



You Are Your Worst Problem

September 10, 2023

Mark 7:14-23

Clint Pressley

¹⁴ And he called the people to him again and said to them, "Hear me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵ There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him." ¹⁷ And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. ¹⁸ And he said to them, "Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, ¹⁹ since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) ²⁰ And he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. ²¹ For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

(Pastor prays)

Connie and I live in an older home. It comes with its own challenges and deficiencies. Our house was built in 1971, and, evidently, in 1971—judging by the closets—nobody had clothes. Also, nobody wanted to use the bathroom in 1971. Our bathroom is small, our closets are small. If you buy a house built in 1971 and nothing has been remodeled from the time it was built, then you probably have a well and septic tank. We have never hooked up to city water. Maybe one day we will. But that means when it thunders bad here in Charlotte, NC—like it has lately—lightning strikes. I don't know if a squirrel jumps on the line, but, whatever it is, we lose power all the time. And if you

lose power in my house, you don't just lose electricity, you also lose water. During one bad thunderstorm, Connie and I were taken back to the Dark Ages. The lights came back on, but the water did not. I called the repairman to come see what the problem was. And when he came and inspected it, he found that the well pump was dead. So they came to replace it, and it was fascinating to watch. I went out into the yard and watched the entire process. They pulled the pump out of the bottom of the well, pulled all that pipe out to fix the pump, and then put it all back in. And as the repairman was finishing putting it all back together, right before he put the cap on top of the well, he took a cup of bleach and poured it into the water to kill any bacteria that might have gotten into the well while they were working on it. I think it's a great idea. So they put the bleach in there and the repairman said, "Now listen, you might smell and taste Clorox for the next few days." So every time I had a glass of water, every cup of coffee that I made, every time I got into the shower, I could smell, and even taste bleach. In fact, about that time, somebody asked me if I had lightened my hair—was I using Sun-In or something on my head? I could smell—I could even taste—the bleach. Why? Because the bleach was in the water source.

If you wake up one morning and you don't feel well, and that ill feeling persists, you go to the doctor and maybe he can't figure out what the problem is. He starts to do tests on you. After several tests, he comes back into the room with a grim look on his face to tell you that—a lot of you have gone through this—you have cancer. But the cancer is not localized; it's not in one spot. The cancer has gotten into your very bloodstream. The cancer has affected everything that your source, your life-blood, touches. So what you thought was just a serious medical issue and cancer, has now become a death sentence. Now, I open with these two brief examples because in the text, Jesus, the Great Physician, is telling us that we have a problem that we can't fix. All too often when we find out we have a problem, we seek to treat the symptoms. And I'm all for treating symptoms. There are times when I have symptoms and I want those symptoms treated. But too often all we do is treat symptoms of issues and we never actually get to the root cause. So we try

education and we try culture and we try reformation. We try correction. When, in fact, what is needed to save us is a radical change in the human heart. There is no power in the world that can make a bad heart good. Only the gospel can do that. The Bible says that only the gospel is the power of God for salvation. I'll just get to the text here. In the text, Jesus is going to tell us why the world is the way it is. Now look, this passage in front of us that I've read to you is not for the faint at heart. If you're a visitor today, I recognize this passage and this sermon are not for the faint of heart. But like an honest doctor, Jesus is going to show us what the problem is. But unlike any physician that has ever walked the face of the earth, Jesus not only shows us what the problem is, Jesus is willing to become the solution for you. If you like to write things down, you can write this one down.

Our Problem is Not What We Do, It's Who We Are

Our problem is not what we do. Good or bad things, it's not your problem. That's a symptom. Our problem is who we are. Let's do what we have been doing in the last several weeks: going back through the text and picking things up. Let's go back and read it, I'll provide some commentary as we go along, then we'll come back and make some application, and let that be the sermon. So first, the commentary, and then the points of application. Join me there in verse 14.

