

..... Daily Devotions

January 7-13, 2018

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Palmer and Suomi location, Michigan

Sunday, January 7, 2018

Text: *Proverbs 4:23 NIV*

Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.

Near where I live there is a small pond, from which flows a semi-permanent brooklet that feeds Warner Creek. Now if water flows *out*, then water flows *in*. I have sometimes used my regular walks to try and discover where the water comes from. A mile or so upstream there is a boggy area; nearby, an old water-filled pit seems to be spring-fed. I, the great local limnologist, have declared this area the Source.

The water in any stream or river comes from somewhere. If you want to understand the stretch of water in front of you, look where the water came from. If you want to improve water quality or ecosystem health, look upstream.

Our lives are like this also. To understand our actions, you must look upstream. Something *flowed into* that thing we just did. Many would examine what others have done to us, and this has its proper place. But in the Bible, the interest is more often in one's own heart. That is the Source of our actions.

We in the English-speaking world usually think of the word *heart* in two ways. It can mean the physical, blood-pumping organ. Or it can mean our feelings. But in the Biblical languages, the heart is the center of human personality. It not only feels, but wills and thinks. There are times when the best translation of the word *heart* might be *will*, *mind*, or even *self*.

Guard your heart, the wise man says, *for everything you do flows from it*. We can always look upstream from our actions to our heart. What things (books, TV, internet, music) have we been watering the wells with? Which emotions have we chosen to dwell on? What things do we habitually notice? (Beauty in creation? Other people's faults? Their bodies? Their kindnesses?) Where do we choose to focus our minds? (We can't take in everything; we are always choosing.) The things of the heart flow into actions.

So guard your heart, the wise man says. Be watchful not only about what you are doing, but what you are thinking and willing. Pay attention to emotions, acknowledge them, but don't let them run your life. Bring all before God for redirection, purification, healing, or sanction.

This week I will be looking from various angles at this fascinating subject, the heart. As you perhaps examine your own heart, remember this most of all: You are being called above all to come close to God's heart (Isaiah 40:11).

Let us pray:

O God, help me to learn to guard my heart. More than that, sweep me up in Your love, so that the springs of my life are watered from the fresh wells of Your Spirit. Amen.



Monday, January 8, 2018

Text: *1 Samuel 16:7*

The LORD does not look at the things human beings look at. Human beings look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.

This verse comes from the account of the prophet Samuel anointing David as king of Israel. At the time, his big brothers seemed more impressive; but God chose the young shepherd, who hadn't even been included in the guest list.

There are two reasons we need this idea. The first is, it's so necessary (and hard) for us to remember that the heart really does matter more than appearance. The second is, it's so necessary to remember that Someone really *can* see the heart.

It is hard for us really to believe that our heart matters more than our appearance. For one thing, we are bombarded with messages to the contrary many times a day. Just before writing this I saw headlines about two famous stars, one who is 80, the other 60. From both headlines, I gather that what really matters is how *fabulous* they look. And from the advertisements we learn what failures we'll be if we don't look fabulous, too (but, don't worry, just buy the product...).

There is another reason we might be tempted to value appearance above the heart. People all around us live as if what others believe about them matters more than the truth. Witness the effort put into image-building on social media. But it isn't just there. How many second graders have learned that if the teacher *believes* you did your homework, the result will be the same as if you did it? How many teenagers have supposed that if their parents *think* they are living obediently, that's enough?

This really works, too – up to a point. But there are at least two problems.

First, sooner or later it quits working. Reality is shown for what it is. Facades fall.

But there is an even greater problem. The moment I live for outward appearance instead of the heart, I betray myself. I cheat myself of integrity.

This is not to say we are to disregard appearance altogether. *Of course* we put our best foot forward. *Of course* we don't needlessly advertise all our negative traits to everyone else. It is because we are in the image of God that we want to beautify things, and why shouldn't that include oneself? And if you work hard to stay in shape, you are making the most of what God has given you; there is no sin in that. Furthermore, the effort to make a good appearance can be an act of love. We do not show love to those we encounter by showing up poorly groomed.

Perhaps the first and most important step toward health and balance is simply to acknowledge this fact: *The Lord looks at the heart*. God *can* look at the heart, so there's no point in trying to hide. God values the heart above outward appearance, because God esteems Truth. It is you that God loves, not some sham image of yourself. That is why God desires "truth in the inward being" (Psalm 51:6 ESV).

