

The Heart of the Problem

There is a quote you may have heard that goes like this: “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.” The quote is a paraphrase of a line from a work by the early Church father Tertullian. He was observing the fact that the Roman persecution of Christians in the first and second centuries had not had the desired effect of stamping out this “false” religion. The paraphrase is now often referenced as a truism that persecution fosters church growth, in a numerical sense. This claim is debatable but does seem to capture the feel of certain periods in church history, both positively and negatively.

Whether that is true or not, we do know what the Bible says about suffering. Such as Romans 5:3-5, “Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” So, we see suffering starting this domino effect of growth in the Christian.

Also, Paul’s apparent claim in Romans 8:36 and its surrounding passage is that Christians being “killed all the day long” serves to prove to all that they cannot be separated from the love of God in Christ. Such martyrdom may indeed draw people into the Church.

Or, similar to the Romans 5 passage, James 1:2-4 says: “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

These passages, and others, make it clear that there is certainly a correlation between suffering and growth, but the growth primarily in view for the New Testament is character growth, as opposed to numerical growth, though it does record startling numerical growth periodically, sometimes as a result of persecution.

Negatively, there also seems to be some indication that ease or comfort with the world can inhibit that same growth of character. Paul says in 2 Timothy 4:10 that Demas deserted him because he was “in love with this present world”. Perhaps with such a desertion of faith in mind, John says in 1 John “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” Here we see love of the world at odds with love of the Father. Finally, 1 Timothy 6:10 says, “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.” Money represents many unhealthy relationships to the world, because we love money as a means to an end of many other desires, such as the desire for more power, comfort, safety, etc. And we see that this love of money has the potential to cause people to fall away from the faith. So, comfort with the world seems to be at odds, or at least have the *potential* to be at odds with following Christ.

To be fair, there are other passages in the New Testament to consider that complicate the issue. For instance, Jesus’ parable of seeds falling on various soils says that persecution, far from growing the Church, can actually snuff out shallow faith. And there are biblical examples of those who likely had means according to worldly standards and yet were faithful followers of Christ, such as Phoebe, mentioned as Paul’s patron in Romans 16. But, generally speaking, in the New Testament suffering is viewed as galvanizing, and ease as potentially detrimental to growth in Christ.

Why would that be? Why would suffering benefit faith and ease weaken it, generally? These are just my observations, so take them for what they are, but here are a couple thoughts. First, when I suffer, I go to God. I pray more, even if that prayer is, “God, where are you?” I read my Bible more, in an attempt to figure out how my suffering fits into His plan for the world and my life. I seek godly counsel more, again to try to make sense of the suffering by drawing on the experience of wiser saints.

Second, when I suffer, along with seeking God more seriously, I examine myself more deeply. When prayers for relief go seemingly unanswered, I begin to look at myself and consider, as the psalmist says, “...if there is any unclean

way in me.” And honestly, when I do this it is pretty rare that I find an unclean way in myself...usually I find *multiple* unclean *ways*.

Now, I am not sure if these unclean ways are the direct cause of suffering (though they may be), so much as they are the proof that at any given moment in the human heart there is no shortage of sin to be addressed. This realization returns me to further pursuit of God, creating a cycle that pushes me into deeper growth. So, in short, suffering exposes what is inside us and subjects it to fire: true faith gets refined, and false faith gets consumed.

Ease, on the other hand, can allow false faith to masquerade as true faith for a long time, because its quality never gets tested. And so, I believe it is important to test our faith in times of ease, which requires brutal honesty.

In our passage this morning, Matthew 15:10-20, Jesus is inviting us into such honest self-evaluation. It is a hard call, because, as I said, as often as you examine your heart you will find something unpleasant lurking in the shadows. But, and hear this now, it is also an invitation to greater life, an invitation into that cycle of growth in which we bring who we *truly* are before a loving Father so He can surely and gently make us more like Christ. And this, I would argue, is the process God has for all believers. We call it sanctification.

Our passage this week is a continuation of the passage Stan took us through last week. To refresh, the top Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem came and challenged Jesus with a question about his disciples' premeal handwashing practices. Jesus does not respond to their question, but rather points out the flaw that underlies and motivates the question: the flaw of holding human teaching above God's Word. Such a disordering leads to the hypocrisy of saying you want to honor God, when in reality your focus is on man and his teachings, not God and His truth. Jesus ends his discussion with these religious leaders with that very indictment of hypocrisy.

Let us pick up the story in verses 10 and 11 where Jesus shifts his attention to the people around him. “And he called the people to him and said to them, ‘Hear and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person.’” In this story there are three separate groups of people Jesus addresses. First, the Pharisees and scribes; second, the crowds around them, made up of who knows what range of common citizens; and third, Jesus' own disciples. Now, to this point, Jesus has been having a private, or at least semi-private conversation with the Pharisees and scribes, but now he invites everyone in. This is the only point in this brief story when all three groups of people are listening to Jesus, and he lays down a general rule: what goes into the body does not defile you as much as what comes out.

