

## THE HEART'S HOMECOMING

The Pharisees were worried about dirty hands, but Jesus had a different concern. Jesus was worried about dirty hearts. The Pharisees believed that personal and social problems could be solved by following the rules. But for Jesus, the basic problem with human beings was heart trouble.

Obedying the religious laws that the Pharisees touted so highly could make a person appear good and righteous on the outside; but it couldn't make a heart good and righteous on the inside. And the heart is where most human problems begin.

Think about it. Every war ever fought was first started in somebody's heart.

Every marriage that ever ended began its death spiral in someone's heart.

Every murder, every theft, every unkind and hurtful word, every abuse of a helpless child, every act of deceit, every hateful deed, every betrayal, all of them first begin in the heart. And Jesus understood that even though the law has some power to reign in our darker impulses and actions and keep them at least partially in check, the law isn't able to transform hearts, where those darker impulses and actions originate from.

A few years ago, in the town of Flint, Michigan, the residents there began getting sick. Medical doctors and healthcare workers treated those who were ill as best they could, but it seemed to be a losing battle. People continued to get sick. The saddest part of what was happening was that it was the children of Flint who were being most seriously and adversely affected.

Finally, after a long and difficult investigation that was made all the harder because some of those in power were trying to cover it up, it was discovered that the cause of the problem was the source of the drinking water. Like a beating heart, water from the Flint River, which had been polluted with chemicals that were eating away the inside of the water mains in Flint, was being pumped into the residents' homes. And with every glass of water they drank and every pot of water they cooked with, they ingested high levels of the dangerous lead and other toxins and were being poisoned by it.

Even the best, highest quality medical care in the whole world couldn't have made the residents of Flint, Michigan healthy. Only a new, clean source

of water could do that. The sicknesses that were cropping up in the town of Flint, Michigan were the symptoms of a deeper, more serious problem. The same thing could be said about you and me and every human being on earth.

When people act wrongly and do things they regret, whether those acts are trivial or terrible, the misdeeds that can be seen and felt on the outside are merely the visible symptoms of a deeper, imperceptible problem on the inside. Their hearts are alienated from God. This estrangement from God is a collective human problem. It seems almost too easy, as though it's in our very nature, for our hearts to wander away from the One who gave us life and loves us so much.

Did you know that, in the book of Psalms, about half of the 150 psalms were written by authors whose hearts were struggling and yearning to draw closer to God. The psalm writers expressed their struggles and yearnings in all kinds of different ways. They said God was like a great rock in the burning desert. If you stayed close you could kneel in the shade of that rock and find shelter from the sun; but if you wandered away, the sun would ultimately strike you down.

The psalmists wrote that God was like a mother cradling and nursing her child. If you take the child away from its mother's arms, it will starve for food and love.

Some of the psalms described God as being like a spring of water in the dry wilderness. Near the oasis there was lush green life and growth, but a few steps away from the life-giving water there was only baked, dead earth.

So, when we find ourselves feeling weary and wasted, frightened and alone, tainted and impure, we might want to ask ourselves, have our hearts at some point wandered away from God? If that's the case, the cure becomes pretty obvious. We have to get our hearts back to God. We have to find a way to return to the One who made us, who has loved us from the moment we were conceived in our mothers' wombs, who will love us eternally, and who will always take us back no matter how long we've been gone or whatever reason we've been separated. Returning to God renews us from the inside out. It cleanses our hearts of all the things we don't want in there, because those dark, impure, unwanted things can't survive for long in the light of God's holy presence.

So, how do we do that? What do we need to do in order for our hearts to experience a joyous homecoming, a jubilant return to God?

I could give you a standard "Christian" answer to that question. I could tell you that there are a lot of ways to draw nearer to God. I could talk about attending worship on a regular basis. I could suggest that you take time every

day to pray and read the Bible. I could encourage you to obey the Ten Commandments because God gave them to the Israelites for the purpose of drawing them closer to God, and maybe they could do the same for you.

Yes, I bet if we put our heads together and did some brainstorming right now, we could come up with a list of spiritual disciplines and activities that, if followed, would help us feel closer to God. Or, if they didn't help us feel nearer to God on the inside, they would at least make us look as though we were closer to God on the outside, in the eyes of other people. And as Billy Crystal's character Fernando on the old *Saturday Night Live* TV show used to say, "It is better to look good than to feel good!" The Pharisees in Jesus' day would have agreed whole-heartedly.

