

Where Is Your Heart?

Psalm 24:1-10, Matthew 15:1-20

Where is your heart? Is it near to God? Or, is it in the gutter? That is the question, and those are the two choices, presented by today's reading. Where is your *heart*? It was designed, created, and intended to be close to God. Unfortunately, too many are far away from God, spewing forth filth and venom. And, according to our reading, too many of those are within the church. Where is *your* heart? Come with me today as we listen to the word of God and seek to find our hearts.

The first thing being said here is that God has spoken to us. Jesus says, "For the sake of your tradition, you have made void the word of God." The first, deepest, most important, underlying truth here is that God has spoken. The silence of the heavens has been broken. The emptiness of our lives has been filled. The aching of our hearts has been addressed. God has spoken to us and for us.

The second thing being said here is that God has especially spoken to us in Jesus Christ. The people coming to Jesus, the people whom he criticized so sharply, were Bible students and scholars. They were religious people. They knew about the Ten Commandments. But Jesus authoritatively reinterpreted their well known scripture for them. Jesus spoke for God and on behalf of God, saying anew what the word of God said and meant. From this point on, all correct and authoritative interpretation of the word of God must be made in and through Jesus Christ.

The third thing being said here is that we are the ones being spoken to. We are the ones to whom the word of God is addressed. We are the ones for whom Christ came. The fundamental stance of the human being before God is one of listening. Of course, we are not only to hear but also to believe and to obey, but all of this begins with listening. In that God has spoken and especially has spoken in Jesus Christ, we are to listen. We are to listen not as an avocation, not as a hobby, not as an aside, but with our heart, soul, mind, and strength, as if our lives depended on it, for in fact they do.

The fourth thing being said here is that we are what we are by the divine and sovereign initiative of God. "Every plant which my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up." Conversely, what God has planted will prosper. We are what we are by the wisdom, providence, grace, and mercy of God Almighty. This is not fatalism. Far from it, this is our only hope. God alone can and does clean our filthy

hearts, and draw them back to himself, and he does it precisely by the preaching of this gospel.

God relates to us at the deepest level of our humanity, at the center of our being. God addresses the heart, because the heart is the part that matters. The heart determines the basic orientation of the self, and everything else grows out as expressions of that basic direction. This means that God addresses our whole humanity. There is nothing human that God neglects or ignores. There is nothing that God overlooks or leaves out. God addresses our heart to claim our total allegiance: heart, soul, mind, and strength. God speaks to the heart, because the heart must be changed and healed for there to be any health and wholeness about human life. God knows that the gonewrongness of our lives goes to the very depths of our being. God knows what it takes to heal that. In Jesus Christ, God touches and heals our deepest wound.

What does this gospel have to do with us today? What difference does any of this make for our lives? First of all, this gospel has profound implications about the way we worship. We are supposed to hear the word of God spoken to us and for us. This is what worship is for and what it is all about. Jesus specifically condemns worship which involved teaching human ideas as doctrine instead of listening to the word of God. “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.’” Do you hear what that is saying? The great danger is that the people of God will gather, ostensibly to worship God, but then waste their time by teaching human ideas instead of preaching the word of God. Whatever else today’s reading tells us, it tells us this: we had better stick close to the Bible if we want to worship God rightly.

So, we shape our worship in ways that are faithful to the word. We read and preach because the scriptures say to. We base our prayers of confession, thanksgiving, intercession, and dedication on those we find in scripture. We sing hymns that praise God because the scriptures direct us to. There is always a temptation to move away from the biblical base for worship to some human invention. There’s always a temptation to add something to worship because it’s pretty, or it’s cute, or it makes us feel good, or everyone else is doing it. Yet Presbyterian worship, at its best, has always gone back to the simplicity and the integrity of the biblical roots of worship.

Second, this gospel has profound implications for our understanding of the authority of scripture. The scripture is the word of God spoken to us and for us. It is nothing less than the word of God. It is nothing other than the word of God. It is the word of God! This is a tremendous issue before the church today. This will be the root of important debates and decisions made at the General Assembly of the

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) when it meets in a few weeks. Again, there are people in the church who want to set aside the word of God and follow instead their own inclinations, predispositions, orientations, leanings, learnings, life-styles, and choices. There is an arrogance involved in the conviction that they know better than God who we are and what we are about. There is a frightening stupidity involved in the assumption that they know better than God what the church is to be and to do. That God has spoken to us in Jesus Christ means that the scripture is authoritative for our faith and life.

