

When I was growing up in Africa, name calling was a popular put-down among us kids. It was less messy than a fist fight.

The Afrikaans kids called the English kids *rooineks*. It meant “red necks,” but it didn’t mean what it means in America. It had something to do with the tendency of the fair-skinned English soldiers in the Anglo-Boer war to get severe sunburn. We English kids called the Afrikaners *vaalpens*. That meant “grey belly.” I’ve no idea where that put-down came from.

In our family, if one of us became upset because we’d been called a name, my dad wasn’t much help. He’d just say, “Ah, consider the source!” Turns out he just gave us another delectable put-down to trump other put-downs.

“Consider the source” is a disdainful way of dismissing an unwelcome criticism or put-down. It insinuates that the source is a pea-brained doofus, so anything that comes from that source is witless tripe.

- Jesus also advised people to “consider the source”—but in a very different sense.

Here’s how it happened:

Some religious leaders had a bone to pick with Jesus about the behavior of his disciples.

They were upset because Jesus’ disciples were flouting one of their religious laws. They didn’t wash their hands before eating.

My mother tried to get me to wash my hands before I ate, but it had nothing to do with religion.

- The law God gave to Moses explained the terms by which God would have a relationship with his people. But later on an “oral law” developed, comprising traditions that came from certain rabbis, not from God.

In the first century the oral law was called the “tradition of the elders.”

One of those traditions demanded fastidious acts of purification, like always washing hands before eating.

People believed that the traditions of the elders were what God himself demanded, and it was sin to disobey them.

‘Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don’t wash their hands before they eat!”’ (Matthew 15:1, 2)

Jesus seized this opportunity to explain the source of people’s faults and failures.

- Some people are persnickety about their food. They count the calories and fat grams and who knows what. They have a freaky attraction to lettuce. It’s no fun eating with them. They take pride in not letting anything rich or sweet pass their lips.

The problem is, some people don’t let anything sweet pass their lips the other way either. They spew out the worst kind of pollution; their words are lethal. There is something wicked at the source of their character. It spits out its venom through their lips.

- The source of our conduct is our character. What we do exposes who we really are. Therefore, consider the source.

This is precisely the point Jesus made in our text

¹⁰ *Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen and understand.*

¹¹ *What goes into a man’s mouth does not make him ‘unclean,’ but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him ‘unclean.’”*

¹² *Then the disciples came to him and asked, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?”*

¹³ *He replied, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots.*

¹⁴ *Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit.”*

¹⁵ *Peter said, “Explain the parable to us.”*

¹⁶ *“Are you still so dull?” Jesus asked them.*

¹⁷ *“Don’t you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body?*

¹⁸ *But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man ‘unclean.’*

¹⁹ *For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.*

²⁰ *These are what make a man ‘unclean’; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him ‘unclean.’”*

In the New Testament letter of James we read, “*What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you?*” (James 4:1)

God’s word tells us quarrels and disputes are forged in the inner passions of our character.

We can all do our part to keep Crossroads a center of Christian truth and love by taking to heart the lessons Jesus taught about the source of fault-finding attitudes.

I. OVERSIMPLIFICATION PROVOKES CONFUSION. Matthew 15:10-11, 15-17

People usually blame conflict on what someone said or did. That's not it. That's way too simple.

If the cause of every quarrel were something external, objective—out there, then conflict would be fairly simple to resolve.

Why? Because we wouldn't have so much of ourselves invested in it.

All we'd need to do is insulate ourselves from negative outside influences and we'd enjoy a peaceful, hostility-free life.

- Some monastic orders and separatist religious groups try to keep evil out by banning contact with the outside world.

In the 5th century the Anchorites were a monastic group that tried to isolate themselves from all defilement from contact with the outside world. The best known Anchorite was Simon Stylites. He lived the last 30 years of his life on top of a stone pillar 70 feet above the ground.

Even today there are well-intentioned people who think that if they dress with extreme modesty and abstain from all intoxicants, they will squelch any unwholesome worldly arousals and be free from defilement.

But it's not that simple!

¹⁰ *Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen and understand.*

¹¹ *What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean.'"*

Jesus identified the real source of spiritual defilement.