But that's exactly what Jesus warned against and harshly criticized the Pharisees for doing when he quoted the prophet Isaiah: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules."

I believe there's only one true way for us to draw near to God, and that is to draw near to Christ. In Christ we can return to God. In Christ our weary, disobedient, broken and fearful hearts can experience a joyous homecoming. Whatever brings our hearts closer to Christ, brings us nearer to God. And everything we do in the name of religion—all the righteous acts we do and all the pious words we say—those things might be true to the letter of the law, but they will miss the spirit of the law unless we do them because our hearts are in Christ and Christ is in our hearts. And, as this morning's reading from Mark's gospel makes clear, keeping the spirit of the law is what Jesus was concerned about.

Allen Puffenberger, in his book *Words for the Weary*, wrote: "Some of the churches that are growing the fastest are those that demand their members follow rigid sets of rules and regulations. When the world seems chaotic and its future seems uncertain, people tend to gravitate toward churches that claim to have everything nailed down and offer black and white, yes and no answers to gray-shaded, maybe-or-maybe-not kinds of questions.

"Unfortunately, the same kind of pride that was in the Pharisees can also be found in these kinds of churches. Human beings tend to quickly turn rules and regulations into ends in themselves. When people follow them, they often come to believe that they have done their duty to God and their fellow human beings and nothing else, not even their judgmental attitudes and selfish motives for doing their duty, matters. But that's not what Jesus wants. "Jesus wants people's hearts to be filled, not with pride or a fear-inspired need to check off a legal list of do's and don'ts, but with a loving desire to do God's will.

Jesus was lifted up on the cross to draw people to himself. And ideally, the love of God that was revealed in the death of Christ moves our hearts to love God as God loves us. This is what the prophet Jeremiah referred to as God's law being "written on our hearts."

I'll share one final story with you.

One summer a group of teenagers from some Presbyterian churches across southern Louisiana gathered in New Orleans for a week long work mission. Most of the teenagers had grown up in church-going families and considered themselves to be good and faithful Christians. But none of them had ever been exposed to the staggering problems faced every day by people living in the inner city.

As the week progressed, the group participated in a variety of hands-on ministry. At a soup kitchen they ate and conversed with homeless people, many of whom had walked several miles for their only hot meal of the day. They saw and heard the stories of teenagers their own age who were living on the streets. They also worked on houses for the working poor that were being renovated by the local chapter of *Habitat for Humanity*.

During the course of that work mission, a transformation occurred. Those teenagers had talked about the love of Christ and the importance of loving one another all their lives. But now, as they risked living out that love in new and sometimes intimidating situations, their faith deepened and grew, and their hearts were opened to the presence of the living Christ in a very powerful way."

That's how it is for us and for all those who follow Jesus Christ. When we allow our divinely touched hearts to lead us in living out Christ's love, we're doing more than just keeping the letter of the law; we're living according to the spirit of the law. And eventually God's law will become written on our hearts and be transformed from a robotic way to live into a God-inspired way of life. And when that happens, our hearts will draw near to God and experience a joyous homecoming.

Long ago there was a man named Augustine. All his life he'd had a difficult time drawing near to God. He strongly resisted God's call, and his heart wandered long and far looking for peace and satisfaction. Augustine's "god," like that of many human beings throughout history right up until this very day, was physical gratification, worldly riches and intellectual pride.

Augustine's heart ultimately found its way home, to God, and he wrote a book called *Confessions* that looked back at his life and candidly reflected on his past mistakes. Thinking back on his years of wandering and struggles and his heart's eventual repentance, Augustine was inspired to write a brief prayer—a prayer that I believe goes a long way toward explaining our wanderings, anxiety

and lostness. And that prayer gets the last word in this sermon.

“Lord, you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you.”

And the Lord’s response to that prayer is simply, “Welcome back, my son. Welcome back, my daughter. I’m so pleased and happy for your homecoming. Now, your restless heart can finally be at peace.

Thanks be to God. Amen.