Third, this gospel of Jesus Christ captures our hearts. And with our hearts, it captures our souls, our minds, and our strengths, our whole beings and selves. This is our hope. This is our salvation. Hearts which have wandered far away from God are recaptured and brought home to God again.

God made us to worship God from the heart. That's what human existence is all about. The problem is that we've allowed our heart to become attached to false gods. Our hearts become attached to our own survival, to self-elevation and promotion, and to the need for success. Our hearts become attached to money and all it can buy. Whatever the heart fastens onto, the heart makes that into its god. That becomes the focus of worship. Of course, when this happens, it crowds out any response of the heart to the God and Father of Jesus Christ. So even if we do worship God, we run the risk of it being only an external activity, not a heart-felt one. Not that the external activity is unimportant. It's very important, primarily as an expression of the internal activity of the heart and secondarily as a teacher of the internal activity of the heart. The problem comes when the internal and the external get disconnected. This happens when our hearts become attached to false gods instead of the true God.

The good news is, this is why God speaks to the heart. God speaks to heal our heart. God elicits from the heart the response that reattaches it to God. God speaks to our heart to refocus our hearts upon God and to restructure our lives around God. To say that God expects a response from the heart is not only to say that God has designed it that way. It is also to say that God acts to heal the heart. God captures our attention with the cross of Jesus Christ. God wins our hearts over. And because our souls are bound to God, they are set free from all the distractions that compete for our allegiance. God saves us. The healing word of God begins with radical surgery. It cuts away all our false and misdirected worship. Yet God speaks to the heart to win a response from the heart. He calls forth our answer from the depths of our being. Because God expects it from us, he makes it possible for us. This is good news: God expects and provides for us to respond to God from our hearts, with worship, faith, gratitude, and obedience.

We worship God with our whole being. To worship God with the heart is more than worshiping with an abundance of feeling and emotion. Feeling and emotion are important. Genuine worship cannot be cold and lifeless. Yet life is more than feeling, and humanity is more than emotion. The heart is not one part among many. It is the center. It is the core from which everything else grows. So worship from the heart does not mean feelings alone. It means worshiping God with our whole being, with all that we are. We want to believe with all our heart, to understand with all our mind, and to obey with all our strength. That's why the commandment is, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30). It starts with the heart. Then it involves our total being. So worship from the heart appeals to and expresses our emotions: joy, sorrow, love, exhilaration, and gratitude. Yet it also appeals to and expresses the best and deepest thoughts of our minds. And it calls us into a life of service and obedience that demand our greatest strengths. We do well to remember John Calvin's motto: "My heart I offer to you, Lord, promptly and sincerely." This guided the dedication of his whole life to the service of God.

To worship God from the heart involves worthy gifts of our time, our abilities, and our money. One of the responses that God's grace elicits from our hearts is gratitude. But to say "Thank you" without giving God worthy gifts in return would be worshiping with empty words instead of from the heart. We worship God with all that we are and all we have. Some would tell us that we shouldn't discuss money in church. That's not true. Money is one of God's strongest competitors for our hearts. As Jesus says, "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). They are that closely attached! To withhold our full and grateful offerings from God is to withhold our hearts. Yet to make worthy offerings to God, offerings in response and proportion to all God has given us, is to give our hearts gladly to God.

We also share the good news with other people. As God speaks to our heart and we worship God from the heart, our heart overflows. We tell other people about the love of God because we cannot keep it to ourselves. We tell other people where to hear the word of God because it means so much to us. We speak the words of comfort, hope, welcome, and invitation. We give the desperate a word of hope. We give those who are searching directions to their destination. We give those who are suffering a place of comfort. We give those who are strong a place to serve.

Fourth, this gospel has profound implications for the nature and practice of the Christian life. The Christian life is not simply a matter of outward behavior. The Christian life has to do with flows out of our heart, the core of our being. If our heart is close to God, good things come forth from the heart. But if our hearts are far from

God, vile and nasty things are spewed forth, far worse than what happens when we eat ceremonially unclean food. This very passage condemns a number of human activities which flow from the unclean heart: “evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.” I take it that this list is not meant to be exhaustive but merely suggestive of an innumerable host of evil deeds flowing from the human heart. The point here is that evil is evil, so that we are not at liberty to say these things are good. And yet, there are many in the world and even some in the larger church today who want to fly into the very face of scripture, who want to throw the words of Jesus Christ back into his face, and who want to say that many of these things are good, clean, loving, acceptable, God-given, and honorable ways of life which should be recognized as such by the church! This is outrageous! This cannot be allowed to happen!

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To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.

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