



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Toxic Thoughts

Mark 7.14-23¹

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A Serious Outbreak²

"Up to 18 August 1,350 people had been reported as having died from the [Ebola] disease in four countries; Liberia 576, Guinea 396, Sierra Leone 374 and Nigeria four."³ The World Health Organization said there were 84 deaths reported between August 14 and 16 (2014).⁴ Because of Dr. Kent Brantly, the Christian medical missionary who contracted the virus, it has captured our attention, as citizens of the U. S. and as Christians.

For the sake of the safety of our population, some have opposed transferring Brantly and his co-worker Nancy Writebol to Atlanta for treatment. Whether or not we agree with them, we understand their concern. There is presently no vaccine or cure for Ebola. Its fatality rate in the current outbreak is about 55%, but can reach 90% ("Ebola crisis"). So we understand the fear that it could threaten us.

But Jesus said there is something that should concern us more, a toxic contagion worse than Ebola or anything like it. It is so common that it is easy to minimize it, but Jesus' teaching is that, if we are serious about following him, we must take it seriously and get a handle on it.

We're Beginning in the Middle

Mark 7.14-23 continues the emphasis on uncleanness begun in verses 1-13. Jesus used the challenge by the Pharisees and scribes to make his point in verses 14-23. They were concerned with defilement (v. 2) from people who came in contact with Gentiles or others tainted by pagan culture. Jesus warned that emphasizing the cleanliness of externals did not ensure pure motives (vv. 6-7) and in fact had led them to elevate their ways above God's commands (vv. 8-9, 13).

But verses 1-13 do not completely show why Jesus' disciples would ask him to explain verses 14-15 (in v. 17). The law of Moses had commanded steps to take to ensure ritual cleanliness (Lev 11.1-47). The Pharisees aimed to delineate more specifics to keep people from inadvertently violating Moses' law.

They could point to their recent history to show why such caution was necessary. Cleanliness had been the flashpoint for the revolt against paganism that resulted in a century of political independence from 165-63 BC. Some of their ancestors died rather than eat unclean foods as the Greek ruler Antiochus Epiphanes had decreed:

But many in Israel stood firm and were resolved in their hearts not to eat unclean food. They chose to die rather than to be defiled by food or to profane the holy covenant; and they did die (1 Macc 1.62-63).

Yet, in verses 14-23, Jesus “was wiping out in one gesture the laws for which Jews had suffered and died. No wonder the disciples were amazed.”⁵

What Did Jesus Mean?

Was Jesus taking issue with Moses’ written law? In one sense, he was, as the parenthetical statement in verse 19 shows. But, translators are correct when they set apart that sentence as a parenthetical statement, for Mark was surely using it to defend a theological point that applied later. So, what was Jesus’ main point in his exchange with the Pharisees and scribes?

We gain some insight into it by noting a customary Hebrew method of using antithesis as an emphatic way to say that something that was being neglected was in fact more important than what was being emphasized.⁶ Notice, for example, Isaiah 1.10-17 where the prophet denounced the very sacrifices that God had ordained. But his reason for denouncing them was that ritual had been emphasized to the point that right behaviors and care for others were being neglected (see also Jer 7.1-7, 22-24; Hos 6.6; Mic 6.6-8; etc.). Thus, he said, their rituals were for nought. In our text, Jesus’ concern was virtually the same, as verses 6-7 show. In fact, verses 14-23 elaborate the principle declared in verses 6-7. Real purity is not about external traditions, but about inner motive.

Identifying Impurity

Jesus spells out his point in verses 18-20. What the Pharisees ought to have been concerned about was not what went *into* (or touched) their bodies, but what came *out of* them. Theologically, Mark tells us, this meant that the food laws no longer applied (v. 19). But, we must not make that statement yet another external matter that distracts us from Jesus’ real concern.

Verses 21-23 enumerate twelve specific failings of the heart under the heading of “evil intentions” (διαλογισμοὶ οἱ κακοὶ, *dialogismoi hoi kakoi*). The list reminds us that “every outward act of sin is preceded by an inward act of choice” (Barclay, 176).

Although it is not reflected in our translations, “the first six nouns are all in the plural, suggesting repeated action, . . .” (Hooker, 180).

1. Fornications (πορνείαι, *porneiai*) - every kind of sexual vice.
2. Thefts (κλοπαί, *klopai*) - a deceitful and dishonorable pilferer, a sneak.
3. Murders (φόνοι, *phonoi*) - the willful taking of an innocent human life without just provocation or cause.
4. Adulteries (μοιχεῖαι, *moicheiai*) - narrower in scope than fornication, perhaps with the violation of the marriage covenant in mind.
5. Acts of avarice (πλεονεξίαι, *pleonexiai*) - from two Greek words meaning “to have more.” It has been defined as “‘the spirit which snatches at that which it is not right to take, the baneful appetite for that which belongs to others.’ It is the spirit which snatches at things, not to hoard them like a miser, but to spend them in lust and luxury” (Barclay, 176). It is the spirit that seeks satisfaction in things, not God.

