

PREPARING YOUR HEART

Preparing your heart to receive your Savior is one of the traditional themes of Advent. But what exactly does it mean? How do we prepare our hearts?

When we speak of our heart in this context, we're obviously not referring to that red lump of muscle which acts as a pump for our cardiovascular systems. Instead, we use "the heart" to refer to the core of our conscious being where our longings, our desires and our emotions reside. The part of us that makes us uniquely *us*—the part that Jesus was referring to when he said, "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength.*"

Why did we choose the heart as the organ which would stand for this part of our being? I don't know—maybe it just sounds better than the liver. Actually, the ancient Israelites didn't use the heart to signify the source of their most basic longings; the word they used meant "bowels." Pretty romantic, huh? How about a love song entitled "My Bowels Yearn for You." Or, "Here I Stand with my Bowels in my Hand?"

In any case, when the Scriptures do refer to the heart as the core of our inmost being where our longings and desires and emotions reside, they usually have some unflattering things to say about it. Back in Noah's time, God observed that "*every inclination of the thoughts of [man's] heart was only evil all the time.*" Solomon said, "*The purposes of a man's heart are deep waters.*" Jeremiah said, "*The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.*" And Jesus said, "*Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. And these are what make a man unclean.*" As far as the Bible is concerned, the contents of the human heart are polluted waters indeed.

Once upon a time, of course, our hearts were not befouled. They were clean and pure and bore the undefiled image of God. In paradise, before they imbibed the knowledge of evil, Adam and Eve had pure hearts. They longed only for God and each other and they were able to satisfy each other's longings. Can you imagine what a

blessed state that was? To not only have all of your own desires fulfilled, but to be able to fulfill the desires of the one you loved simply by virtue of being who and what you are? But Adam and Eve were infected with a craving for more than God wanted them to have and after they had acted on that craving, they infected their children and everyone since, and now here we are: people with impure hearts who are dissatisfied with the things God has given us and who crave other things we neither need nor profit by having.

And so the notion which has become very popular in our time that you should follow your heart and trust it to guide you, is a very risky proposition; in fact, it's a lousy idea. How many times have you longed for something—or someone—you knew you shouldn't have? Popular music has been permeated by the idea of the "heart-led-life" ever since the days of Tin Pan Alley. "How can it be wrong when it feels so right?" the song asks. And the answer is; "Easy!" Yearning for something God hasn't given us is the essence of *coveting*.

Coveting is any craving we cherish for something which God has warned us against having.

People *covet* for all kinds of things. We *covet* ~~for~~ jobs we couldn't do if we had them, ~~for~~ homes twice the size of what we need, ~~for~~ new faces and bodies we don't need. We crave things we assume God hasn't been WISE enough to give us. Who are we kidding? How long do you think any of those things would make you happy? How long have any of them ~~have~~ kept you happy in the past? Why aren't you happy now? Not enough things? I don't think so.

No, the heart is deceitful above all things AND BEYOND CURE. We need more than a pacemaker. We need more than a bypass. We need new hearts.

How do we get them?

According to David, who was a man after the Lord's own heart, they need to be created in us by God Himself. "Create in me a ~~new~~ ^{pure} heart, O God," he wrote in the 51st Psalm. And God is willing to create new hearts in us, but he will do so on only one condition, and that is that he come and live at the worksite where the work is to be done and do it Himself in the person of the Holy Spirit. But in order for the Holy

Spirit to do this creative work in us, *we have to prepare the way.* And so John the Baptizer cries out: "*Prepare ye the way of the Lord!*" and Isaiah cries out, "*Build up the highway and remove the stones!*" Make way for the Lord so that He may enter through the portals of your heart and make you a holy people, redeemed of the Lord.

And so we're back to the question we started with: How do we prepare our deceitful and corrupt hearts to receive our Savior?

The answer does not lie in correcting or repairing the one we have, but in fastening our hope on gaining a new one, one created by God. And that, my friends, is called repentance—the earnest longing for a new heart that comes from an honest examination of the contents of the one we have. But, you say, I've done that! I've made my list of sins and asked God to forgive me and He does but the sins still don't go away. I don't feel any different than I did before I made the list! What's the matter?

