

WORDS WRITTEN ON OUR HEARTS

From the time we were infants, and throughout our toddler years, words began to matter. They started to make more and more sense to us. At some point we came to realize that there was meaning behind them.

At first, words were just mysterious, incomprehensible sounds coming out of our parents' mouths. And although we loved those sounds because they emanated from our beloved parents, we didn't yet understand what they meant. Then, at some point, we began putting words and their meanings together.

We cried when we wanted to be fed, and when we heard our mother say words like "hungry" and "bottle," we got it! We knew that food was on the way and our hunger would soon be satisfied. If we fell down and daddy came running and we heard him say, "Boo-Boo," we came to understand that "Boo-boo" and the hurt we were feeling were related. And as we grew older and our minds continued to absorb the sound of people talking to us, we learned more and more words. We understood when we heard the word "naughty" or "bad" that Mom and Dad weren't happy with us; we'd done something to displease them. We touched the stove and burned our fingers, and our mother put ice on them to ease our discomfort; then she said "hot!" and we realized that "hot" was a warning to help us avoid the burning sensation that hurt our fingers so much.

Yes, at some point early on in our childhood we began to comprehend words. I remember back when my daughter Alisha was very young, Penny and I were in the living room and one of us—I can't remember who—said to Alisha something like, "Okay, sweetie, let's go upstairs." And Alisha, who couldn't even walk yet, crept over to the stairs and waited for us to come. She knew what the word "stairs" meant. And Penny and I looked at each other in amazement. That's when we realized that Alisha was starting to put words and their meanings together, and was beginning to understand what we were saying. And Penny and I realized we were going to have to be cautious about what we said in Alisha's presence from then on.

When you think about it, words and language are quite amazing. From twenty-six little symbols, what we call the alphabet, we have created

thousands of words; and each of those words carries a meaning that allows us to communicate with each other and helps us make sense of life. But words can also confuse us, because one word can have multiple meanings. Or two words can be spelled differently but sound exactly the same. And that can lead to miscommunication and misunderstandings. So we learn to put words in context and say them with a certain tone of voice to make them less ambiguous and more comprehensible to others.

You know, it's one thing to have a word up here, in our mind. But it's an entirely different thing to have a word written here, on our heart. Words in our mind go through a mental process. They travel through the neurons of our brain and are compartmentalized and filed away for retrieval when we need them.

A word in our mind is what we use for a test. It can be crammed into our cranium the night before, recovered the next morning to write down the answer the teacher wants, and then it may never be used by us again. Or, if we want to remember a word, we have to retrieve it from our head and use it once in a while, or else it will be forgotten or get lost somewhere up in the dusty filing cabinets and memory banks in our heads.

But a word written on the heart is different. It's almost as though that word lives and breathes inside us. A word written on our heart has gotten into our blood and coursed through our arteries and veins. It's been absorbed by all the cells in our body. It has entered our muscles and bones to become an inseparable part of our very being. We don't lose or forget a word that has been written on our heart. That word has actually become a part of us and who we are, as though it's been knitted or woven in us and through us.

I wonder, if we could somehow open up our bodies and examine our souls, what words would we find there that have become part of us? Would we find love? Justice? Kindness? Hope? Faith? Humility? Generosity? Or would we find words in our heart like resentment? Anger? Hatred? Greed? Anxiety? Prejudice. Injustice. Self-centeredness? Despair?

The prophet Jeremiah was a man of words. I looked it up and learned that the 52 chapters of the book of Jeremiah contain about 13,500 of them. Many of those words are unpleasant and not easy to hear. They're words of warning, judgment and harsh accusation. In so many words, Jeremiah made it clear that the northern nation of Israel and the southern nation of Judah had been unfaithful to the Lord and made the Lord unhappy. They hadn't kept the promises their ancestors made to God, and as a result they were being punished by a long, devastating period of defeat, foreign domination, and captivity in a foreign land.

They were the dark days of the people of God, according to the Hebrew Scriptures, when their great-grandmother Rachel cried bitter tears for her children. They were the days when they sat by the river in Babylon, weeping and yearning to return home, back to the land God had given them. It was a time of fear and anxiety for the future. It was a time of subjugation and humiliation for the Israelites.

Like most of the ancient prophets, Jeremiah's words were excruciating to listen to; they were a bitter pill for God's people to swallow. And even now it's not easy reading. The people of God must have cringed and recoiled when they heard Jeremiah's words spoken to them. And maybe we cringe, too. But there's a bright spot in all of this. Somewhere near the middle of Jeremiah's severe tongue-lashing, he devoted four chapters to comfort and consolation. Speaking on behalf of the Lord, Jeremiah promised that there would be better days ahead; and that after their severe punishment, God would make a new covenant with God's people.

