

From the Heart!

Mark 7:1-23 (ESV)

November 17, 2002

“This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” God wants us to worship him from our hearts. God wants us to honor, praise, trust, and obey him from the core of our being, not just the surface. Today’s readings make that clear. Isaiah quotes the Lord to criticize the people of his day for worshiping God with their mouths and lips while their hearts were far away. Jesus quotes Isaiah quoting the Lord to chastise the people of his day for caring more about the rules and regulations they had added to worship than about the inner, spiritual realities of worship which God sought from their hearts. Mark quotes Jesus quoting Isaiah quoting the Lord to warn the church of his day against making the same mistake again. And now I have quoted Mark quoting Jesus quoting Isaiah quoting the Lord. God wants us to worship him from our hearts.

God chastises people for not worshiping him from the heart, because God desires, seeks, intends, and provides for true worship from the heart. The heart is the center of the self, the depth of one’s being. God wants true, honest, and complete devotion flowing out from the center of our being and involving all that we are.

The problem is that the desired worship of God from the human heart is not forthcoming. The fact that it has to be asked for indicates that the human heart has become disoriented. Designed to latch on to God, it now lacks true knowledge of God. So the heart seizes upon whatever pretenders are available. By elevating these counterfeits into false gods, the human heart becomes a factory for all kinds of evil instead of good. Jesus cites a long list of the evils that displace the worship of God from the heart. If money becomes one’s god, then greed and theft pour forth from the soul. If sexuality becomes a god, then fornication, adultery, and licentiousness result. If a person becomes his or her own god, if one places oneself at the center of one’s universe, then the perverted and self-centered heart spews forth pride and folly. Jesus makes the point well. It is not unclean food or unwashed hands that puts one in trouble before God. “What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts.” That is the problem. We have reduced the human heart, with which we are supposed to worship God, to nothing more than the source of all evil thoughts and actions. Now what can we do?

Someone always says, “Look within yourself to find God.” That is the worst possible advice. When we look within, we find our old, messed up heart. When we

find that heart, we find the source of all evil thoughts and actions. The more we look, the worse it gets. That is not a good place to be poking around! There are secrets hidden there that would best stay hidden. If we look within our old hearts, we will find hurt, anger, disappointment, betrayal, pettiness, hatred, failure, and deep, impenetrable darkness. The more dirt we find, the more desperate we become, and the farther away we are from worshiping God. We have become our own worst enemy, so it is not helpful to look within ourselves for solutions.

Others will say, "Try harder to be good, and work harder to do good." There is no doubt that we all need to be better and to do better. But since the heart is the source of all evil thoughts and actions, and since the core of our being has us started in the wrong direction, trying harder is not going to help. Since we are heading the wrong direction to start with, trying harder will carry us farther from the goal. We need help from outside.

So here is our human predicament: God has created us to be his own people, to be united with him in love and fellowship; God has designed us with hearts to be focused upon him, and God desires that we worship him from our hearts; and yet, our hearts have become twisted, malformed, perverted, latched upon every pitiful and imaginable piece of the universe as if some mere fellow creature were our god, instead of being focused upon God our Father and Creator, our Judge and Redeemer. All evil thoughts and actions spew forth from the heart and fill the world with evil thoughts, words, and actions. So what can be done?

There is a solution to our problem. There is one, God-given, true and perfect answer to this mess. God does not mock us. Since God desires that we worship him from the heart, God provides a way for this to happen. What is the solution? If our hearts are no good, we need new hearts. As the Psalmist says, "Create in me a clean heart, O God!" This is the only way that we can worship God from the heart. Only by this overwhelming grace and mercy of God can we worship God rightly. We cannot undo the mess we are in. We cannot repair our broken hearts. We cannot create new hearts. We cannot go back to the beginning and start over. Only by the mighty acts of God can we be given a new heart, one turned away from sin and evil and turned toward God. Only God can give us this new starting point and a new life. Does God desire us to worship from our hearts? Then God can and does give us new hearts with which to do this.

This may sound too radical to you. "Sure," you might say, "we have all messed up a little bit, and some more than a little, but we are not that bad. We are not rotten to the core. We love God and try to do what is right. Our hearts are in the right place, even if we do not always live up to it. So why do we need new hearts?" If the human predicament were not so bad, if we could find our way back to God on our own, why did Jesus have to come and be born on earth? If we did not need a

whole lot of help, more help than the whole world put together could deliver, why did Jesus Christ, the Son of God, have to die on the cross? You see, if sin were only a little problem, we would not need much help with it. If we could fix it ourselves, we would not need Jesus. If we could find our own way home, Jesus would not have needed to die. And yet, Jesus did come and live and die among us and be raised again. The immensity of this solution indicates the severity of our problem.

We are in a mess we cannot clean up ourselves. Since the heart is the deep center of human being, once it is polluted and misdirected, nothing flowing out of it can cleanse or correct it. And yet, we can bear this deepest and darkest view of sin, because we have the cure in the powerful and wonderful reality of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. The solution of receiving a new heart is radical because the problem is severe. If we say we are not so bad, we reject the gift. Receiving the gift involves a profound recognition of the seriousness of our problem and of our unworthiness to receive the gift. This is a confession of sin. So hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ is not easy and is not to be taken lightly: it is as radical as having a heart transplant!

How and where do we receive this new heart? Not by looking within ourselves. Not by trying harder to justify our existence. No, the only way to receive the new heart is this: look to Jesus Christ. Look to him on the cross. Let the cross lift your eyes away from yourself to see this great and terrible sight. Let your hands rest from their many strivings, as you realize what great works God has accomplished for us. Here on the cross is one who had a good heart, one who did no wrong, one who lived in perfect communion with God, one who obeyed God even when it cost him his life. Here is one who loved his enemies and prayed for those who persecuted him. Here is one whom hate could not conquer. Here is one whom evil killed but could not break. Here is one whom death claimed but could not hold. God was present with us in Jesus Christ. He took on all the pain, rejection, and evil of the world, without retaliation He absorbed evil in suffering, and thus he undid evil.

In Jesus Christ on the cross, we see the suffering love for us in the very heart of God. As we look, the misdirections of our old hearts are taken away. God lifts our attention away from ourselves and toward God in Christ. And a miracle occurs: God places a new heart within us. A new life begins. The grace of God elicits our gratitude in response. And so we do worship God from the heart. That is why we point people toward Jesus Christ on the cross. That is all a preacher can do. That is all the church can do. No one can receive the gift of a new heart anywhere else. But here we do receive it. Thanks be to God!

What good flows from a new heart? Good, true, God-desired worship flows forth from a new heart. The heart that God gives us when we see the outpouring of his heart on the cross responds in kind with an outpouring of love and worship.

Since the heart is our center, the core of our being, the spring or well from which all the rest of our being, self, and identity flow, when good and true worship flows from the new heart, it flows throughout our whole being. We worship God from our heart and therefore with our mouths and lips, also.

“This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” God wants us to worship him from our hearts. If that word stood alone, the expectation would crush us. We cannot meet it with our old hearts. Yet within the desire of God, we find God’s grace, which gives what it commands. By the cross of Jesus Christ, God creates in us new hearts with which to worship God.

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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