6. Wickednesses (πονηρίαί, *ponēriai*) - a person or thing who is actively evil; the person in whose heart there is the desire to harm, someone who loves to cause trouble for others. It is significant that this word is sometimes used to refer to Satan.

The last six vices “are in the singular, denoting different vices” (Hooker, 180).

1. Deceit (δόλος, *dolos*) - this comes from a word meaning “bait,” and so means trickery or deceit. It has to do with being “crafty, cunning, deceitful, clever treachery” (Barclay, 177).
2. Licentiousness (sensuality; ἀσέλγεια, *aselgeia*) - “the Greeks defined this word as a disposition of soul that resents all discipline, a spirit that acknowledges no restraints and dares whatsoever its caprice and wanton insolence may suggest” (Barclay, 177). It is a person who has lost the sense of decency and shame (see Jer 6.15; 8.12).
3. Envy (literally, an evil eye [KJV]; ὀφθαλμὸς πονηρός, *ophthalmos ponēros*) - “the eye that looks on the success and happiness of another in such a way that it would cast an evil spell upon it if it could” (Barclay, 178).
4. Slander (βλασφημία, *blasphēmia*) - to insult man (slander) or God (blasphemy).
5. Pride (ὑπερηφάνια, *hyperēphania*) - literally, “to show oneself above.” This is the person who has contempt for everyone besides himself. “The interesting thing about this word, as the Greeks used it, is that it describes an attitude that may never become public” (Barclay, 178). It involves setting oneself up against God; it’s called the peak of all vices. Little wonder God opposes the proud (Jas 4.6).
6. Folly (ἄφροσύνη, *aphrosunē*) - this is not a lack of brains, but a lack of moral character, moral folly, the person who plays the fool.

Lessons To Take to Heart

First, Jesus’ teaching reminds us that sin is more serious than many think. Jesus doesn’t focus on evil deeds here, except to say *that those deeds are caused by evil thoughts*. Each is the opposite of or challenges God’s holy character. Together, they present us with multiple examples of “fall[ing] short of the glory of God” (Rom 3.23). All show a deeper and more absolute standard of right and wrong than many affirm (see especially Mark 7.23). *In other words, motive matters*. Just because we do right things, or observe the right rituals, does not necessarily mean we are godly. That sobering thought is something we should take seriously.

Second, it is possible to have these evil thoughts replaced by those that imitate God (Rom 12.2; Col 3.1). However, while ultimately God must cleanse us, seeking to have good thoughts is something we must do (Phil 4.8-9). Think how many of the traits named above represent values the world around us esteems (see 1 John 2.15-17). Because of the prevalence of those thoughts, it is hard to resist them. But, Jesus taught that it is necessary to do so.

We can illustrate our third lesson with the story of a generally good, wealthy, and powerful man whose wandering eye and impure heart got him into trouble. It defiled him. It caused an incredible amount of trouble for his family. For awhile, it cost him the empire he had worked so hard to build. Just one undisciplined period of idle time, one longing look, one command to an underling that she would have needed the greatest amount of courage to refuse. We doubt he imagined where his thoughts would eventually lead.

King David was confronted with the sins he committed in that episode. He understood and pleaded for the only possible solution: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me” (Psa 51.10).

We may never find a cure for Ebola, but one for the toxin of which Jesus spoke has long been available. Like David, and many others whose stories Scripture records, no matter what we've thought, or done because of it, we can be made clean (Heb 10.22; cf. 1 Cor 6.11; Eph 5.26). Jesus said it and can make it so. Come to him.

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Notes

¹ Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations in this sermon are from the NRSV.

² This sermon was prepared and presented in August 2014, at the time Dr. Brantly's battle with Ebola was in the news. Members of our congregation were among those who followed it with great interest. For future presentations of the sermon, I would look for more timely examples and research the relevant statistics and other details to make the points I do here. (As I'm editing this in 2022, the Covid pandemic would be an obvious choice.)

³ "Ebola: Mapping the Outbreak" BBC News, 20 August 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-28755033>, Accessed August 21, 2014.

⁴ "Ebola crisis: Liberia finds 'missing patients,'" BBC News, 19 August 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-28852384>, Accessed August 19, 2014.

⁵ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, The Daily Study Bible, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), 175.

⁶ Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, Black's New Testament Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 179.