



THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Catalog No. 1314
 Jeremiah 17:1-18
 15th Message
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 June 3rd, 2001

The heart is the most vital organ of the human body. People can live even if they are missing certain valuable members of their bodies — things like hands, legs, feet, eyes or ears, but no one can live without a heart. Not only is the heart the most vital organ of the body, it is considered to be the center or source of our emotions — our personality, thoughts and feelings. The heart is closely connected with our moods, energies, convictions, indeed our very nature. Daily we use words like heartache, heartbroken, heartfelt, heartless, heartsick, after one's own heart, change of heart, from the bottom of one's heart, have a heart, in one's heart of hearts, take heart, with all one's heart, with half a heart, lose heart, and near one's heart.

The heart then is the most vital element of physical life. We take great care to maintain its health so that we will not suffer heart attack or heart failure. We are careful to exercise, eat properly, and check our cholesterol. The heart is also the most vital element of our spiritual life. If we were to attend to the center of our spiritual life in the same way that we care for our physical life, we would take extraordinary steps to keep our hearts pure and healthy. Hearing this can give us heartburn at times, however. That is because we know how inattentive we are to our spiritual heart. We know that we are fickle and wayward, that we have a heart condition that needs to be corrected. So let us attend to our hearts this morning. My prayer is that we would leave here with pure hearts, healed hearts.

Our text is Jeremiah 17. In these verses we encounter the word "heart" four times. Unfortunately, time does not permit me to go through the entire text verse by verse, because its poetic lines are densely packed with truth. Verses 5-8 of this chapter set out a remarkable contrast between the man who trusts in mankind and the man who trusts in God. We might say that this text gets to the heart of the matter.

Thus says the LORD,

**"Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind
 And makes flesh his strength,
 And whose heart turns away from the LORD.
 For he will be like a bush in the desert
 And will not see when prosperity comes,
 But will live in stony wastes in the wilderness,
 A land of salt without inhabitant. (Jer 17:5-6, NASB)**

The man who trusts in human flesh and human strength is cursed, according to our text. This is speaking of physical strength, intellectual prowess, business

acumen, military, economic or technological power. Everything that this kind of man depends on comes from within himself or from others who provide the strength he needs to live. He surrounds himself with people and things that make him feel strong.

These words were addressed to the kings and leaders of Judah. At the time, the nation was surrounded by superpowers—Egypt, Assyria, and the rising Babylon. Judah kept trying to make alliances with these nations, especially Egypt, to achieve national security. This word was spoken to the people of Judah who climbed every high hill to proclaim their trust in Baal, hoping that the god of the Canaanites would bless them with water and crops. It speaks to us also when we put our trust in the economy, our job, or in the prowess of our CEO. It speaks to us when we trust in our bank account, our personality, our natural abilities. It speaks to us when we trust in our homes, our possessions, even our spouses.

This word reveals that this man who trusts in mankind is anxious to find strength but is depending on someone or something other than God for that. God is not the object of his trust. This man seeks comfort, security and strength from human sources. His mission is to amass human strength and make that the object of his faith. His heart turns away from the Lord.

Notice the connection between trust and heart. Trusting in human strength and a heart turning away from the Lord are two aspects of trying to find strength and security apart from God. When our heart turns away from God, we will trust in human strength. When we find ourselves seeking strength from human sources, that is a revelation that something is wrong with our heart.

This misplaced trust is symptomatic of a deeper problem, the source of which God reveals in the next verses.

**"The heart is more deceitful than all else
 And is desperately sick;
 Who can understand it?
 I, the LORD, search the heart,
 I test the mind,
 Even to give to each man according to his ways,
 According to the results of his deeds. (Jer 17:9-10)**

The word "deceitful," which comes from the same root word as the name Jacob's, denotes treachery. "Desperately sick" means incurable. This is the same word that we encountered in Jeremiah 15, when the prophet

asked God, "Why is my pain perpetual and my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?" Our hearts are afflicted with a chronic ailment. They are fickle, untrustworthy and unfaithful.

We got a new puppy a year ago. Her favorite game is taking something that belongs to someone else, a toy, a ball, whatever, and running away with it. The object of the game is to get every dog and its owner and every child in the park to chase her to try and retrieve the thing she has so deftly stolen. My wife gets very upset with this behavior. She takes it personally. For her, a good day is a day when no one is at the park. A bad day is when she returns either in tears or in a rage, having chased Lucy for an hour.

