

*Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person. So says Jesus.*

There's trouble in aisle five. It also lurks in the frozen food aisle, the bread aisle, and the dairy aisle. The mischief-maker is highly processed food. Now, technically any food that's been altered from its natural state—like pasteurized milk, roasted coffee beans, or even precut veggies—is processed. So a little processing isn't necessarily a bad thing.

Highly processed foods, on the other hand, are stripped of their inherent nutrients or plied with sugar, sodium, unhealthy fats, or unrecognizable ingredients. Amazingly, these less than desirable eats now make up the bulk of foods on supermarket shelves, accounting for 58% of our calories and 89% of the added sugar in our diets.

“Prevention” magazine is here to help clean up our act in three simple steps. First, upgrade your pantry. Ditch white flour and anything made from it, forego most packaged breads, white rice, chips, and canned broth.

Step two, overhaul your fridge. Salad dressings, flavored yogurt, sausage, bacon, hot dogs, deli meats have to go. Step three, restock your freezer. Light ice cream, frozen dinners, breakfast sandwiches, frozen veggies in sauce, are forbidden.

Where is Jesus when you need him? Processed food wasn't a thing in his day but dietary restrictions of another kind were. It is unlikely Jesus dismissed the banned foods list because he wanted a lobster roll. It is more likely he wanted the crowd to know the Pharisees were straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel. What comes out of our mouths is much more important than what goes into them.

Maybe we could blame the coarsening of our speech on processed foods which have damaged our hearts. Christ turned water into wine, blindness into sight, hatred to love, the desire for revenge to forgiveness, and death to life. But the toughest act of all, according to his brother James, was to tame the tongue: *no one is able to tame the tongue: a restless evil full of lethal venom.*

The Psalmist's enemies use words as weapons. They *hatch evil plots and conceal the schemes deep in the inmost heart.* The evil intent of their hearts is revealed in their slanderous speech. Considerable damage is done to a person's position and security by malicious gossip. Sticks and stones are child's play compared to the power of words.

The words of Psalm 64 play on the power of words, words as the slings and arrows of chaos knocking at the door. Of remarkable importance is the reality that the final word of the psalm is not one of chaos but of praise and thanksgiving. In the end the enemies own words bring about their downfall.

*What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and that defiles a person.* According to Jesus, perjury and slander are every bit as evil as murder, adultery, and theft. He is alluding to the second half of the decalogue (ten commandments). His language recalls the Sermon on the Mount, which refers several times to the heart and demands that it be pure and focused in intent.

The heart, for Matthew, is the center of a person's willing, thinking, knowing, deciding, and doing. The stress on the heart, on the interior life of religion, on intention and attitude, is indeed found throughout Matthew and is a chief characteristic of the whole of his gospel. At the heart of Matthew's gospel is the demand for integrity, for harmony between thought and act, for heeding the inner meaning of the commandments.

The disciples are called to live lives of faithfulness and trust. Trust depends on truthfulness. Perjury and slander sabotage the habits necessary to sustain a community capable of forming a people of virtue.

At Jesus' trial before Pilate, perjury and slander pave the way for murder. Violent rhetoric seeds violent acts. According to Jesus, the person whose rhetoric ignites the violence is every bit as guilty as those who act violently.

Language is sacramental; it makes visible spiritual realities. The intentions of our hearts, sometimes unknown even to ourselves, are revealed in our speech. Our speech is an audible sign of an invisible reality—the condition of our hearts.