Let us pray:

O God, you see me for who I am, and you love me. Help me not to hide, but to present my heart continually to you for renewal in Christ. By your grace, may I bring you glory, inside and out. Amen.



Tuesday, January 9, 2018

Text: *Exodus 20:3-5 ESV*

You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God.

I believe it was the French-born theologian John Calvin who observed that the human heart is a “perpetual idol factory”.

In Martin Luther’s *Small Catechism*, the Commandment against idol-making is explained in one simple sentence: “We are to fear, love, and trust God above all things.” Yet human hearts are constantly inventing ways of turning this on its head – to fear, love, or trust something else in such a way that it supplants God. It may be easier to fabricate false gods in this way, than to recognize when it happens.

Whatever we “fear, love, and trust above all things” is functioning as god. People do this with money, sex, ambition, power, food, booze, and drugs. Idols may appear spiritual or even holy. Family, love, patriotism, the flag, clean living and religion have all taken their turns at being idols. In fact, every idol ever worshipped by the human heart is – or at least seems to be – good in itself. The problem for our heart comes when a created thing crawls up on the Creator’s throne.

The strongest antidote to idol worship is true worship. The more we give our hearts over to seeking God for who God is – the more we occupy our heart with reciting and proclaiming God’s true worth – the more we concern our hearts with the Genuine Article – the less we will be able to interest our hearts in second-rate substitutes.

Let us pray:

You are always worthy, O God, of your place on the throne in my heart. Grant me a true sense of your love and majesty, so that any idolatrous tendency of my heart might be subdued. Amen.



Wednesday, January 10, 2018

Text: *Ezekiel 11:19-20*

I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God.

This ancient text about open heart surgery makes reference to the heart in two ways. First God promises to give “an undivided heart” – a heart that doesn’t go this way and then that, but keeps going God’s way. Then God promises to replace a heart of stone with a heart of flesh.

The central problem for the people Ezekiel addressed was idolatry – “detestable things and abominations”, to use language from both before and after the verse quoted above (Ezekiel 11:18, 21 ESV). It seems that the idol factories had been working overtime. There is warning in the passage against worship of idols, and the promise of help for those who turn to the true God with all their heart. Since we are prone to the same problem that plagued Ezekiel’s people, we do well to listen.

In promising an “undivided heart”, God recognizes the inner fragmentation that comes to us humans when we follow after idols. The medicine is wholehearted worship of the one true God.

As for the “heart of stone”, this seems to indicate a spiritually diseased state, lacking the fullness of life. A stone heart is a hard heart, but whereas this idea in English usually refers to a lack of feeling, in the Bible it always refers to stubbornness, confusion, or both. As Pharaoh’s heart was hardened in the Exodus account (chapters 4-14), he became stubborn-willed and closed-minded – we might say, bullheaded and thick-skulled.

The Apostle Paul uses different language to describe the same reality: “Although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened” (Romans 1:21 ESV). Following idols creates futility; it darkens the heart.

This would be very bleak, indeed – if it were the whole picture. Fortunately, it is not. I said above that Ezekiel 11 refers to “open heart surgery”. When we come to God with open hearts, God performs the operation, giving us a heart that is undivided and new. *Come now*, someone might say. *Is it as simple as that?* I reply that it is that simple, and that difficult; and furthermore, that we need to submit to the operation again and again. But God’s grace and power are real.

Let me end today’s devotion by letting God speak to us again through the prophet Ezekiel: “Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn and live” (Ezek. 18:31-32 ESV).

Let us pray:

I come, O Lord, with an open heart. Now perform the operation. Turn me from false gods and from all sins, to worship you with an undivided and living heart. Amen.



Thursday, January 11, 2018

Text: *Matthew 12:34b-35*

“For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. A good person brings good things out of the good stored up within, and an evil person brings evil things out of the evil stored up within.”

Again and again, the scriptures make a connection between the heart and the tongue. If we say something embarrassing, we might tell ourselves we should have watched our tongue – and rightly so, for “the prudent are restrained in speech” (Proverbs 10:19). But we might do even better if we take a hard look at our heart, for “the things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart” (Matthew 15:18).

