from what one thinks to what one actually does, reside in the heart. So ultimately, it is the evil-filled heart that pollutes a person, not eating with unwashed hands!

These dark things are in the heart of every human being. These are what render him unfit to approach the Lord to enter into his holy place. The love of these evils take the heart of a person far from God. The worship of God is mutilated by love of sin. And this is every human being by nature. This is your biggest problem. It is you. For me, it is me. Every natural person, that is every person in the condition in which they are conceived, is dead in this way. Paul puts it clearly that the natural person is dead in trespasses and sins in which he lives, following the course of the world, following the prince of the power of the air, living in the passions of the flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind and by nature is a child of wrath as everyone else. (Ephesians 2:1-3).

Our biggest problem when it comes to our defilement is not outside us. It is not some contaminant out there. It is not eating food the wrong way. It is not the temptation you encounter. It is not that person out there who knows how to press your buttons. It is not the circumstances in which you find yourself. It is you. The trouble with you is you. And the trouble with me is me. We all have heart trouble. We possess polluted hearts.

III. The Reason People Do Not Recognize Their Biggest Problem.

Clearly, the Pharisees and scribes did not recognize their biggest problem. They promoted a system of traditions that undermined God's word, God's law, for the purpose of selfishness. Their tradition created a loophole that allowed them to disobey God's directive to honor father and mother. We talked about this last week. If they did not want to share their property

they could claim it was "given to God." Then when they wanted to use that same property for their own benefit, they could say it was no longer "given to God." In their system they were God and God was their servant to serve their selfishness. They loved themselves and therefore would never be inclined to admit they were in fact their biggest problem. In their view defilements were all external. They were "out there." If you avoid bringing the defilements into your body, then you are clean. It was a system of pure idolatrous selfishness which promoted feeling good about yourself because all the evil is out there.

Not much has changed, has it? It is not only Jewish scribes and Pharisees who think they are good people. Ninety percent of the people who walk up and down the sidewalk think they are good people as well. It is offensive to the natural heart to conceive that it is unclean in itself. The disciples came to Jesus and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees were OFFENDED when they heard this saying?" Yes, they were offended.

No one wants to believe that they are bad. And so, how dare you suggest otherwise! And in defense of themselves, people concoct a belief that all that is bad in them is not their fault. This maneuver has been used since human sin became a reality. The Lord asked Adam in Garden, "Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" And the man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate. Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." Both of these we hear loud and clear saying, "It is not my fault!" The real cause came from the outside. It is not me. I am not that bad.

Jesus identified the reason why people do not recognize their biggest problem. He explained that one of the proceeds of the defiled heart is false witness. The heart lies. It feeds evil thoughts. And some of the lies it tells are spoken to the person himself. The defiled heart says, "You are a good person!" or, "It's not your fault! The problem is out there! It is good for you to believe in yourself, love yourself, serve yourself; nobody else is going to do that!" And when some high and mighty whippersnapper comes along saying, "the problem is your heart. It is far from God. It itself is defiled and it defiles you," there is but one reaction to have. Be offended!

The reason people do not recognize their biggest problem is that the failure to recognize it is part of the problem. Their defiled heart hates the light. It hates the truth. It does not want to admit it has a problem. It is something else. It is somebody else. It is all out there! Everything in here is good. Out of that very heart comes false witness and the heart believes the lies. It is blind with a willful blindness. It refuses to see the truth because it does not want to see the truth.

IV. The Danger of Not Recognizing Your Biggest Problem.

It is ominous. The Pharisees were held in high esteem by the masses of the Jews. Even Jesus' own disciples seem concerned that Jesus offended them. But Jesus counsels his disciples not to be bothered. Leave them alone. Pay them no attention. They may appear to be powerful. They have a great deal of worldly influence to be sure. But here is their end. Every plant my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. God allows no weeds to remain in his garden. He will extract them, roots and all, without a trace to be left. You do not need to worry about offending people who do not belong to the kingdom.