Our hearts suffer from the same malady as my dog. They run after everything they should not have: pleasure, success, power, evil. Our hearts get wild and uncontrollable impulses to steal and take. They take delight in being the center of attention. They run away from their owner, from God himself. They operate by deceit, under cover. They mask their intentions in the guise of goodness, kindness, love, even religion. As the hymn writer put it, "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, Prone to leave the God I love." We know the good we should do but we do evil anyway.

A recent article in *Newsweek* had this to say about the roots of evil:

In their search for the nature and roots of evil, scholars from fields as diverse as sociology, psychology, philosophy and theology are reaching a far more chilling conclusion. Most people do have the capacity for horrific evil, they say: the traits of temperament and character from which evil springs are as common as flies on carrion. "The capacity for evil is a human universal," says psychiatrist Robert I. Simon, director of the program in Psychiatry and Law at Georgetown University School of Medicine. "There is a continuum of evil, of course, ranging from 'trivial evils' like cutting someone off in traffic, to greater evils like acts of prejudice, to massive evils like those perpetrated by serial sexual killers. But within us all are the roots of evil.

These experts agree with Jeremiah: the problem lies within us, in our deceitful hearts. Jesus said, "The things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile a man" (Matt 15:18).

We think we can conceal our deceptive hearts. Well, we may be able to fool most of the people most of the time, but we cannot fool God. God sees everything, because he searches the heart. He said to Samuel when the prophet anointed David as king, that He "sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." Adam tried to hide in the garden and failed. We can't hide, either, even in church. The source of our problem is a deceitful heart. We would be wise to accept this diagnosis, because God knows all about it.

So we have a diagnosis. Now what is the prognosis for our chronic heart condition? If we do not attend to our heart and keep trusting in human things, we are headed for disaster. God says that the man who trusts in mankind and whose heart turns away from him will be cursed. He will lead a dry, lonely, isolated, withered life. This is what we discover in the three metaphors in verse 6: a bush in the desert, stony wastes in the wilderness, and a land of salt without inhabitants. The bush is perhaps a juniper, a shrub with a stunted root system that does not penetrate to the water level beneath the surface. The word is derived from the idea to make bare; other derivatives include destitute and childless. John Calvin suggests that this particular shrub may well give the appearance of life even though its root system is dead. Stony wastes denotes a dry, withered, parched place. A land of salt is a place that is devoid of life and vegetation.

The consequences of turning away from God and trusting in evil are thirst, loneliness, and sterility. When prosperity or good comes we won't even see it. When our heart turns away from God, it withers and dies.

Our text points out another consequence of an unhealthy, diseased heart.

**The sin of Judah is written down with an iron stylus;
With a diamond point, it is engraved upon the tablet of their heart (Jer 17:1).**

Here Jeremiah uses the graphic metaphors of an iron stylus and a diamond point, instruments used for engraving on hard surfaces. Our hearts become hardened when we turn away from God. If we continue in this direction, God makes a record of our sin on the tablet of our hearts, a permanent, irreversible record of our guilt. It can't be changed, denied or forgotten. It is written in the ultimate place of memory. Our heart becomes a personal diary written by God, that we and others can read.

The symptom of the deep problem in our lives is trusting in the wrong thing. The diagnosis is a deceitful heart. The prognosis is a withered and hardened life.

Next, the man who trusts in mankind is contrasted with the man who trusts in the Lord.

**"Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD
And whose trust is the LORD.
For he will be like a tree planted by the water,
That extends its roots by a stream
And will not fear when the heat comes;
But its leaves will be green,
And it will not be anxious in a year of drought
Nor cease to yield fruit. (Jer 17:7-8)**

The man who trusts in the Lord turns his heart towards the God. He not only trusts in the Lord, his trust is the Lord. This is a beautiful repetition and narrowing of thought. This man doesn't merely trust in what the LORD does or gives, he trusts in who he is.

The curse of verse 5 is contrasted with blessing. The man who trusts in the Lord and turns his heart toward God will be like a tree that will always have a supply of water. He will not fear when the heat comes; he will not be anxious in times of drought. The leaves of this tree will be green and healthy. It bears fruit and yields a blessing to others.

The tree is in contrast to the desert shrub. One is destined for life, the other for death. One has a root system that brings nourishment, the other does not. One has adequate water, the other does not. One sees the good, the other does not. One has no fear and anxiety, the other is always desperate. The man who places his trust in mankind to find security so that he can avoid fear and anxiety will find his source of comfort lacking. The only way to avoid these things is to trust in the LORD.

