

Your Heart is Central

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presbyterian Church of Newton, KS - Feb. 7, 2021
(Drawing from John Eldredge's books *Wild at Heart*, *Waking the Dead*, & *Restoration Year*.)

I'm going to jump right into this topic! You are not your sin; sin is no longer the truest thing about the person who has come into union with Jesus. Your heart is good. **"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you"** (Ezek. 36:26). The Big Lie in the church today is that you are nothing more than *"a sinner saved by grace."* You are a lot more than that. You are a new creation in Christ. The New Testament calls you a saint, a holy one, a son and daughter of God. In the core of your being you are a good man. You are a good woman. Yes, there is a war within us, but it is a *civil* war. The battle is not between us and God; no, we're fighting alongside the Spirit of God against a traitor who wars against our true heart,

A new power is in operation. The Spirit of life in Christ, like a strong wind, has magnificently cleared the air, freeing you from a fated lifetime of brutal tyranny at the hands of sin and death...Anyone, of course, who has not welcomed this invisible but clearly present God, the Spirit of Christ, won't know what we're talking about. But for you who welcome him, in whom he dwells...if the alive-and-present God who raised Jesus from the dead moves into your life, he'll do the same thing in you that he did in Jesus...When God lives and breathes in you (and he does, as surely as he did in Jesus), you are delivered from that dead life.
(Rom. 8:2, 9-11 *The Message*)

The *real* you is on the side of God against the false self. Knowing this makes all the difference in the world! The man who wants to live valiantly will lose heart quickly if he believes that his heart is nothing but sin. Why fight?

Because the heart is central. That we would even need to be reminded of this only shows how far we have fallen from the life we were meant to live—or how powerful the lie has been. The subject of the heart is addressed in the Bible more than any other topic—more than "works" or "service," more than "believe" or "obey," more than money and even more than worship. Maybe God knows something we've forgotten. But of course—all those other things are matters of the heart. Consider, but a few passages:

Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. (Deut. 6:5) [Jesus called this the greatest of all the commandments—and notice that the heart comes first.]

Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart. (1 Sam. 16:7)

Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Luke 12:34)

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. (Prov. 3:5)

Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against You. (Ps. 119:11 NASB)

These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. (Matt 15:8)

For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him. (2 Chron. 16:9)

According to the Scriptures, the heart can be troubled, wounded, pierced, grieved, even broken. How well we all know that. Thankfully, it can also be cheerful, glad, merry, joyful, rejoicing.

The heart can be whole or divided - as in that phrase we often use, *“Well, part of me wants, but the other part of me doesn’t.”* It can be wise or foolish. It can be steadfast, true, upright, stout, valiant. (All of these descriptions can be found by perusing the listings for the word *heart* in any concordance.) It can also be frightened, faint, cowardly, melt like wax. The heart can be wandering, forgetful, dull, stubborn, proud, hardened. Wicked and perverse. I think we know that as well.

Much to our surprise, according to Jesus, a heart can also be pure, as in, **“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God”** (Matt. 5:8). And even noble, as in his story about the sower: **“But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop”** (Luke 8:15). The Bible sees the heart as the source of all creativity, courage, and conviction. It is the source of our faith, our hope, and of course, our love.

It is the “**wellspring of life**” within us (Prov. 4:23), the very essence of our existence, the center of our being, the fount of our life.

Think about your work life for a moment. Why are so many people bored or frustrated with their jobs? Why do they dread Monday mornings and say, “*Thank God it’s Friday*”? Their hearts are not in their work. Far from it. However they arrived at what they’re doing with their lives, it wasn’t by listening to their heart. The same holds true for their love life. Why do so many relationships fail? Because one or both partners no longer have a heart for making it work. On and on it goes. Why are so many people struggling with depression and discouragement? They’ve lost heart. Why can’t we seem able to break free of addictions? Because somewhere along the way, in a moment of carelessness or desperation, we gave our heart away, and now we can’t get it back.

There is no escaping the centrality of the heart. God knows that; it’s why he made it the central theme of the Bible, just as he placed the physical heart in the center of the human body. The heart is central; to find our lives, we must make it central again.