It is important to understand what Jesus means by “defile” here. He is alluding to ceremonial uncleanness as defined by the Mosaic Law. It was this uncleanness that the Pharisees' handwashing practices were supposed to guard against, though handwashing is never specifically called for in the Law. Such uncleanness made one unacceptable to God, according to that Law.

However, Jesus wants everyone to know the religious leaders have gotten it wrong, and contrary to their teaching what comes out of your mouth is a much better indication of whether you are acceptable to God or not, than what you put into your mouth. Although, true to form, Jesus points out this error by way of a parable, as Peter makes clear in verse 15 when he asks for an explanation. In other words, he does not explain exactly what he means by “what comes out of the mouth”. He leaves it to his audience to wrestle with that question.

The one thing that was apparently clear to everyone was that Jesus was disagreeing with the religious leaders, and was bringing it up in a public way. This undermined their standing with the people as authorities on relating to God, which explains their reaction in verse 12. “Then the disciples came and said to him, ‘Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?’”

On the one hand, this is understandable reaction. After all, instead of answering their question Jesus rebuked them, and then told the people that they had been mistaken in their teachings. I am guessing most of us would probably be frustrated by such an exchange, especially if we came into it thinking we were the ones in command of the situation.

It is worth noting how often this seems to happen with people when they come to Jesus with an agenda. Those who come with an agenda, tend to leave with a rebuke. Whether it is the Pharisees hoping to trap him with theological hypotheticals and trivialities being told they do not know what they are talking about by way of Jesus casting doubt on their basic Bible knowledge. Or whether it is the rich young ruler hoping to get a kudos being disheartened by the call to sell all his possessions and follow Jesus. Or whether it is the lawyer looking to justify himself being shown how far he falls short of being a good neighbor by the story of the Good Samaritan. Those who come to Jesus with an agenda, tend to leave with a rebuke. Whereas those who come to Jesus with a true understanding of their neediness and his authority over them tend to find a gentle answer and help for their predicaments.

Put simply, with God the proud are humbled and the humble are exalted. The Bible, and Proverbs especially, is clear on this. Proverbs 3:34 says, "Toward the scorners he is scornful, but to the humble he gives favor." Which is the basis for the better-known phrasing used by Peter and James, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Proverbs 11:2 says, "When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom." Proverbs 29:23 says, "One's pride will bring him low, but he who is lowly in spirit will obtain honor." So, the lesson here: come to God in humility that He may exalt you, not the other way around.

To bring it back to the religious leaders in our story, their reaction is the understandable, but prideful reaction. And as pride often does, it misses the truth while it is busy being offended. What should have been clear from Jesus' one line parable is the *origin point* of that which defiles a person. The Pharisees and scribes were concerned with the defilements "out there". Unclean food. Unclean persons. Unclean practices. But Jesus says that the defilements are not "out there" but "in here," inside us.

Do you see that? The religious leaders think there are unclean things outside of them, and so they must purify themselves in order to avoid consuming something unclean. The movement is from outside in. Whereas, for Jesus, the defilement originates within a person and moves out into the world. If the religious leaders had been humble, they may have heard the truth capable of purifying their religion and sanctifying their zeal, but instead, they miss the truth that might have set them free. It is the reality of their prideful posture that leads to Jesus' response to his disciples' concern for how the Pharisees and scribes took his words in verses 13-14.

"He answered, 'Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.'"

Jesus is not exactly mincing words in his assessment of the scribes and Pharisees. Similar to his assertion that new wine requires new wineskins, he says here that some things must be completely thrown out. Some things are beyond pruning and must be completely uprooted. It is for this reason I believe Jesus refused to answer their question about handwashing. Because the whole paradigm of "How do we keep the unclean things outside of us from getting inside of us?" no longer applies. It must be discarded, if we are ever to confront the unclean things that are already in us. And because the religious leaders are still clinging to that faulty paradigm, Jesus warns his disciples against following them, for they are blind guides who have gone astray, and astray is the only place they will lead those who follow them. Peter, perhaps sensing that he and the disciples were missing something, asks Jesus to explain in verses 15-16.

"But Peter said to him, 'Explain the parable to us.' And he said, 'Are you also still without understanding?'"

I am interpreting tone here, but if Jesus' response seems a little short to you, he would have had good reason to wonder at his disciples' lack of understanding, because this really is not a new concept. The Sermon on the Mount largely focuses on the heart over religious actions. Then in Matthew 12:34 Jesus said, "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." In other words, teaching that the heart is at the center of our relationship to God is not a one-off lesson for Jesus, but a recurring theme. One the disciples apparently have not caught yet. So, Jesus explains once again in verses 17-19.

“Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.”

Forgive me for the impropriety, but Jesus uses graphic language to describe the fact that any food our body does not have a use for gets expelled; it does not stay inside us. Our body has its own ways of getting rid of anything unclean that we put in our mouths. But that which is at the very core of us, in our heart, is not so easily expelled and is often revealed by the words that come out of our mouths.

Such things as evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, lies, and slander boil up within us until we can no longer hold them in and they come pouring out of our mouths and into our actions. Of course, before we form an evil thought; we have an evil feeling, which again harkens back to the Sermon on the Mount. Before we kill; we hate in our heart. Before we break our covenants or indulge our sexual perversions; we lust in our heart. Before we steal, lie, or slander; we covet in our heart. And all of these defilements are often verbalized, whether as grumbling, insults, indecent requests, untruth, or some other way. Our hearts are the source of the problem, and what comes out of them is the proof. And so, Jesus concludes in verse 20, “These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone.” Jesus is redirecting people to the real crux of the matter, which is the heart behind the things we do. He is telling us the problem is primarily inside us trying to get out, not outside trying to get in.

This is not to say there is not anything dangerous “out there” that we should avoid, but remember, Jesus called the sin of others a speck, and the sin inside us a log. This is an intentional picture on Jesus’ part. For the Christ-follower our own sin is always the bigger deal than someone else’s, and so we do not judge. To do so would be like a defendant in a class action lawsuit trying to take over the judge’s seat to indict his fellow defendants. Which would be absurd. So yes, there are specks “out there,” but we are called to consider the log in our own eye and leave the specks to God.

So, the question I have for each of us, myself included, is: where do you tend to think the problem is? Is it outside you, or inside you? Is it with “them”, whoever “they” are, or with “me”? Misunderstanding where the heart of the problem leads to the trap of over-sheltering ourselves from the world around us. It is tempting to withdraw from the world. To set up the walls of Colossians 2:21: “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch.” But, as that passage tells us, those things look good and wise, but they are, in fact, a reiteration of the Law that never saved or freed anyone, and so are of no use for true godliness.

Not only do such walls often cut us off from the very people who need to hear the Gospel most, but, again, they assume again that the problem is “out there”. What you need to know is that such walls often trap you in the sin that is inside you. There are certainly things that Christ-followers should not “handle”, “taste”, or “touch”, so to speak, but that must come as good fruit from a good tree, as good works from a good heart, not as traditions that displace the Word of God which tells you that grace is your only hope for cleansing.

You see, the other thing Jesus does when he shifts the focus from “out there” to “in here,” is he shifts our attention from a problem we can fix or at least control by our own efforts in some measure, to a problem we have no hope of fixing or controlling on our own. You may be able to wash your hands, but you cannot wash your heart. You can, as Jesus says in Luke 11:39, “cleanse the outside of the cup,” but the inside will still be full of “greed and wickedness”. To such people Jesus proclaims woe in that passage, for “you tithe the mint and rue and every herb and neglect the justice and love of God.”

So, where is the problem? “Out there” or “in here”? If your Christianity is marked by exhaustion, frustration, anger, broken relationships, stringent rules, fear, anxiety, defeat, and the like, I would suggest you have misunderstood where the problem is and overestimated your ability to fix it. You may think the problem is “out there” and if you can just keep it from getting “in here” God will accept you as clean. If so, I urge you to despair of that vain endeavor and recognize the problem is already inside you.

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When you come to that realization, if there is any hope, there is only one hope: the mercy of God in the face of Jesus. And such mercy, He readily offers to those who come to Him in honest need. He gives grace to the humble. And so, true Christianity is the response to the dreadful realization that the problem is “in here” and it is everywhere. So much so that even our righteous deeds are filthy rags, according to Isaiah. So that we must even repent of our righteousness, for even it is tainted with the sin of pride and is simply self-righteousness.

Christianity begins when we come to our senses in the pigsty of our own efforts and return to God in utter humility to find Him running out to meet us with His love. That love clothes us in a righteousness we could never earn, and therefore, can never lose. And takes us in to perfect rest. Rest from trying to stop everything unclean “out there” from getting inside you. Rest as of a lost child, found; a dead child, made alive again.

So, is the problem “out there” or “in here”? If you think it is “out there,” I have no good news for you, because as long as your focus is on the specks around you, you will be blind to the log within you that is the greater danger to your soul. But, if you can see that it is “in here,” I have great news. Jesus came to change our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh. He came to become the sin “in here” that we might become the righteousness of God. He came to make us new creatures. He came to give grace to the humble. Therefore, humble yourself in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.