

February 25, 2009
Houghton Lake UMC

The Sins That So Easily Beset Us
(Sermon #1 in the series)

Ash Wednesday
Mark 7:1-23

Lent is a season of introspection, reflection, penance, and spiritual growth. At the end of our Lenten journey our goal is to be better Christians with a deeper commitment and a greater understanding of God and a victorious spiritual life. This year as we come into Lent and once again look into our spiritual mirrors, I want us to reflect on the subject of the sins that so easily beset us. I want us to understand the difference between spiritual defeat and victory. I want us to realize that the Christian life is one of warfare and spiritual battle, with the possibility of defeat. Where defeat reigns, our spiritual growth stops or is greatly diminished; our potential to further Christ's kingdom will halt because our compromise often affects our obedience. Where there is victory we not only better understand our sin, but we also understand that God is greater than our sin. We must be aware of the costs of sin in our lives and the power of God to free us of those sins that bring frustration and defeat.

When it comes to the topic of spiritual growth and pleasing God on the one hand and interacting with the world around us on the other, this is where the rubber meets the road. Our vertical relationship with God is crucial to our horizontal relationships and how we interact with other people.

Because Christians often have a very different moral compass than does the world, the concepts of good and evil, right and wrong are often also different. Christians and non-Christians often clash in the areas of values, priorities and moral actions. This is because the assumptions of the world around us are very different from the assumptions Christians have if we are working to conform to biblical revelation and want to please God more than please people. If our concentration is only on the horizontal (with relationships with people

in mind), our perspectives and our values will be different from those who seek a vertical relationship, a personal relationship with God first, “seeking first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness” before we consider our horizontal relationships. The Christian and the atheist, for example, will live very different lives and have very different understandings of what is true, what is right, what is good, and what our lives should accomplish.

Many people in our world do not want to acknowledge that God exists because they do not want to acknowledge an authority above themselves. To acknowledge the existence of God is to also acknowledge a being greater than ourselves to whom we will one day be accountable. That is why the philosophical view of humanism is so inviting to those who do not want to acknowledge God’s existence. When everything begins and ends with humans, then humans can be in control of moral issues as well as be a law unto ourselves. It allows us to be right in our own eyes and allows our compromises and excuses to be validated. It allows us the opportunity to walk in denial and to claim ignorance when faced with the truth.

The world is going to argue with us about the definition of sin, primarily because they do not correlate the troubles they suffer with the actions and choices they make. The world is quick to dismiss God when choices are made, and quick to blame God when the consequences of our actions bring death and destruction into our lives. In reality, we cannot have it both ways.

Our text today is a very powerful statement by Jesus regarding sin and law. Jesus was often accused of breaking the traditions of the elders and not complying with the manmade laws of the Jewish leaders. Jesus agreed. He did break the manmade laws of the elders of Israel. He broke them because the manmade laws broke God’s laws, and it was God the

Father that needed to be obeyed. Many of these battles are recorded in the gospels, and the principle one most debated was about what could or could not be done on the Sabbath.

Eventually Jesus shares the words of our text today, pointing out that what makes a person “unclean” is not what goes into a person, but what comes out of them in the form of thoughts, plans, words and deeds that express the evil condition of their heart.

Our text today is a list of those thoughts, plans, words, and deeds, which Jesus identifies as sin and what makes a person unclean. Listen again to the list.....

(Mark 7:17-23) After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. “Are you so dull?” he asked. “Don’t you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him ‘unclean’? For it doesn’t go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body.” (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods “clean”.) He went on: “What comes out of a man is what makes him ‘unclean’. For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean’.”

I want to reflect on this list of things that make us “unclean”. The first observation I want to make about this statement is that God will judge our hearts. He will judge our intentions, our attitudes, our spirit, and it is God that determines what is evil. The world makes up their own rules as they go along. One thing we must understand about sin is that it first blinds before it destroys. Satan was at one time the Angel of Light. Therefore, the first thing Satan will do is convince a person that what is evil is actually good in some way. You see, my friends, we have the great capacity to compromise -- to be the exception to the rule -- and the Bible tells us over and over that when we are doing evil we will think we are

right in our own eyes. So, we must first of all be very clear about what God says is good and what God declares is evil. In our text today Jesus declares these things to be “evil”, so we need to take heed of them.

The very first sin that Jesus lists is that of evil thoughts. Sin begins in the heart and then moves to the mind. If a person dwells on things not pleasing to God then temptation will be knocking at the door, which will lead to sin. Therefore, we need to be careful what thoughts dominate our minds. All of the “evils” Jesus listed begin in the human heart, then move to the mind, and then into action --- all the while being justified as good and right in the mind of those who do them.

For example, in Satan’s temptation of Eve, Satan used Eve’s desire to “be like God” to justify breaking God’s instructions. This was in Satan before it was in Eve’s heart. Satan then used the fact that “she would not die” as proof and justification for tempting Adam. This made Satan and Eve right in their own eyes. Only after the sin was committed did the sin bring destruction. Evil thoughts and sin work the same way today. Sin feels good for a season, but then “the wages of sin is death.” (Rom. 6:23) Death comes as a wage, as the result of sin that is indulged. Only after the sin is committed does the true evil and destruction come to light when we can no longer control the outcome.

The same can be said about Cain who was jealous of his brother, Abel. God approved of Abel’s sacrifice but did not approve of Cain’s. The jealousy that resulted in Cain’s heart moved to become evil thoughts in Cain’s mind. Then the jealousy led Cain to eventually murder his brother, Abel. Even today if we were to interview murderers in prison, many would justify their actions and claim that the victim had it coming.

When our thoughts are only evil continually, our moral judgment disappears. Therefore, we must always keep a check on what we are thinking. What did Paul admonish the Philippian church in chapter 4:8? “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” Think about these things, keeping evil out of your mind because it will lead to negative, destructive things that will ultimately destroy your life.

Evil thoughts can lead to jealousy and envy, to coveting and to stealing. Evil thoughts can lead to deceit, lying, cheating, and to destroyed relationships. Evil thoughts can lead to bribery, extortion, bullying, and power struggles. Evil thoughts lead to evil and not to good. How could we ever believe that evil thoughts will have good results? Evil thoughts lead to all of the other evils in this list. Evil thoughts leads to folly, and the book of Proverbs will tell you that folly makes fools and the foolish will end in disaster.

Evil thoughts -- or what Chaplain John Gleason calls “stinkin’ thinkin’” in his jail ministry -- has destroyed many lives. If we are going to please God and receive the blessings of God’s kingdom, we need to make sure that our thoughts are pleasing to God; that if we have a problem with a person we are not to harbor evil or seek revenge. In Matthew 5:23-24 Jesus teaches us, “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.” We are not to go to our friend down the street and tell them about the evil that was done to us. We are to go directly to our brother or sister and reconcile with them, person to person. Then and only then will our gift at the altar be acceptable. We are taught not to let the sun

go down on our anger, because it is then that Satan can tempt us with evil thoughts and start us on the road to more destruction.

As we begin our Lenten journey let us search our hearts and purge any evil thoughts God brings to mind. Let us repent of our sin and reconcile to our neighbor, so that we can come to the Lord with honest, clean hearts and thoughts and cast off any folly that will lead to our own destruction.