

Sins of the Heart

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Our Savior's Way Lutheran Church

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you this Sunday from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

A book that is required reading for people who are studying to go into ministry is "The Hammer of God" written by Bo Giertz. It is a novel based on the lives of pastors in the church of Sweden, a Lutheran church. One of the conversations in the book is between a wise old pastor and a young man named Fridfeldt and deals with the human heart. The young man tries to explain to the wise old pastor how he knows he is saved. The old pastor asks, "I ask only what it is you believe in." Fridfeldt answers, "In Jesus, of course! I mean – I mean that I have given Him my heart." Suddenly, the old pastor's face turns solemn and grave and he says, "Do you consider that something to give HIM? The heart is a rusty old can on a junk heap. What a gift!"

The old pastor must have been thinking of the Gospel lesson from Mark today. Today's Gospel lesson is a continuation of last week's Gospel in which we heard how Jesus called the Pharisees and scribes sent to investigate him, hypocrites, and soundly rejected their blindly following man-traditions. In the reading today, Jesus turns to the crowd nearby and says to them, "**Hear me, all of you, and understand.**" He was strongly emphasizing that what He was to say was important. Jesus then announced a person is not defiled (or made unclean) by eating with unwashed hands or anything outside the body. A person is unclean because of what is inside their body.

To His dismay, Jesus' disciples didn't get it. So He took them inside a house and gave them some private instruction and Jesus responded rather sternly and bluntly to His disciples because they, like us, often tend to be blind to the sin in our own lives. The problem with that - in a nutshell - is that we often don't see, and don't want to see, how much we offend God by our thoughts, words, and deeds.

I know a person who constantly says terribly hurtful words about other people – usually in private. It bothers me a lot when I hear these things. Why? Because this says a whole lot about a very harsh spirit and about a heart that is unkind and angry. Hearing these things spoken by this person saddens me more for the person who is speaking than the one who is spoken about. God’s Word is very clear about leaving judgment of other people to God; about speaking a kind word – even to an enemy; about a kind word having the potential to make peace and to win over an adversary. But yet – out of the heart comes this terrible anger and malice toward others. And sadly, I don’t believe that this person even realizes what they are doing. They are offending God and their neighbor.

In speaking to His disciples and to us, Jesus got very specific about those things that come out of us originating in our hearts. What Jesus means by heart is not the muscle in our chest that pumps blood, nor the emotional aspect — the Valentine’s Day heart. Jesus understands the heart in the Hebrew sense as the center or core of the person, the inner self.

He listed twelve dreadful vices - six attitudes and six behaviors which He said make a person unclean (defiled). The first six are plural referring to wicked actions, and the second six are singularly describing evil drives and words. It’s like Jesus opens up our chests like a surgeon and points these poisons out. Jesus started His list with an overall sin of the heart. He said every outward act of sin is preceded by an inward act of choice—therefore Jesus lists evil thoughts first because they are the source of each sinful action. Each evil that Jesus lists comes from inside a person, from the heart, and all of these attitudes and behaviors are offensive to God.

The words that Jesus used were all-inclusive in their meaning. They don’t translate well into English.

Evil Thoughts – Evil thoughts are the root of all that follows. When an evil heart conjures up evil intentions, the evil person will carry them out. From the heart to the brain and to the body. The source of our bad behavior is our heart.

Jesus says the heart is where the problem lies. Our hearts are full but what fills them is, all too often, poisons that kill our spirits and the spirits of people we influence. That is what He means by evil thoughts. That includes such things as bad reasoning, wicked ponderings, perverted imaginings, a sick inner dialog that we have with ourselves over that which is sinful. That is why managing what you think about and what you say to yourself is crucial—why? Sin must be stopped first in the mind—how? Philippians 4:8, ***“Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.”*** Otherwise, the words of Proverbs 23:7 hold, ***“For as he thinks within himself, so he is.”***

Sexual Immorality - The Greek word here is “porneia” and it refers to any illicit sexual activity especially by married persons. The origin of sexual sin is not in the body, it is the result of a defiled heart! Jesus casts a wide net here covering everything from sex before marriage to pornography, prostitution, sex jokes, and every kind of sexual sin that violates God’s Law—all of which start in the heart.

Thefts – Taking that which belongs to another for your own use. This covers a lot of territories. The Greek word here is “kleptas” (from which we get kleptomaniac), and this person is a mean, deceitful, dishonorable pilferer. Jesus says in our hearts, we are “kleptas” – and that leads to shoplifting, loafing on the job, wasting time, squandering what God has given us, cheating on our taxes, and withholding generous giving to God, which God calls robbing Him according to Malachi 3: 8-9.

Murder – The taking of another’s life includes having hatred in our hearts toward another person, according to 1 John 3:15, which is a deadly sin. And included in this sin in the present day is the murder of infants in the womb and euthanizing of the elderly.

Adultery – Illicit sexual activity by married persons. Violations of the marriage vow – all starting in the mind as desires in the heart.

Coveting – An insatiable craving for anything that belongs to someone else. Coveting is also a love of having– that is a ravenous appetite for that which is not right to take, to desire that which belongs to another, the passion to gain things. Actions that show a person sees happiness in things, not in God. All starting with the heart.

Wickedness – This is another word for “malice.” It refers to all the ways that evil thoughts manifest themselves in a person’s life. It includes deliberate acts of meanness! In Greek, the word is “poneros” which means a person or thing which is actively evil. Jesus says we are “poneros” people who in their hearts have a desire to do harm to others, to delight in hurtful mischief, and to create tragedies for others. It means such diabolical evil, that is also a name for Satan—and this comes from our heart. The heart inside us according to Jesus.