The Pharisees considered themselves guides of the pitiful blind of the masses. Jesus says that they themselves are in fact blind. Woe to them and to those who follow them. They will both fall into a pit. Farmers were known to dig pits in their fields to collect water for livestock. A field would be a dangerous place for a blind man to wander. Eventually he would fall into one of these. The danger of not recognizing your biggest problem is that you will fall into God's pit. If you are unwilling to admit that your heart is what defiles you, you will never receive the cure God offers for cleansing of the defiled heart. And you will be righteously judged by him.

V. The Implications of Your Biggest Problem.

A. Your biggest problem is your defiled heart. You have not made yourself a sinner because you sin. That happened with Adam, but each of us inherit from him a sinful heart. We sin because we have polluted hearts. And because of this we are incapable of doing anything on our own that is not polluted. By nature we cannot do anything but sin. No matter how nice we might appear, our hearts are completely unfit for God. Combine that with

the fact that God is holy, holy, holy. He is a consuming fire. It is a fearful thing to fall onto the hands of the living God.

The first implication of your biggest problem is that you need a new heart, a cleansed heart, a humble heart. You need a heart that is acceptable to holy God, a clean heart, a pure heart. David rightly prayed, "Create in me a clean heart O God." Paul summed up the good news to Titus this way, God saves not on the basis of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the holy Spirit whom he pours out richly through Jesus Christ, our Savior. Being justified by his grace, we inherit eternal life."

Jesus' instruction in this passage points out that the OT system of cleansing for uncleanness was itself a teaching tool given by God so that people could grasp the uncleanness that pollutes and condemns the heart with all manner of sinful inclinations. And the writer of Hebrews declares that "when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent . . . he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification fo the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God" (Hebrews 9:11-14).

Your biggest problem has been addressed perfectly by Jesus. But to receive his gift you must humble yourself and admit that you are your biggest problem and that Christ alone, by his blood can cleanse and save you. And then simply turn to him and trust Him that the blood that he shed to offer to God for your uncleanness is enough.

B. Now there is a second implication of your biggest problem. And this implication specifically relates to believers and how we live our lives every day. Every person who comes to Christ has a new heart, a cleansed conscience. The Spirit of God comes to live within those who are born again. And Jesus says, "out of their very being will flow rivers of living

water. What a contrast to what comes out of the defiled heart! But a remnant of the defiled heart remains. It is called the flesh, and out of the flesh come the defiling inclinations of the natural heart. As a result there is an inner conflict in the lives of Christ's followers.

Galatians 5:17 says that the desires of the flesh are against the desires of the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to one another to keep you from doing the things you want to do. In Romans 7 the same apostle as wrote Galatians says that he finds himself doing the very thing he hates. He says, "I know that nothing good dwells in me and I find that I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing." The battle is real. It is an inner battle.

What I want you Christ followers to grasp this morning is that even when you have come to saving faith in Christ, you remain your biggest problem. God's will for you is your sanctification. It is for you to abstain from evil and live in godliness, to walk in holiness. And the main thing standing between you and growth in godliness more than anything else is you. You are your biggest problem. And the first step to solving your problems is to correctly identify what they are. The Pharisees were never going to have their biggest problem solved because they have incorrectly identified their problem.

The biggest impediment to your growth in holiness is not what is outside you. It is not your circumstances. The job you have or don't have, the amount of money you make, those testy neighbors, Milwaukee drivers, politics in America—these are not your biggest problems. It is not your relationships either. Your spouse is not your biggest problem. You say, but if you only knew. I know about some difficult situations. But in every single one of them the biggest problem for each person is not the other person, it is them.

Conclusion

At the outset this morning, I asked you to make a mental list of three of the biggest problems in your life. I want you to consider that list now. I imagine that few of you if anyone placed "yourself" on that list. It is because we have this default setting. It derives from that fleshly heart and

it tends to believe that all my problems are out there. If I could change this situation or that person I would be okay. But no, you would not. Because what is inside you is still there. All that the difficult and challenging people and circumstances do is squeeze out of you what is already there. Your biggest problem is you. It is not how someone speaks to you. It is how you talk back. It is not what they did to you; it is what you are doing in return. It is not that thorn in the flesh that you have but whether you are willing to thank God for his good purposes that make use of the thorn.