Well, the problem is that you and I, with the help of an increasingly decadent society, have developed a remarkable ability to tolerate our sins. We can forgive ourselves even before we've committed them! We can wallow in lust or hatred or envy for one minute and forget about it the next and never feel much guilt because we've gotten used to our sins and we like to think that God has too. But if we feel no remorse, how can we repent? And if we don't repent, how can we receive forgiveness? And if we don't receive forgiveness, aren't we still in our sins? Such are the thoughts of sincere Christians, children of God who struggle every day to work out their salvation with fear and trembling.

Would you like to know an ironclad, surefire way to repent from the bottom of your soul? A way to gaze upon your sins and see them the way God sees them? A way which is guaranteed to make you yearn for a new heart? (I have suggested this you before and I'm going to suggest it again!) Try this little experiment: make arrangements to confess your actual, concrete sins to a Christian friend. Not a generic confession like the one we make every Sunday, when we say, "*Forgive me Lord for all my sins of thought, word and deed.*" But a confession of actual sins to a real person at a specific time and place in the near future. It could be your pastor at church at ~~2:00 p.m.~~ this

10:30 a.m.

coming Wednesday, or it could be to your best Christian friend in their kitchen at 10:00 a.m. tomorrow morning. It doesn't require much preparation. You just sit down and tell a brother or sister in Christ the sinful things you have thought, the sinful words you have spoken, and the sinful things you have done during the last week. The pornography you turned to in a moment of weakness. The petty jealousy you feel for someone. The gossip you indulged in. The hurtful things you said to your spouse. The lie you told your employer when you called in sick and then went shopping. Just tell them plainly the sinful things you thought and said and did during the last week and then ask them to pronounce forgiveness in Jesus' name.

Do that and you will repent. You will feel ashamed and humiliated and you will earnestly desire never to return to those sins again. Your pride will be mortally wounded and that's the best thing that can happen to you, because it is with our pride—our desperate need to retain the good opinion of other people—that we bind our sins.

If the thought of doing this is appalling to you; if you are horrified at the thought of revealing your sinful thoughts and words and actions to your pastor or to a fellow Christian who has a good opinion of you—then you are perhaps for the very first time looking upon your sins as God looks upon them. They ARE appalling. They are revolting. And you can thank God for the revulsion you feel, because that revulsion is from the Holy Spirit who is no less grieved over them than you are. But what grieves the Holy Spirit more than the sins themselves, which God has already forgiven, is the pride which keeps you from confessing them.

God strikes down the proud, but He loves a humble and contrite heart. *"He has scattered the proud in their inmost thoughts...but has lifted up the humble."* A heart emptied of its sins through pride-killing confession is a heart prepared to receive its Savior.

Later in his life, Martin Luther came to view confession as almost a third sacrament, along with Baptism and the Lord's Supper. That's how important he thought it was.

Awhile back, a member of the church I used to serve who had moved away called me to tell me that she and her husband had managed to

put their marriage back together after it had seemed to be irretrievably lost. *"In looking back on it,"* she said, *"the one who was mostly wrong was me."* I don't know if that was factually correct or not, but it was a spiritually healthy way for her to think. After she stopped blaming her husband for everything and came to grips with her own sin, she felt like a hundred pound weight had been lifted from her back. *"Why is it so hard for us to admit that we're wrong?"* she said.

Why indeed? God has given us a way to get rid of our sins: only our pride stands in the way. Why don't we use this Advent season to take an honest look at what's wrong in our lives, confess it to a fellow member of the priesthood of all believers, and receive through their words, the forgiveness and the cleansing we crave? It would be the best Christmas gift you could ever give yourself.

Amen.

Psalm 51 Create in Me a Clean Heart, O God

To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

51 Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.

²Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin!

³For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.

⁴Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you may be justified in your words
and blameless in your judgment.

⁵Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
and in sin did my mother conceive me.

⁶Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being,
and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.

⁷Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

⁸Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have broken rejoice.

⁹Hide your face from my sins,

and blot out all my iniquities.

¹⁰Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.

¹¹Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.

¹²Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and uphold me with a willing spirit.

¹³Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.

¹⁴Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your
righteousness.

¹⁵O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.

¹⁶For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would
give it;

you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.

¹⁷The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not
despise.

¹⁸Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;
build up the walls of Jerusalem;

¹⁹then will you delight in right sacrifices,
in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.