Deceit – Cunning maneuvers designed to trap someone to gain a personal advantage. It is the idea of someone trying to work undercover to bring someone else down. It is a sneaky, deceptive person who acts to succeed over others.

Sensuality - The word Jesus used is best translated as debauchery or lewdness. It’s a heart that resents all discipline and restraints. It describes a person who gives free play to their sinful impulses—if it feels good - just do it. It refers to unrestrained, shameless behavior. It is an attitude that says, “I will do as I please and I do not care what anyone thinks about it!”

Envy - The translation of this word is a Hebrew expression “An Evil Eye.” It connotes envy and jealousy. It means that a person looks at the blessings of another and desires them for themselves. It is a person who is envious and jealous when others are successful and prosper.

Slander – Injurious or defaming speech directed at either God or man. Gossip and cursing fall into this category.

Pride – is boastful exalting of oneself. It's the attitude that says, "Look at me, see what I have done. No one is good or as great as I am." This is an overbearing attitude that is the opposite of humility.

Jesus ends his unholy listing with "Foolishness"

Foolishness – This word refers to those who are morally and spiritually desensitized. They cannot see their sins; neither can they sense that God is at work in or around them. With this kind of person, there is no spiritual illumination. There is no spiritual discernment. They do not know God and there is no desire to know Him.

Jesus said, "**All these evil things come from within and defile a man.**" Now, no one wants to be confronted about what is in their heart and mind and what they have done.

The Russian writer, Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote in his book the "Gulag Archipelago" wrote: *"If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"*

There are a lot of contemporary churches and pastors in them who avoid talking about sin as straightforwardly and bluntly as Jesus did. The congregations always feel good about themselves because sin is not mentioned. But without the acknowledgment that we are sinful people with all these things in our hearts, we miss the point of salvation. Without our acknowledgment of our sinfulness, we are not driven to ask for forgiveness. Without the acknowledgment of our sinfulness, we lack the need to repent and walk a more righteous path in this world.

Jesus confronted each of us today from 2,000 years ago just as Nathan the prophet confronted the adulterer and murderer, King David. Nathan said, "You are the person." Jesus says to us, "**You are the sinner.**" That hurts and like King David, we know our hearts need cleaning. But we know we cannot do that cleansing ourselves. So, we

make the same plea as King David, we pray and sing, “Create in me a clean heart, O God! And renew a right spirit within me.”

There is a story about an old Deacon who was teaching a Sunday school class and wanted to help his young students understand what Christian really was. So, he asks them one morning, “Why do people call me a Christian?” There was a long period of silence in the room and then one boy raised his hand. The crusty Deacon said, “Well, what is your answer?” The young boy answered, “Well, maybe it’s because they don’t know you.”

You see that is the point. Often, we put up a false façade and cover up our sin from the world. Be we know who are aware, and worse, God is aware of the evil that’s in our hearts. But our God is a merciful God. So, He decided to do something about our sin full hearts.

God has cleaned our hearts for us with pure, holy water. He has made us clean in the waters of Holy Baptism—He has washed us in the blood of the Lamb – Jesus. He has made us clean by joining us in His Holy Word. He has sent His Son, His Word, in the flesh, to take the punishment we deserve for our sin-filled hearts. By our faith in the sufferings and death of Jesus, God has given us a NEW HEART. A heart that is no longer filled with filth and sin. And, God has put a new spirit within us— a right spirit— HIS HOLY SPIRIT— and by that Holy Spirit we now have a heart that’s clean and perfect and holy in His sight— a heart that wants to walk in His ways!

Jesus is right - out of our hearts come all kinds of evil—but God has given us new hearts. Hearts that strive to do His will. So why do I still struggle with all those sins Jesus says come out of my heart?

So, why do we all still struggle with sin that makes us unclean? The answer - Because our new hearts are in constant battle with our flesh. And sin is in our blood. St. Paul said it best in Romans 7: 22-23

“So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, (his heart) but I see in my members (his flesh) another law waging war

against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.” (Romans 7.22-23)

St. Paul was a righteous man who admitted to all of us that his new heart from God wants to do good—But his flesh is determined to do evil —because sin was in his blood. Sin is in our blood. Sin wages war against us and tries to drag us into its captivity once again. So even with our new hearts—we will struggle with sin—BUT we must fight against it.

We must fight daily against our sinful flesh. We must fight daily against the devil and his evil temptations. We must fight every moment of every day against the world and all its sinful, alluring iniquity.

And we fight—not as the world thinks we should—but with weapons of the Spirit. Once again, St. Paul tells what those weapons are from his letter to the Ephesians, our second reading this morning. He says we need to put on the Armor of God – a belt of truth, a breastplate of righteousness, the gospel as our combat boots. We should have a shield of faith, a helmet of salvation, the sword of the spirit, which is the Word of God, and, like any good Christian soldier, we need to pray.

But, when we go to fight this battle with sin that lives inside us, we know we will win because Jesus has already won. He has defeated the sin that lives in our flesh on the cross. Jesus has defeated the devil and all his empty promises and all his evil ways—on the cross. Jesus has defeated the world and all its sinful allurements on the cross. Jesus defeated all the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places, the principalities, and the powers and the rulers of the darkness of this age. Jesus has defeated them all on the cross. AND Jesus took our sinful hearts all the way to Calvary, and thanks be to God, they were nailed to the cross and died. And, with new hearts from Jesus. So, we can fight with confidence against the evil in this world even that which abides in ourselves. And not just on Sundays, but every day, we can pray, “Create in me a clean heart, O God and renew a right spirit within me.” And our merciful, loving,

and compassionate God hears our prayer. And, for all this, we can be truly joyful.

In the name, and to the glory of God, and His Son, Jesus. Amen.