The text says that He called the people to Him again. Okay, Jesus has been talking to the scribes and the Pharisees. They were talking to Him because His disciples were not washing their hands ceremonially before they ate. The Pharisees, who had come down from Jerusalem, were trying to find a way to trap Jesus. And so they're having a conversation, and Jesus excoriates them. So after that's done in a private conversation with the scribes and the Pharisees, verse 14 says Jesus called everybody over—come over here, I want you to hear this. And He said to them, I want you to hear me, but not just the words. Let them go into your ears. I want you to understand. We are going to use that as our first point, we'll come back to it. In verse 15, there's a broad

statement He makes to anyone who would hear it: *“There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.”* You see, it’s from the heart. Now, many versions of the Bible might have a verse 16. Most of our versions drop over to verse 17. The reason is that verse 16 is not found in most manuscripts. Most translations, like mine, put it down at the bottom and it tells us that Jesus said something like, “If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.” Then, in verse 17, we find out the people disperse, and it’s just the disciples and Jesus at the end of the day and they have a discussion. Let’s pick it up in verse 17: *“And when he had entered the house, [maybe that’s Peter’s house at Capernaum] his disciples asked him about the parables.”* So they’re meeting, thirteen of them—the twelve disciples and Jesus—and they’re having a conversation. And they still are not getting it. You can hear the frustration in the voice of Jesus in verses 18-19. “And he said to them, *‘Then are you also without understanding?’*” If you read it literally in Greek, it’s like this: “Are you really that dull that you’re not getting this?” That’s the tone in verse 18—“Are you also without understanding, do you not see?” This is how I have to be sometimes, just as plain as I can possibly be. They’re not getting it. You have got to be more specific. So here’s what Jesus does in verses 18-19—He’s very specific—*“Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?”* If you’re reading it in Greek, yours might say down at the bottom that they go into the latrine. This is what Jesus says; you eat and you go to the bathroom and that doesn’t affect your heart. So I feel like they’re getting it now. Look at verse 20, *“And he said, ‘What comes out of a person is what defiles him.’”* And then here comes the list in verses 21 -23. Here’s the list that Jesus gives you. We find this list all through the New Testament, but this is the only one that Jesus gives, and it is not an exhaustive list. It is a representative list. I’ll just read it from verses 21-23. *“For 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.”* You see the problem is not what we do. Jesus says your problem is who you

are. If that's the case, then how do we change? How do we change who we are? If it's not so much what we're doing, how do we change what's inside?

I'd like to use that word, *change*, to drive the rest of the sermon. Here's the first point, number one:

Change Starts With Comprehension

When you understand, you see that and hear that in the voice of Jesus in verse 14, you understand that change starts with comprehension. Some of you say you don't like to read because you don't pick it up. You feel like you have to read something over and over again before you get it. You feel like you have problem with reading comprehension. Well, I'm not talking about reading comprehension. I am talking about understanding. What does it take to be a Christian? Jesus says in verse 14 that He wants you to hear and also understand, to comprehend. What does it mean to comprehend? It means not just that you agree with Christianity or that you don't have anything against Christianity. It means a full and complete surrender of your life to the Lordship of Jesus.

I would like to boil it down to four or five things that you really have to understand to become a Christian. Here's the first: What do you need to comprehend? I think you need to understand your purpose. Why did God create you? Why are you here on this earth? One of the things you need to settle is the understanding that God has created you for a purpose. That purpose, primarily, is that your life might honor Him, that you were created in the image of God, that God and His goodness created you in His image. But it is not just that. He created you, not randomly, but for a purpose. So you get that. There's something else you need to comprehend that we miss. Oftentimes, that second thing is we need to comprehend our state of being. What's going on with us? What's our problem? Our state of being is that we were created by God in His image. But we know that the image of God in us has been tainted by sin. There's nobody in here that would say, "Yeah, I'm not a sinner now." A lot of times, we excuse sin by saying that nobody's perfect or

that we have made mistakes. That is not our condition. Our condition is that we are predisposed to do those things that dishonor God, that's our condition. We were born into it. You didn't come into this world with a blank sheet of paper, your environment wrote on that sheet of paper, and that's how you turned out. That is not what happened. Your environment certainly will have some effect on how you end up, but not the full effect. We come into this world with a predisposition toward sin. Where did we get that? Well, we got that from our first parents, Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden and that's when Creation fell. That's why this world is cursed and we have inherited sin from them.