It's not something that comes into us from out there.

Guarding against moral pollutants is a good thing. But it doesn't solve the problem of sin.

Do you remember Jesus' stunning put-down of the religious leaders of the day? *'Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean.'* (Matthew 23:27)

Their public persona was a calculated cover-up of who they really were.

- There is no religious practice or tradition that can eradicate evil from your life. It didn't work in Jesus' day, and it doesn't work today.

Sin, or the impact of evil, has corrupted every human being on the inside.

You've heard the expression: *'The fleas come with the dog.'* Sin comes with being human.

In his prayer at the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem King Solomon said, *'There is no one who does not sin.'* (2 Chronicles 6:36)

There is nothing out there makes you unclean, or sinful. It's already inside you.

Randall Balmer wrote *'The seductive darkness of the "world" for most of us . . . lies not in the taverns and bordellos and movie theatres but much closer to home, in the recesses of the heart. It's easier, though, and a good deal more comforting, to insist that the enemy is outside rather than inside.'* (Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*)

Watch what you allow to pass your lips going the other way. That's what's inside you, and it shows who you really are.

- Jesus told them to pay attention to what came out from its source inside them. That's how they could gauge the extent of their purity or righteousness.

¹⁵ *Peter said, "Explain the parable to us."*

¹⁶ *"Are you still so dull?" Jesus asked them.*

¹⁷ *"Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body?"*

There is scant correspondence between the spiritual and the gastrointestinal.

- Jesus was appalled at how obtuse the disciples were.

They were so steeped in their religious customs that they couldn't think beyond their traditions.

- Lots of people who have been marinated in a strong evangelical religious tradition tend to focus on externals.

Why? Because that's what other people see. It's important to give the right impression to other religious people.

It's tragic if they do that for a lifetime without ever dealing with what's inside—what God sees.

That's probably why gossiping and besmirching the character of others slips so easily out of the lips of many religious people.

If we want Crossroads Church be healthy and strong, then each of us has to deal with the pollution in our lives that we may have hidden from other people—but not from God.

II. UNDERESTIMATION PROMOTES DELUSION. Matthew 15:12-14

If we think that God sees us exactly the same way others see us, we are sadly deluded. We underestimate God. We can fool the people, but not God

Most of the Pharisees suffered from this delusion.

The people watched the Pharisees parading their piety in public. So the people viewed these religious leaders as the most righteous people in all the land.

It didn't occur to them that there might be any difference between what they saw and what God saw.

The Pharisees were outraged when Jesus probed beneath the surface of their lives and behind their outward acts.

Jesus was messing with the underpinnings of their religion.

Thomas Huxley said, *'Tragedy in science is the slaying of a beautiful hypothesis by an ugly fact.'* (Thomas Huxley)

The religious leaders held on to a cherished theory that they could be righteous by following the outward traditions of the elders.

Jesus destroyed that hypothesis by the ugly fact that they had serious problems inside them.

¹² *Then the disciples came to him and asked, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?"*

¹³ *He replied, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots.*

¹⁴ *Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit."*

Jesus used an agricultural metaphor to explain that Israel's religious leaders were not placed in their positions by God. God hadn't planted them.

Undoubtedly this shocked the disciples. No one would dispute the Pharisees' divine appointment.

God had "planted" or commissioned many leaders throughout Israel's history to speak his words to the people—all the prophets, including John the Baptist had been planted by God. But not these Pharisees, whose outward righteousness masked an inner rottenness.

- Jesus also said the Pharisees were spiritually blind. They didn't understand God's word. But they presumed to present themselves as spiritual guides for the people.

In their spiritual blindness they led people to destruction.

Jesus told his disciples, "Leave them; they won't do you any good."

This is a warning we should heed today. Sometimes there are people in churches who present themselves as religious leaders, and people follow them blindly because they respect their credentials—just as the disciples respected the Pharisees' credentials. But God hasn't placed them there. They have turned a blind eye to God's will, and people blindly follow them on a path of destruction.