Jeremiah uses another very powerful metaphor, the image of water, together with insights about the heart. The heart that does not trust in God lacks water. It becomes dry and is always thirsty. When drought or crisis strikes, it will wither. On the other hand, the heart that trusts in God will always be filled from the wellspring of God's reservoir. It will never lack, not even in times of crisis. Thus the blessing is an abundance of water, and the curse is the lack thereof.

Water was a most valuable resource Jeremiah's day, just as it is today. Considerable effort was expended to dig underground tunnels so that water was available cities under siege. "The metaphor of water in such a context makes clear that trust is a life-and-death matter" (Walter Brueggeman). Mankind cannot survive without water.

These thoughts are reflected in verses 12-13.

**A glorious throne on high from the beginning
Is the place of our sanctuary.
O LORD, the hope of Israel,
All who forsake You will be put to shame.
Those who turn away on earth will be written
down,
Because they have forsaken the fountain of living
water,
even the LORD. (Jer 17:12-13)**

Again we are reminded of Jeremiah 2:13:

**They have forsaken Me,
The fountain of living waters,
To hew for themselves cisterns,
Broken cisterns,
That can hold no water. (Jer 2:13)**

God's throne is his place of honor. In the sanctuary we worship and draw near to him. He is the source of blessing, hope and life. He alone has living water. But our hearts are deceitful. We turn away from God to place our trust in human resources, forsaking the fountain of living water. That is when our hearts become dry and hard. So we face a life and death choice. Everything depends on the health of our heart and which direction

it is turned. The pivot-word is trust. Our destiny is determined by the object of our trust. This is the heart of the matter.

It's easy to grasp the seriousness of the situation through the power of these metaphors, heart and water. Most of us want to be like the man who trusts in the LORD and is blessed. However, we identify much more closely with the man whose heart turns away from the LORD.

Is there a cure for the deceitful heart? In verse 14, Jeremiah begins to reflect on the condition of his own heart and make his petition to God.

**Heal me, O LORD, and I will be healed;
Save me and I will be saved,
For You are my praise. (Jer 17:14)**

Jeremiah realizes that he needs outside help to cure his heart. So do we. We can't heal our heart by moving to a new city, changing our spouse, changing careers or relocating to a more affluent neighborhood. The problem lies within us, so no rearrangement of life will be effective. We will take the same heart with us wherever we go.

Jeremiah points us in the right direction. The only cure available comes from God. Our heart is horribly diseased and sick. It is incurable. Bypass surgery will not work. What we need is a transplant: a new heart. And that is what God is capable of doing. That is his specialty.

**"But this is the covenant which I will make with the
house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD,
"I will put My law within them and on their heart I
will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall
be My people." (Jer. 31:33)**

God heals and saves. By his Spirit he regenerates and renews our heart. By his Spirit he wipes clean the tablet of our heart that has been engraved with a record of our sin, and writes his law on it. Either sin or Torah will be engraved on our heart. God's Spirit cuts away the hard exterior and leaves it soft and receptive. God changes our hearts. And because of that he is our praise.

Our dog Lucy is behaving better these days. My wife is working hard with her. She believes in the bonding method. She thinks that if she loves Lucy enough then, out of devotion to her, the dog will change and not turn away from her to run after things she should not have. It seems to be working.

Maybe we should take a lesson from this. If we connect our hearts to God's heart, we will wander less and trust him more. By turning to God, listening to his voice, and knowing the depth of his love, we will realize that trusting him is the only viable choice. He is the fountain of living water.

How is your heart today? Is it parched and dry, or is it full from the fountain of life? Is your heart turned toward God or away from him? Are you trusting in God

or trusting in mankind? We need to care for our heart, the center of our spiritual life. Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matt. 5:8).

The good news is that God heals and saves. The blessing is that he can satisfy our thirsty souls.

As he looked toward heaven, Sir Walter Raleigh penned these lines in his poem, *The Passionate Man's Pilgrimage*:

And there I'll kiss
The bowl of bliss,
And drink my eternal fill
On every milken hill.
My soul will be a-dry before,
But after, it will ne'er thirst more.
And by the happy blissful way
More peaceful pilgrims I shall see,
That have shook off their gowns of clay,
And go apparelled fresh like me.
I'll bring them first
To slake their thirst,
And then to taste those nectar suckets
At the clear wells
Where sweetness dwells,
Drawn up by saints in crystal buckets.

Let us turn our hearts towards God. Let us trust in his strength. Let us drink from his well.

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