This covenant would be different. It would be a covenant grounded in God's everlasting love. In the old days, the law of God was etched on tablets of stone. But the new covenant would be written on their hearts. God's people wouldn't merely read the law and try to cram it into their brains and practice what it said; they would actually internalize it and digest it and allow the words of God's law to live in them. In a sense, God's law would become flesh through them; the Word of God would be like nourishment—something life-giving rather than a burden to bear.

In effect, the Lord, through Jeremiah, was telling the people, "I'm going to make you get it; really get it. My law will no longer be something external, etched in stone; it will become something very internal and very personal . . . even invasive, to you.

That's what Jesus taught his listeners in his Sermon on the Mount. Again and again he told them, "You have heard it said, but I say . . ." Jesus took the old law and internalized it, so that it would sink down deep in our being, take human form through us, and come to life within us."

"For example," said Jesus, "the law tells us not to murder; but what about the dark and sinful intents in the human heart when we're angry or insulting to a sister or brother and say to ourselves, even if it's in a half-joking way, "I could kill him!" Isn't that inner anger, violence and hatred against someone, even if it isn't acted upon, as much a breaking God's Law as the actual taking of their life is?"

The law says, "Do not commit adultery;" but Jesus wanted us to consider that the lustful thoughts inside a person that lead someone to commit adultery

are as wrong as the act of adultery itself, because both originate from the same dark place in our hearts.

The law says, “Love your neighbor;” but Jesus said we’re not supposed to stop at that. “Loving your neighbor is easy. Even sinners do that. But what about your enemies? Will you love them, too? Because that’s what the heart of God’s law commands.” God’s will is for us to love all people, friend and foe.

In every instance of his teaching in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus delved deeper into the very essence of the law, into the fuller meaning behind the words of the law and their true intent for our lives. That was what the liberating work of the new covenant Jesus was establishing between God and humanity was all about.

External words are only sounds coming out of our mouth or symbols written down on a piece of paper. And they mean little or nothing unless they’re lived out. Like that old saying goes, “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.” Sticks and stones are tangible; external words aren’t. External words are merely a collection of letters that are strung together or sounds that are uttered, to which we have assigned some kind of meaning. But when words are internalized, when they’re written on our hearts, take root there and become a part of our very being, they have a whole new life and whole new potential. For example, to say “joy” is one thing; but the only way we can truly come to know joy is to internalize it and actually experience it.

The word “love” sounds sweet to our ears; but we all know that love—I’m talking about genuine love—is a whole lot more than just a sweet sounding word. When we receive love into our hearts and spread love and share love with the people around us, it makes the word come to life and transforms it into the most powerful and potent action a person can take—a force that can help transform the world into God’s kingdom, little by little, one life at a time. You see, when words are written on our hearts, take root and are actually lived out, they become more than just words to us. They become a way of life.

We all know that, as we get older, we start to experience what has been amusingly termed “senior moments,” when we gradually lose some of those free-floating words that used to live in our heads. Some of those words get short-circuited along with our dying brain cells and dissipate into the currents of time. And they may never come back to us. And some of us, sadly, may even experience senility or dementia, and the words that remain in our minds may no longer have meaning or be able to help us make sense of life. But caregivers who work with people who have dementia and help those unfortunate people who have lost many of the words in their heads, have discovered that often an old, familiar hymn, or a well-known prayer like the Lord’s Prayer, brings back a

spark of life in those people's eyes. Sometimes they will even join others in singing that hymn or reciting that prayer, because those familiar words of the hymn or the prayer have been written on their hearts. The words were etched in their souls, and became life-sustaining words to them.

My friends, when you and I leave this earthly life, our external words won't be of any more use to us. They will no longer serve us. Maybe some of us will lay beneath gravestones that have an epitaph engraved on it, words that will sum up or be suitable for the lives we lived. But I wonder what words—and they're the only words that will matter, the only words that will live on after we die—I wonder what words the people we have left behind will remember us by, because we lived out those words in our lives. And what words will God find in us that weren't just spoken or jotted down on a piece of paper by us, but were actually written on our hearts? I guess what I'm asking is, what words will we take with us into eternity when we go to be with our Creator?

There is no more important task for us, as God's people, than to discover the truly meaningful and important words of our human existence: words that we consider worthy to live in us and to take with us into eternity; words we will allow God to write on our hearts and transform our inner souls with their meaning.

I think of the words to the Lord's Prayer. Or the 23rd Psalm. Or the hymn "Amazing Grace." The words of all those are familiar to us, and the echoes of God's divine Word reverberate through them. We say or sing them frequently in church, at weddings, and at a graveside. But do those words stick with us? Have we internalized them and allowed them to really seep into us? Have we let God write those words on our hearts?

I will end my message this morning with a two-part question.

What are the words that God wants to write on your heart?

And will you be receptive enough to allow God to write them there so you can bring them to life through you?

May we all think about it. Amen.