

Theology is the study of God. Geology is the study of the earth. Zoology is the study of animals. Can you guess the term that is attached to the study of trash? Garbology.

Professors such as Stephanie Hughes of Santa Clara University take students on tours of paper recycling plants, sewage treatment plants, and household hazardous waste facilities. Apparently, you need a very strong stomach to handle her garbology class.

Hughes tells *NPR* that humans are different from other species because we produce “things that cannot be used again in nature.” In every other species, waste from one animal will naturally become nutrients for another. But we humans end up with stuff we cannot use, and we call it “garbage.” Apparently, Humans are the only species that needs a trash can.

One solution is to get better at recycling, which we don’t do well today. Hughes has seen diapers, greasy pizza boxes and unrinsed yogurt cups in recycling bins. Most plastics, like the containers that blueberries come in, are not even recyclable in many cities. “All of this reduces the quality of the contents of those recycling bins,” says Hughes. “And sometimes those just have to go right to the trash.”

A woman named Claire Parchem graduated from Santa Clara University back in 2016, and she was so inspired by her garbology class that she got an internship with Waste Management. Today, she is a manager at a company called AMP Robotics, which programs robots to do the work of sorting waste from recycling. Imagine that: a robot, picking through trash.

But what about the garbage we generate in our relationships with family members, friends, neighbors, and even with God? There is no robot that can clean up *that* mess. This is evident through the words of the prophet Isaiah who offers a prayer of confession in which he says, “We have all become like one who is

unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.” Isaiah admits that our words and actions are unclean in the eyes of God, including our righteous deeds. In other words, it’s as if we are decomposing like leaves in a compost pile, and our iniquities take us away to a garbage dump.

Perhaps we might consider the possibility that Isaiah would appreciate the idea of combining a study of trash with a study of God, in a class that could easily be called “Garbology and God.” When we complete it, we’ll discover that God has provided a way for us to deal with our garbage.

First, we begin by admitting that we all produce unclean words and filthy deeds. Maybe we make a critical or mocking comment on Facebook, trying to get a reaction. We gossip about a neighbor or stab a colleague in the back. Perhaps we cheat on a test at school, tell a lie to a boss or betray a spouse or a friend. All these words and actions make us dirty. They are the garbage that cannot be easily recycled or turned into something that is helpful to someone else. They are simply trash, and they stink!

Thankfully, God spoke through the prophet Isaiah to reveal his will to the people of Israel, and to call his people to return to the right path. Although the prophet sometimes spoke about the future, he was not primarily a fortune teller. Instead, he is best understood as a truth teller, bringing words of challenge and comfort to the Israelites.

Living in the eighth century before Christ, Isaiah challenged the people of Jerusalem to practice social justice, which means to treat all people fairly, judging them by the same standards and offering them the same respect. “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean,” he said; “remove your evil deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow.” Bible scholar Brevard Childs says that these words

of the prophet were delivered “to a corrupt, complacent, and self-righteous population.” One might even say they need to continually be spoken for all to hear in this day and age.

Jerusalem was full of corrupt leaders who spent time with thieves. Greed was rampant, bribery was everywhere, and people loved chasing gifts for themselves. The poorest of the poor — orphans and widows — were overlooked and ignored. The rich got richer, and the poor got poorer. Sound familiar?

Isaiah issues the same challenge to us today: To wash ourselves and make ourselves clean, so that our words and deeds are no longer a filthy cloth. Notice how doing good, in the eyes of God, has everything to do with our caring for the most vulnerable people around us: those treated unfairly, the oppressed, the outcast, the marginalized, the persecuted, the downtrodden.

Ok, so how do we get rid of our filthy deeds and words? Tim Keller, a Presbyterian leader who died earlier this year, said that the “first facet of biblical justice is **radical generosity**. While secular individualism says that your money belongs to you, and socialism says your money belongs to the State, the Bible says that all your money belongs to God, who then entrusts it to you.” That’s right. Our money does not belong to us or to the State. It belongs to God, who allows us to use it.

When we practice generosity, we begin to cleanse the filthy cloth of greed and selfishness within us. Since our money belongs to God instead of us, we are to use it in line with God’s purposes. This means that we practice God’s justice by feeding the hungry and housing the homeless, so that all may have the food and shelter they need. Your money is in your control “and no one must confiscate it from you,” said Keller. “Yet you have moral obligations to both God and your neighbor to use your money unselfishly and with great generosity to love others with it, according to both your ability and to their needs.”

That is such a wonderful reminder for us during Advent as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ, but as we also prepare for his eventual return. We need to remember that our gracious God who blesses us to bless others, calls us to radical generosity, especially in this season of giving.

The Good news is that we can also be cleansed by seeing that God “works for those who wait for him.” God helps us when we turn to him in prayer, but often in ways we do not expect. The whole point of prayer is not to change God, but instead to change ourselves.

One of the most well-known modern prayers is the Serenity Prayer, said first by Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr during World War II. It is now central to the recovery from addiction being achieved in thousands of 12-step groups: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.”

Notice that God is not being asked in this prayer to heal anyone miraculously. Instead, the prayer asks for God to give people the qualities they need in order to lead sober and healthy lives. God works for those who pray to him, turning them into people who can live with serenity, courage, and wisdom. As Isaiah promises, God meets “those who gladly do right” and who remember God’s ways.

We can be thankful that God is not finished with us. We are not pieces of garbage that God is anxious to toss into the dump. Instead, we are “the clay,” according to Isaiah, and God is the potter. We are the work of God’s hands, and God is continually molding us into the people that he wants us to be.

Of course, there are times, however, when the shaping of the potter is not enough. We also need forgiveness. In order to be fully cleansed of our filthy deeds and words, we need God to “tear open the heavens and come down.” We need for God to put away anger and choose **not** to “remember our iniquity forever.”

Fortunately, God has done this in the coming of Jesus the Redeemer. In the ancient world, the role of a redeemer was played by someone who paid a debt for a debtor or freed a captive through the payment of a ransom. In the Bible, the role of our Redeemer is played best by Jesus, the one who gives us “redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace.” (Ephesians 1:7). Jesus is the Redeemer who buys us back from slavery, pays our debts, and cleanses us from our sin.

“Do not fear,” says God through the prophet Isaiah. “I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” With the help of God, we are never destined for the trash heap, no matter how messy our lives have become. Instead, we recycle ourselves by seeking justice, practicing generosity, being changed by prayer, and receiving the gift of forgiveness.

In the eyes of God, we are never garbage. Instead, we are people who can always be cleansed, always be transformed, always be redeemed. And thanks be to God for that! Amen!