Many of you can look at your parents and know you have some of their attributes. I can do that. We have a bay window at our house and, not so long ago, I walked by that window. I thought it was reflecting the driveway and I thought, *Oh look, here comes Dad*. But it wasn't my dad; I was looking at a reflection of myself. That's how old I've gotten. And, by the way, all of you here have some sort of trait from your parents that they got from their parents, and all the way back. You have a tendency toward sin. You came with that. One of the things we need to get ahold of and understand is not just how we were created and why, but we need to understand our condition as being those who are sinners. And if we are in sin, then we are enemies of God. We're in a bad state. The third thing to understand is that there is only one solution. One solution. The solution is not you being better, being a nicer guy, that you're acting right, getting your act together, that you're living clean. All of those things are great. I hope that you'll do those. That's not the solution. The Bible tells us that Jesus is the solution. You see, God is, of course, a God of wrath that will punish sin. But he's also a God of love who gives us Jesus.

So the gospel story is that Jesus lives perfectly in a way we can't because we have a sinful nature. He didn't. He did that in our place as our representative. And the cross is important for Christianity because, at the cross, what happens is that God punishes a sinner. Now it should have been us. But God

puts his wrath on His own Son, who has taken our sin. But that's not all He did. It's called the Great Exchange. If Jesus takes your sin, He gives you His righteousness. That's the gospel story. God kills His Son instead of killing you. That's the gospel. So there are a few things you need to understand here: understand God's purpose, understand our state of mind—who we are as sinners. The third thing is understanding that the only solution is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The fourth thing we need to understand is grace, something I think we miss. We miss what it means to be saved by God's grace. That God will save us when we put our faith in what Christ has done for us, and He saves you not because He sees your potential. Or it doesn't mean He saves you because you are special. You are not special. He didn't look at you and think, You know what she has so much talent and can be such a great use to the Kingdom of God, so I'm gonna save her to use her. That's not what God sees. God looks down and sees how we're children of wrath like the rest of mankind, and how we were dead in our sin. And to be dead is to be to be rotting. When God looks at you, He doesn't see someone who is going to be great. He sees death. And the fact that He would bring you here on this Sunday to hear the gospel—that He might save you today—that is God's grace. There's nothing about us that makes God want to love us. He does it because He is God and He is a God of love and grace. It's a good thing for us to get a hold of what grace is.

Let me give you a fifth thing. I need to move quickly. We need to have a comprehension of what repentance is. What it means to take all that you've heard—so you've heard the gospel today—what it means to take all of that, and have it become yours. How does it become yours instead of just some information out there? It is you saying, "I want that. I am a sinner, condemned to hell. I need something to save me. I have heard the only solution is Jesus. I believe it." Then you turn from your sin and have faith and trust that Jesus died for you. Change starts with comprehension. Let me give you a second point. We'll pick up the pace a little bit. Here's point number two:

Change Takes Root When We Reject Shallowness

Don't you hate shallowness? I mean we need to see the deeper issues and realize the need for radical change. Let me show it to you in verse 15. Jesus says, *"There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him."* The important word here is *defile*. Nothing outside can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him. The word *defile* is an interesting word. You find it eleven times in the New Testament. Nine of those times that you find the word *defile*, Jesus is using it. Every time you see it in the New Testament, it has something to do with God, His Holiness, and our lack of holiness. All too often today, I see several things happen in the modern church, and I pray that it doesn't happen at Hickory Grove. All too often, in modern-day Christianity, the worship service and the church itself is turned into a carnival. I've been seeing several churches have these themed worship services, and the theme has to do with a movie. So one church had a *Barbie-themed* worship service. I don't know that I can say anything and not sin about that. Sometimes in churches, you'll find that they become this prosperity, help sessions, to help you actually flourish, to prosper. Or worse, the temptation is to become this bigoted, legalistic, and oppressive church. And what Jesus is saying in the passage is that we have a heart issue. Isn't that what Jeremiah said in Jeremiah 17:9? He said, *"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?"* Look, all the behavior management in the world, all the discipline in the world—and I think you ought to be disciplined—can't change the heart. What did Jesus say to the scribes and the Pharisees in Matthew 23:27? He said, *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness."* There are people sitting in this church right now who look like they have it all together, and yet they are completely dead inside. And the promise of the gospel is that it doesn't have to be like that. By the power of God, by what Christ has done for you on the cross, God will forgive you and change you and restore you and fill you. Change finds its root when we reject shallowness. Let me give you a third point. I'll make this the last one, number three:

Change is Complete When You Get Depravity and Grace

Change is complete when you get two opposite things. You have got to have a good understanding of depravity, and you also have got to have an understanding of grace. I'm gonna fly quickly through verses 17-18. Jesus decides in verse 19 that He's going to be as clear as He can possibly be and spell it out for them. He does it so that they understand it's the heart that is the issue. Then, over in verses 20-23, what you have is the Lord Jesus giving us an explanation of depravity. In fact, let's use the doctrine of total depravity. Total depravity is misunderstood. Oftentimes, we hear the word *depraved* and, when we use the word *depraved*, we're thinking of something terrible, something egregiously terrible and sickening. That is not what total depravity is. Total depravity is the well that has been polluted. Total depravity is the cup of bleach that has gone into the well and tainted the entire water source. Total depravity says that everything about who we are has been polluted by sin. All of our consciousness has been tainted by sin. Puritans used to say that our tears of repentance need to be repented of. In verse 20, Jesus says that the most deadly contamination is not what you touch, it is in your heart. And then Jesus does something He doesn't do anywhere else. He gives a representative list. I'd like to go through it as quickly as I can. He starts with a general statement in verse 21. It is a general statement. Look what He says in verses 21-23: *"For 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."* Hey, look, this has a lot to speak to where sin begins. Is it what you do or who you are? It starts with evil thoughts. Jesus says ponderings and desires and schemes and plans and attractions. You have attractions, daydreams and intentions, not just actions. It's not you being able to say, "I can look, but I can't touch." Jesus said no, you've lusted. You've committed adultery. But what's behind the action? So He says it's evil thoughts, and that is the overarching theme.

And then underneath there are twelve more, He lists them. I'll go quickly. The

first six are listed in plural. You won't see it in your Bible. If you're reading it in Greek, I think maybe the numerical standard might have it like that. So let's just look at it like that. He begins with sexual immoralities. Sexual immoralities. What is that? That's the Greek word *porneia*. It's where we get the word *pornography*. It's a general term. It has to do with all sexual sins that are contrary to God's will. So premarital sex, extramarital sex, homosexuality, transsexuality—all of those things. And notice He says in plural sexual immoralities, the *porneia*. It's every click, not just one look, but every time you looked at it. They come from the heart. That's a wrong design.

And the next four that He lists come out of the 10 Commandments. Theft is taking from someone something that is not yours. Murder is killing an innocent person. Adultery is violating the marriage covenant. And coveting—"You shall not covet."—it covers all of them.

Wickedness is behavior that's intentionally mean or hard-hearted. Deceit, think of Judas. Deceit is betraying a friend with a kiss. You look like a friend, but it's a trick. Sensuality, Jesus says that the word *sensuality* is this unbridled, shameless living that's lacking in a sort of moral discernment or even care. Get in your mind something you've seen in a movie like a terrible college frat party where people are drinking to the point of throwing up and it's just debauchery. It's kind of the word. Jealousy, that literally is the evil eye, being jealous. Jealousy wanders into resentment that you can never satisfy. Slander. That's the word *blasphemy*—to say something evil about God or about someone else. Pride, which is arrogance or the sense of superiority. Foolishness is an appropriate one to end on. Why? Because Psalm 14:1 tells us that the fool says in his heart that there is no God. These are corrupt, abominable deeds. There is no one who does good. All these evil things come from within. They defile the person.

You see, it's not unwashed hands. It's an unwashed heart. Our problem is not what we do, our problem is who we are. And Paul says in Ephesians 2 that God has a solution. This is the solution. You were dead in your trespasses and

sins in which you once walked. When you are following the course of this world, you are following the prince of the power of the air. That spirit that is now at work all around you in the sons of disobedience, whom we all once were. We lived in the passions of our flesh. We carried out the desires of the body and the mind, and we were by nature children of wrath, just like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, He made us alive together with Christ. It's by grace you have been saved. And He raised us up with Him and He seated us with Him in the heavenly places so that in the coming ages, He might show the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved, through faith. This is not your own doing. It's a gift, not works. So that no one would boast. For we are His workmanship. We are created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand. That we might walk in them. Jesus Christ. He is our hope in life. He is our hope in death.

(Pastor prays)