

Evil Within

Mark 7:14-23

Among the many construction changes and improvements done in Ames over the summer was a beautification project of the medians on Lincoln Way here in Campustown. In addition to just making them look nice, the changes also improved sight lines for traffic and pedestrians, a goal the city of Ames and ISU has had for several years.

A few years ago, after a student was struck and killed by a CyRide bus on the corner of Lincoln Way and Ash, which prompted a study of traffic safety. When the results were released, they were somewhat surprising. The problem was not with the road. The geometrics, sight distance and lighting of the area complies with current design guidelines, and traffic operations in the peak hours are also within acceptable ranges, according to the project consultant's report. Instead, the problem is with the people themselves. Compliance with the traffic lights, the walk and don't walk signs, was less than fifty percent, and that doesn't include all the people who walk across in places where there are not crosswalks or traffic signals. Since then, the addition of the delayed walk signals at these traffic lights has helped, but the bigger change was education and awareness. The problem wasn't something that could be solved by only engineering. The problem wasn't something outside of the people. The problem was something inside.

The Pharisees often get a bad reputation from us, but what they were doing was trying to fix people's insides by controlling what happened outside of them. They followed the rules from Leviticus and elsewhere where God had commanded them to be holy, set apart. And so they weren't supposed to be in the presence of death or sickness or unclean things. But the Pharisees had added their own traditions onto

what God had commanded, and had put their trust in their abilities to keep themselves ritually clean.

Jesus knew that wasn't going to work. Their problem wasn't that they were being made unclean by what was outside them. Their problem was they were unclean because of what was inside them. Jesus had seen the real source of the problem.

We have the same problem. Uncleaness has nothing to do with what we take into our body or with what we touch or what touches us. Instead, it has everything to do with what's inside us, what's in our heart. And when what is in our heart comes out, we defile not just ourselves, but those around us. If John 3:16 is "the gospel in a nutshell," then Mark 7:21-23 is a nutshell of the Law. "From within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

If our hearts are only full of evil thoughts, then maybe we do just need a Pharisaic legal structure in place. After all, if our hearts are the problem, then maybe we need something outside of us to help keep them in check. If we just come up with the right boundaries, the right rules and regulations, then we can control our hearts, or at least our actions. But that doesn't deal with the root of the problem.

As tempting as it is sometimes to label evil as something out there, it's instead important to remember evil is in here. It is in us. And if we don't acknowledge that, if we don't think we could fall to temptation, we can't battle it. Only

when we face our own heart of darkness can we begin to let the light shine in.

Like the Pharisees, it's easy for us to try to put the focus on the evil out there. It's easy to condemn the sins we don't struggle with. It's also easy for us to put the problem of sin on those other people instead of on ourselves.

G.K. Chesterton's legendary (though perhaps apocryphal) response to a question The Times of London allegedly posed in the 1900s, "What's wrong with the world today?" shows us the true problem. Chesterton's response was succinct:

Dear Sir,

I am.

Yours, G.K. Chesterton

We are what's wrong with the world. The problem isn't the sin out there. It's the sin in here. It's the sin inside. It's our own selfishness and pride and greed.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote a book about his time in the gulags of the former Soviet Union entitled The Gulag Archipelago. One of the most famous passages in it reads, "If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being."

We may think that if we could just get rid of those people around us who think differently than we do or act differently than we do, that everything would be fine. We may think that if only those

Because the problem is internal, it's not something we can fix on our own. As much as we may want to, we can't go in and take our

hearts out on our own. But we're not on our own. At the college student fellowship Wednesday night, we talked partly about Psalm 51, written by King David after everything had happened with Bathsheba. David knows his heart is unclean. He knows that what came out of his heart; lust, anger, and pride; led to adultery and murder and lies and an attempted cover-up. David knew his heart was sinful, and that had led to the death of a loyal soldier and an innocent baby, a series of events that broke every commandment. It only took one confrontation with the prophet Nathan for him to see the darkness of his own heart, how he had defiled the throne he sat in, the God he represented, and himself.

Yet the Bible calls David a man after God's own heart. How could that be? He's a murderer and adulterer, and that's just one of the several stories in the Bible that show David in a negative light. But if he is pure and holy, it is because God answered his prayer of repentance. God created a clean heart within him. God purged him, cleaned him, washed him, and made him whiter than snow (Psalm 51:7). And God does the same thing for you and me. Yes, we are sinners; but when God looks at us, he sees us with the clean hearts He has transplanted within us.

The Blood of Jesus washes away our sins and gives us a clear conscience so that we can stand before God in his presence without being rejected or destroyed. As God's forgiven children by faith, we become more and more like him each day as we hear his Word, receive his forgiveness, and receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus in Holy Communion.

God speaks a word from the outside, a word of forgiveness, in order that it becomes a word inside us, unseating our intentions and seating us to feast on God's grace, God's mercy and God's righteousness. In Lord's Supper, we

receive into our own bodies Jesus' body and blood. We receive that which we could not make or earn ourselves: forgiveness and new life.

In the 2003 remake of *The Italian Job*, one of the repeated bits of advice is "I trust everyone. It's the devil inside them I don't trust." We cannot trust our hearts. We cannot trust the devil inside us, the sin that dwells within us. We can trust the God who has promised to give us clean hearts. We can trust the God who came into the world in Jesus, to fulfill the law and take the punishment our sin deserves.

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