The Apostle Paul warned the elders of the church at Ephesus to watch out for these people and to protect the church from them. (Acts 20:28-30)

The Pharisees underestimated what it meant to be true spiritual leaders. They thought it was all external. Jesus said they were deluded.

- We must be very careful about whose teaching we follow and whose opinions we believe.

Some people emanate tremendous confidence and exert powerful influence. They portray themselves as the true custodians of the truth.

You can count on serious problems in a church if people follow teachers and leaders who are not planted there by God. Beware of those who promote the delusion that they are the ones who should be followed.

Jesus did not give idle warnings. Following leaders who ignore God's will can cause unspeakable harm to the body of Christ.

III. INTROSPECTION PRODUCES CONTRITION. Matthew 15:18-20

If Jesus said it's what's inside us that matters most, then we'd better pay close attention to what's inside. We'd better take a good look.

But the view isn't always pretty. Isn't that the truth?

In the Book of Proverbs I read, *'As water reflects a man's face, so a man's heart reflects the man.'* (Proverbs 27:19)

It's much easier to ignore what we see inside and to focus on externals instead.

It's called denial, and it's dangerous.

Why? Because what's inside is the source of everything that comes out.

The New Testament letter of James brings this out forcefully by an analogy. *'Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt (bitter) water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.'* (James 3:10-12)

- Our modern culture tries to find excuses for people's problems by searching for causes outside rather than inside a person. The abuse a person may have suffered as a child is to blame for all his dysfunctions. Or blame all the violence on television for the heinous crimes people commit.

It's true that some abuses suffered in our past may have done serious damage to our lives. But those experiences are not the source of sin in anyone's life.

Let's take another look at what Jesus said about this:

¹⁸ *But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean.'*

¹⁹ *For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.*

²⁰ *These are what make a man 'unclean'; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him 'unclean.'"*

Wherever they went the Pharisees acted as religious inspectors scrutinizing people's behavior.

They didn't encourage people to love the Lord their God with all their heart and soul and mind and strength.

All that mattered was the external evidence that people followed the religious traditions. Did the people wash their hands before eating, and follow the traditions of the elders? (v.2)

- This is where Jesus was radically different from all the religious leaders of that day.

They cared only about external conformity; Jesus cared about internal authenticity.

The Pharisees would never be seen in the company of the unpatriotic and crooked tax collectors and other sinners. It wouldn't look right. But Jesus socialized with them, and they listened when he told them the truths that could change their lives from the inside out.

Jesus taught people to pay attention to who they were deep inside—their true self.

- Honest introspection produces contrition.

God said to his people through the prophet Isaiah, *'This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.'* (Isaiah 66:2b)

God loves the contrition that is produced when people quit playing games of denial and are willing to take an honest look at who they are on the inside. That's how our lives are changed.

That's why Jesus said to Nicodemus *'You should not be surprised at my saying, "you must be born again." . . . So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.'* (John 3:7-8)

The only way to deal with the problem of evil in your life is by a spiritual rebirth.

- It's possible to learn how to act like a follower of Jesus Christ. You can say the right things and participate in the services and programs of the church. People will assume that you are a good Christian, based on externals.

But you must be transformed inside your spirit by faith in Jesus Christ. That's the only way to deal decisively with the problem of sin in your life.

Everything depends on dealing honestly with who you are on the inside—your heart, your soul. God pays attention. He said he "esteems" the person who does that.

God sent Jesus Christ into the world to pay the penalty for your sin and to give you new life—eternal life, on the inside.

- People who live with an awareness of what God has done inside them, are humble people. They don't judge, they don't gossip. They encourage and they forgive, because they have been forgiven.

Have you been watching what others do instead of dealing with who you are?

Are there some church traditions that you have allowed to become so important to you that you've lost sight of our church's purpose to prayerfully introduce people to Jesus, grow them to be like Jesus, care for others, minister to others, and to glorify God?

Are you a little bit offended that I would suggest you take honest hard look at who you really are on the inside?

The Pharisees were offended when Jesus told them to stop focusing on external matters, and to deal with their own inner condition.

Crossroads will be spiritually strong and faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ as all of us deal with who we are internally instead of trying to impress people by what we project externally.