

## Our Defiling Mouths

Does what goes into our mouths matter? There's a lot of talk about that these days. Some say we should eat a lot of protein, and cut back on the carbohydrates. Some say we should eat lots of green, leafy vegetables, and cut back on all wheat products. And of course some say that we should cut way back on today's health nut's version of the antichrist: sugar. What do you say? I say, well, I'll . . . try. But I like ice cream. And bread. We Harders love our bread!

Okay, so if what we put into our mouths matters, why does it matter? Some people would say it's a matter of health and wholeness. We'll feel better if we eat right. We'll live longer. Have more energy. And of course, we'll look better. (With a slim, trim, flat stomach.)

There are some in our society who believe that what we put into our mouths matters for religious reasons. For example, Muslims avoid eating pork. Why? The simplest answer I found is that the Almighty God, in the Qur'an, tells them they shouldn't. And the Almighty God, who created them, also knows what's best for them.

Muslims aren't the only groups of people who avoid eating pork for religious reasons. Seventh Day Adventists don't eat pork. (In fact, they avoid all meat.) And as you probably know, Most Jews do not eat pork. Why? Because the Torah, our Old Testament, tells them not to. Way way back, in Leviticus 11:7, we find this: "And the pig, though it has a divided hoof, does not chew the cud; it is unclean for you."

Unclean. Now we're getting close to today's topic. The term "unclean" comes from the purity laws of ancient Israel, spelled out especially in the book of Leviticus. It has to do with keeping separate those things which just don't belong together. Divided-hoof animals (which were considered clean) from single-hoof animals (which are unclean). Animals that chew their cud (which are clean) from animals that don't (unclean). Uncleanness is considered contagious. And so it is important to keep the clean separate from the unclean.

It has to do with holiness. Which has to do with our separateness, our "set apart-ness," from the world around us. And ultimately, holiness has to do with our relationship with God. So we can see why it is important.

These purity laws—this holy concern with what we put into our mouths—is older than the Bible itself. The Jewish people had been following these laws for more than a thousand years already by Jesus' time. These laws had begun to govern not only what we put into our mouths, but how well we wash our hands before we eat. And Jesus, as we heard this morning, challenged those laws. Because they had become too important. Because the people following them had lost sight of the things that are most important to God. It's not what goes into our mouth—the food we eat—that defiles us, that makes us unclean. It's what comes out of our mouth—our words.

Now at last we have come to this morning's topic. What kinds of words defile us in the sight of God? That's easy: cuss words, right? Swear words, especially those that take the name of the Lord "in vain," like "God [blank] it." Right? Not necessarily.

In this passage, Jesus hints at the kinds of words which defile us. Verse 19. Words which express evil intention, words which commit murder, adultery, theft, false witness, slander.

These different kinds of words all have one thing in common: they are all words which hurt, or offend, or violate another person in some way. With that definition in mind, I'd like to propose for now three kinds of words which defile us in the sight of God. And then in the Sermon Discussion class we can see what other kinds we can come up with.

First, words spoken toward another in anger. In this case it's not the word itself that defiles us or make us unclean, but that it was spoken in anger. And it's not that anger itself defiles us, for there is a time to be angry; there is such a thing as righteous anger. It's when, out of that anger, we lash out at someone through what we say. It's like punching someone in the face, or stabbing them with a knife, or shooting them with a gun. Unlike knives or guns, words won't actually murder someone. But they sure can hurt, and that hurt can last a long, long time.

What can we do when angry words like that have been spoken? One thing we can't do is take it back or "unsay" it. Like a punch, or stab, or bullet, once it's been shot, it's shot. The damage has been done. What we can do is work toward healing, or at the very least, work toward forgiveness between the speaker and the hearer. "I'm really sorry that what I said hurt you." "Yes, it did hurt. But I choose to forgive you." And then, when enough time has passed, they both move on. Note that it's as important for the hearer as it is the speaker. If someone says something that hurts me, it's up to me to tell them. Because they might not realize it. And so there is no way for healing or forgiveness to happen.

