

INTRODUCTION

G.K. Chesterton was one of the most vibrant and creative Christian writers of the 20th century. Let me tell you a favorite story of mine about him. A magazine wrote Chesterton and asked him to contribute an article addressing the question *"What Is the Problem with the World?"* Shortly thereafter, the magazine received a brief two-word reply from him that simply said, *"I am!"* He wasn't being facetious. He meant it and was right. He was the problem with the world.

And you know what? So are you and I. What is the problem with the world? You are! What is the problem with the world? I am! And that's what I'm going to preach about today. I'm going to preach about the problem with the world, in Romans 3:9-18, and, more happily, the solution to that problem, in Romans 12:1-2.

THE PROBLEM – THE GREATER EVILS OF MONSTROUS PEOPLE

Let's start with 3:10-18. In this passage, Paul quotes or alludes to various verses in Psalms, Proverbs, and Isaiah and uses them to describe people. His description is a vivid one. Verse 10 - not even one of them is righteous. Verse 11 - not one of them understands or seeks God. Verse 12 - each one is useless to God and not one does good. Verses 13-14 - their tongues are corrupted and they use them to deceive, lie to, criticize and degrade people. Verse 15 - they are at the ready to assault and even murder people. Verse 16 - they bring destruction or misery to people's lives. Verse 17 - they create constant conflict and strife with people. And finally, verse 18 - they are and do all of those evil things because they don't fear God and I mean at all.

That's a devastating assessment. What we have here are depraved human beings who have sunk to the depths of evil. They have an inherent readiness to evil and when conditions are right, do it. Pay attention to the information we get from television, radio, papers, and more. Evils like the ones in verses 10-18 are commonly reported to us.

Take these reported statistics, all in the United States, as an example of what I mean. 50,000 children disappear every year, never to be heard from again, many sexually abused, killed or enslaved. 600,000 young men and women under the age of 16 earn their living as prostitutes. And a white male baby has a going price of \$30,000 in the black market for children. Think about the kind of people who would kidnap and kill a child, have sex with a teenager, or sell or buy a baby. There's no doubt about it. Verses 10-18 refer to them.

But why do they do what they do? That's what shocked and bewildered people want to know. Why do they perpetuate such monstrous evils? Paul tells us in verse 9. It's because they're "*under sin.*" They were born with an independent power residing in them. That power is sin. That independent power reaches into every dimension of theirs and creates a readiness to evil in them. That readiness then expresses itself when conditions are right. The result is the monstrous evils that we see, hear about, or maybe even experience.

THE PROBLEM – THE LESSER EVILS OF DECENT PEOPLE

But so what? What do verses 10-18 have to do with decent people like us? We certainly aren't going to kidnap a child, have sex with a teenager, and so on. So what do verses 10-18 have to do with us?

Many of you know the name Adolph Eichmann. Eichmann was one of the chief architects of Hitler's holocaust, directing the wholesale slaughter of millions of Jews. He was eventually captured after the war and successfully tried. At his trial, prosecutors called a string of former concentration camp prisoners as witnesses against him, one of whom I want to tell you about, a small frail man named Yehiel Dinur.

On his day to testify, Dinur entered the courtroom and went forward to the witness stand but before sitting down, stopped and stared at Eichmann. It was one of those dramatic moments when victim meets murderous tyrant and as the eyes of the two men met, the courtroom grew silent and tense. Then suddenly, without warning, Dinur began to

sob uncontrollably and collapsed to the floor.

Almost everyone thought that hatred or horror, stirred by seeing Eichmann, caused him to collapse. But as he explained in a television interview later, it wasn't. It wasn't hatred or horror but the sudden realization that Eichmann wasn't the monster that he thought he was. On the contrary, he was just an ordinary person like the rest of us. That caused him to collapse because *"I was afraid about myself . . . that I am capable to do this . . . exactly like he."* Having said that Dinur then looked straight into the camera and spoke these chilling words, *"Eichmann is in all of us."* Think about that. Eichmann is in all of us.

Let me ask you. Was Dinur just emotionally upset and exaggerating when he said that? Or is it true. Yes, it's true. Eichmann is in all of us.

We see that in verse 9. Paul identifies whom he's about to describe in verses 10-18. It's *"both Jews and Greeks."* It's *"all."* Verses 10-18, in other words, describe you. They describe me. They describe every one on earth no matter how decent they are. And here's why.

Decent people like us have three basic goals in life. The first is security, getting our needs met. The second is satisfaction, getting our desires and wants fulfilled. And the third is status, being respected.

All of us value those three things, so much in fact that we're at the ready to do evil in order to get them. That's the basic condition or state of decent people. A systematic readiness to evil dwells in them. They're ready to harm others or to allow harm to come to others in order to preserve or promote their security, satisfaction, or status. That readiness fills common humanity. It's pervasive and deep.