When Jesus steps into history 2000 years ago, he reaches back 400 years earlier to a prophecy to tell us why he’s come. He quotes from Isaiah 61:1, which goes like this:

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,

**because the Lord has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the humble.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners...**

The meaning of this quotation has been clouded by years of religious language and ceremonial draping. What is he saying? It has something to do with good news, with healing hearts, with setting someone free. That much is clear from the text. Here's a plain English translation,

God has sent me on a mission. I have some great news for you. God has sent me to restore and release something. And that something is you. I am here to give you back your heart and set you free.

Now, Christ could have chosen any one of a thousand other passages to explain his life purpose. He is the Sacrificial Lamb, the Root of Jesse, the Morning Star. But here, at the opening moment of his ministry, he chose this passage above all others; this is the heart of his mission. Everything else he says and does finds its place under this banner. I am here to give you back your heart and set you free. *That* is why "the glory of God is man fully alive": it's what he said he came to do. But of course. The opposite can't be true. "*The glory of God is man barely making it, a person hardly alive.*" How can it bring God glory for his very image, his own children, to remain so

badly harmed, broken, captive? Are we supposed to be un-alert and disoriented?

How we've overlooked this is one of the great mysteries of our times. It is simply diabolical, despicable, downright evil that the heart should be so misunderstood, maligned, feared, and dismissed. But there is our clue again. The war we are in would explain so great a loss. This is the *last* thing the Enemy wants you to know. His plan from the beginning was to assault the heart, just as the Wicked Witch did to the Tin Man. Make them so busy, they ignore the heart. Wound them so deeply, they don't want a heart. Twist their theology, so they despise the heart. Take away their courage. Destroy their creativity. Make intimacy with God impossible for them.

Of course your heart would be the object of a great and fierce battle, because it is your most precious possession. Without your heart you cannot have God. Without your heart you cannot have love. Without your heart you cannot have faith. Without your heart you cannot find the work that you were meant to do; the adventures you were made for in retirement. In other words, without your heart you cannot have *life*. The question is, "*Did Jesus keep his promise? What has he done for our hearts?*"

The answer will astound you. I believe God is calling together little communities of the heart, to fight for one

another and for the hearts of those who have not yet been set free. It is the Christian life as Jesus gave it to us.

Now where do we begin?

Start with something you love. The laughter of your child. Sunlight on the ocean. Your beloved dog. A favorite song, music itself. Perhaps a photo, like a Kansas sunset. Maybe a favorite spot—your garden, the Osage trail, a family cabin. Someone dear to you. We begin with the things we love; this is the way back, the path home. For we don't always draw the connection—God made these specifically for you, and he gave you the heart to love them. You'll be out for a bike ride in the very early morning, cool breeze in your face, all the sweet, fresh aromas it brings, the exhilaration of speed, and your heart spontaneously sings, *I love this!*

The next step is to say, *“So does God. He made this moment; he made these things. He is the creator of everything I love.”* Your heart will naturally respond by opening towards him.

It's like throwing your faith a lifeline: Every wonderful thing in your life is a gift from God, an expression of his heart towards you. All your precious memories, each and every one—your eighth birthday, when you got that little red bike that awakened your love of riding, which carried right on into your adult life. That perfect powder day, when you and your fiancé skied run after run, then warmed up by the

fire in the lodge. The vacation you still think about, how fun it was, how carefree you felt. Your wedding reception: the dancing, the inextinguishable joy of it all.

Every moment you have ever been happy, thrilled, comforted, hopeful ... that was God loving you. Such gifts come from no other source. **“You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing. ... Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father”** (Psalm 145:16; James 1:17).

No other act will bring you a greater measure of God than loving him, actively engaging your heart and soul in loving him. Because as we do, the flower of our being opens up to the sunshine of his presence and all the goodness he longs to breathe into us. The best way to get there is to think upon the things we love and remind ourselves, *“This is from God; this is his true heart.”* This is how the Christian life is meant to be enjoyed: living loved by God.