Second, words that demean another person, or put them down. We might think of this as stealing from that person, except what is stolen is not someone's money, or property per se. But rather their integrity, or worth as a person. If I call someone a "doofus," even if I was just teasing or being playful, and it hurts that person's feelings, then I have stolen something valuable from them. In which case it is my obligation to return what I have taken (for example, that person's integrity or worth), or if it's too late to return it, to seek healing and forgiveness. As with words spoken in anger, we shouldn't underestimate the power of an apology, assuming it's sincere and authentic. A sincere apology is an act of humility, which lowers ourselves before the other. But note again that, as with words spoken in anger, there is a two-way responsibility for the healing. Because I might not know that something I said hurt another person unless they tell me, forgiveness and healing can't happen until they do.

There is another dimension or aspect to words which demean another person, which steal their integrity or worth. The harm happens whether that person was there to hear it or not. That person might not have heard it, but guess who did? God heard it. God knows that I have stolen something from another person whom God created, thereby damaging my relationship with God, in which case it's that relationship that needs to be made right, with an apology offered and forgiveness granted. And that, by the way, applies as much to demeaning words said about groups of people as it does words about individuals. Either way, a person whom God created is being demeaned, and even if the person or group of people don't know it, God does. Think about how many times a day that happens! I don't know about you, but I'm constantly saying demeaning things about others behind their backs.

Third, and finally for now, are words which deceive or mislead, or are otherwise dishonest. Trust and honesty are two of the most important currencies there are in human relationships. The wellbeing of a society, the well-being of a friendship, the well-being of a marriage all depend in part on honesty. When honesty is violated, trust is damaged. And when

trust is damaged, relationships suffer. It can take a long, long time for trust to be restored. Longer even than to heal words which are angry or demeaning.

This might seem like a stretch, but I would propose that this is true whether the other person knows they've been lied to or about, or not. If I say something dishonest to or about another person, the relational fabric of covenant is damaged. And God created us precisely for covenant. Even if the other person doesn't know they've been lied to or about, God knows. And, the damage is done.

What about withholding something honest from another? Is that the same as or as bad as lying to them? This isn't so easy, as clear cut. This requires us to weigh the difference between honesty on the one hand, and unnecessary bluntness on the other. It isn't always necessary to say everything that comes to mind. It isn't always a great idea for me to say something to Lois like "You're looking awfully old today." But if Lois asks me what I think, if she really wants to know, then I should tell her truth, right? How many of you think that if Lois asks me whether I think she looks old, I should tell her the truth? ☹️ (As I suspected; not many of you!) Let's just say that there are more loving ways of telling the truth.

In conclusion, I'm not saying that what we put into our mouths isn't important, whether for health reasons, or religious ones. And neither was Jesus. What he was saying is that we mustn't be excessively concerned about what we put into our mouths, to the point of overlooking what comes out of our mouths. One, Jesus points out, merely goes into our stomach, and ultimately out into the sewer. The other comes straight from our heart, damaging the very heart of others, both human and divine.

I want to give a nod and shout out to Don Klaassen, with whom I talked over breakfast at the Beacon on Friday about the crucial importance of personal responsibility. Make no mistake. We are completely responsible for everything that comes out of our mouths. If that isn't both scary and convicting, then you probably haven't been listening!

Finally, to return to the purity code, and the concept of clean versus unclean, if we remember that the meaning of holiness is to be "set apart," what would it take for the words we speak to set us apart from the world around us? And I mean in a good way? We'll discuss that further in the Faith and Issues class.

Amen.

Questions for pondering and discussion.

- Does cussing defile us? Why or why not?
- What would it take for our words to set us apart from the world around us?
- Can we say anything we want about another person if they're not around to hear it? Why or why not?
- Whom do we most often demean when they're not around?
- Tell about the SUV with two bumper stickers: the "middle finger," and the word "peace." What about those stickers might defile the person whose SUV it was?
- How can we express anger toward another person in a way that doesn't injure them and defile us?