When was the last time, for instance, that we got mad and mistreated someone who was thwarting or threatening our security, satisfaction, or status? Last winter, the wife of a celebrated televangelist got mad at a stewardess and acted so inappropriately toward her that she was thrown off of the plane. Several years before that, a celebrated televangelist was thrown off a plane for the same reason. Her dispute was over ski equipment and the televangelist's over

his pastoral robe. Do you see what they are? They're decent people, like us, who are ready to do evil when the conditions are right, in these cases, when someone threatened what they desired or wanted.

But still, we think, that doesn't make them or us like the people Paul describes in verses 10-18. Looking at verse 15, for instance, they and we certainly wouldn't kill anyone. Yes, we might get mad and mistreat a stewardess, motorist, spouse, or child. But we certainly wouldn't kill them. Surely, verses 10-18 don't refer to us. Right? Wrong! It does!

There's something we need to grasp about the lesser evils that we as decent people do. They lie on a continuum with the greater evils. According to Matthew 5:21-22, for instance, getting mad and calling someone a name lies on a continuum with killing them. Or according to 5:27-28, looking twice at a woman lies on a continuum with committing adultery. Thus, the televangelist's wife getting mad at and berating the stewardess lies on a continuum with shooting her. Lesser evils, in other words, involve the same inner dynamics that greater evils do. And besides that, the lesser evils that decent people do cause more misery in the world, collectively, than the greater evils that monstrous people do.

So Chesterton was right. What is the problem with the world? You are! What is the problem with the world? I am!

THE SOLUTION – THE BODY

But happily there's a solution to the problem – in Romans 12:1-2. These verses reveal two things that we, as followers of Jesus, have to do in order to replace the readiness to evil in us with the readiness to good.

First, according to verse 1, we have to present our body a living and holy sacrifice unto God. Our body is the little power pack that God has assigned to us. It is our field of freedom and how our life goes depends on how we manage and direct it. This verse calls us to manage and direct it in a specific way. That way is to lift it up and use it in ways that engage God and His kingdom. Doing that enables the Holy Spirit to replace the readiness of evil in us with the readiness to good.

Fasting illustrates what I mean. Fasting is a bodily activity. We purposely abstain from eating food for a period of time. Food pervasively affects all of us. It has a hold on all of us. Consequently, the effects of fasting permeate the entirety of our person and life. Remember what one of the goals of decent people is. It's satisfaction, getting our desires and wants fulfilled. Well, fasting retrains us away from that. It frees us from always having to have what we want. It teaches us to be calm, serene, and strong when we're deprived, even severely so. That in turn dramatically affects how we live.

I read the testimony of a man who committed himself to fasting. Listen to how he explains the effects of fasting on him: *"The anger which I unleashed at my wife and children was less frequent and the materialism that was squeezing the life out of my spirituality had loosened its grip."* It freed him from his desires and wants.

Fasting is just one of the practical ways that we can present our body as a living sacrifice to God. There are many others including solitude, silence, frugality, chastity, secrecy, sacrifice, study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, fellowship, confession, and submission. Learn what those activities are about and begin practicing them.

So that's the first thing that we do to in order not to be the problem with the world. Present our body a living sacrifice to God.

THE SOLUTION – THE MIND

The second thing that we have to do is found in Romans 12:2. We have to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

Our mind, like our body, is our field of freedom and how our life goes depends how we manage and direct it. Paul tells us how to manage and direct it in Colossians 3:2. We're to *"set it on the things above."* The things above refer to God and the words and scenes of His written word, the Bible. Let me explain what's behind what Paul's says here.

Before they decide to follow Jesus, decent people are burdened by the habits of dwelling on things less than God. Those things are

essentially the clutter and noise of the world around us. By the end of the day, they've given most of their thought to those things and very little, if any, to the things above. That in turn enhances the readiness to evil in them and diminishes the readiness to good.

Deciding to follow Jesus doesn't automatically break those habits of dwelling on things less than God. They're still there. Paul understood that. So, he calls us here to change the habits of our mind. He calls us to constantly direct and redirect our thoughts to the things above. He calls us to open our consciousness to them, to intentionally keep them before our mind as much as we can. Doing that causes new grace filled habits of thought to replace the old ones. Those new habits in turn diminish the readiness to evil in us and enhance the readiness to good.

Now, setting our mind on the things above requires two things of us. First, we must study and learn as much as we can about God and His word. Second, we must think as much as we can about God and His word.

A few months ago, for instance, I testified on a person's behalf in a hearing at the Mahoning County common pleas court. I was at the courthouse for several hours and during that time, set my mind, as much as I could, on the things above. I thought about Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 and what it says about you and I being judged. And Matthew 5:25,40 and what it says about prosecuting lawsuits. And 1 Corinthians 6:3 and what it says about you and I judging angels. And Revelation 20:11-15 and what it says about how God judges. And more.

You get the idea. That's how we set our mind on the things above. We learn and think about God and His word as much as we can.

CONCLUSION

I had a teacher in high school years ago who constantly challenged us with these words: *"Don't be part of the problem. Be part of the solution."* That is in fact our call today. As followers of Jesus, present your body a living sacrifice to God and set your mind on the things above. You'll be part of the solution not the problem if we do.