Take a look at this core passage from Deuteronomy:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD your God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. The commandments I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. (Deuteronomy 6:4-7)

Notice God’s Word is to be on the believers’ heart and *therefore* a constant matter of speech.

Even in the matter of salvation, the tongue and the heart are joined:

If you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. (Romans 10:9-10 NIV)

Let your heart and your tongue glorify God today.

Let us pray:

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen. (Psalm 19:14)



Friday, January 12, 2018

Text: *Proverbs 15:14*

The discerning heart seeks knowledge, but the mouth of the fool feeds on folly.

You feed your mind (heart) as well as your body. Think of the adage, *you are what you eat*, as it applies to your non-physical being. The search for Truth will cause you to become one thing; feeding on folly will bring forth something else.

One of the primary meanings of the word “feed” is “to graze” – it evokes the picture of an animal randomly munching on what it finds in front of it. Now an animal could of course graze in green pastures, where the food is lush and nutritious. But the fool chooses to graze on “folly” – a word that in the Bible always refers to moral badness. My Hebrew dictionary lists some characteristics of fools and their folly: despising wisdom and discipline, mocking at guilt, being quarrelsome and licentious, refusing to be instructed.

Eugene Peterson’s free translation (*The Message*) renders the verse this way:

An intelligent person is always eager to take in more truth; fools feed on fast food fads and fancies.

So by this interpretation, feeding on folly amounts to consuming spiritual junk food. There’s plenty of that to be had, whether on internet or TV, in magazines or popular books.

To acquire a discerning heart, on the other hand, involves *seeking knowledge*. Both the verb and the noun are important. One does not just happen upon a discerning heart. One seeks. And what one seeks specifically is *knowledge*. In the Book of Proverbs, knowledge involves more than facts. If we seek knowledge in this sense, we will pursue a way of life opposite to folly. We will embrace wisdom and discipline; respond to guilt with repentance and restitution; avoid quarrels; and be self-controlled and teachable. This is the true way to nourish the heart.

So ask yourself today: *What am I feeding my heart?*

Let us pray:

Father in heaven, you have sent your Son Jesus to be wisdom from on high for us; and you have given your Holy Spirit, that we might bear good fruit in your name. Help me to acquire a discerning heart, that I may serve you and my neighbor more effectively every day. Amen.



Saturday, January 13, 2018

Text: *Matthew 11:29*

“Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

One sometimes sees, usually on the wall of a Roman Catholic friend’s room, a painting of Jesus with a bright and glowing heart in his chest. Whatever one thinks of such pictures as art, they represent in piety a beautiful idea, the Sacred Heart of Jesus. For our Savior has a lovely heart.

The above verse, about the gentleness and humility of Christ’s heart, is the only verse I know of that mentions his heart directly. (John 19:34 mentions the soldier piercing Jesus’ heart on the cross, resulting in a sudden flow of water and blood. But technically that verse mentions only the spear being plunged in his “side”, not his heart. Perhaps also Acts 2:26 could be quoted,

applying the words of a Psalm to Christ.) On the other hand, every page of the New Testament is about the loving, self-giving, sacrificial, holy, passionate, seeking, servant-natured, beautiful heart of Jesus.

I have written six previous devotions on the heart – my heart and your heart. I have described important things, and I hope I have said them well. But all of it put together – all that could be written in a hundred books about our hearts – can never add up to anything compared to the pulsating love in the heart of our Redeemer.

This heart led Jesus to take the form of a servant, to be found in human likeness, to empty himself even to the point of death, death on a cross (Philippians 2:6-11). This heart came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). This is the heart of a Bridegroom seeking his Bride (John 3:29). This heart pumped the blood which purchased for God people of every tribe and language and people and nation (Revelation 5:9). From this heart intercessions pour forth for us night and day (Hebrews 7:25). Every word of his teaching is the expression of his heart. His Word and Spirit communicate his heart to us today.

Christmas and Epiphany celebrate his heart. Holy Week shows us the depth of his heart. Easter proclaims the victory of his heart. Pentecost declares the gift of his heart, sent forth from the right hand of the Father.

Christ has offered his heart for you. Can you do less than to open your heart to him?

Let us pray:

Come, Lord Jesus, and live in my heart. Thank you for giving your sacred heart for me and for all. Amen.

