



Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

ASH WEDNESDAY HOMILY
PSALM 51
FEBRUARY 22, 2023
"THE HEART OF CHRIST"

There are few words that find their way into a song more than "heart." A list of the "100 best songs with heart in the title" included "Hungry Heart" (Bruce Springsteen), "Don't Phunk with my Heart" (Black Eyed Peas), "How Can You Mend a Broken Heart" (Bee Gees), "Your Cheatin Heart" (Hank Williams), and two more which were more biblically themed than I suspect their singers ever imagined - Selena Gomez's "The Heart Wants What It Wants" (it sure does) and Miley Cyrus', "Who Owns my Heart?". With Miley...one wonders!

There are few things that garner more attention in the Bible than the human heart – it's mentioned over 700 times though almost never as a physical organ. In the Bible, the use of the word is almost always metaphorical. Genesis 6:5 describes the fallen relationship of man with the Lord, with these sobering words; "The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart were only evil all the time." The heart wants what it wants alright! Yet Deuteronomy 6:4, the "greatest commandment"; says "love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength". So, who owns your heart?

In the Bible, the heart was an intellectual center, as when in Psalm 14:1 it says, "The fool says in his heart there is no God" or Proverbs 19:21 which says, "many are the plans of man's heart." Mary, the mother of our Lord, famously "pondered things in her heart." The heart reflected other emotions, as when Jesus says in Matthew 14:27 "take heart, it is I; have no fear". In the Bible the heart is where we express our volition - as when in the Book of Hebrews says God "discerns the intentions of the heart". Finally, the heart is the place where our conscience lives, as when David says in Psalm 51; "create in me a clean heart O God and put a new and right spirit within me".

If the heart is a big deal in popular music, it's an even bigger one in the Bible – to the Bible that is where the action is. If we acknowledge that Genesis 6:5 has us pegged right, (and it has), we can move no where other than to the conclusion expressed in Jeremiah 17:9-10, "the heart is devious above all else...who can understand it. I the Lord, test the heart to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings".

And it is because of our ways and our doings and our thoughts that we had you move rather slowly and solemnly through a line a bit earlier and put a smudge of ash on your foreheads. Our our hearts, where our intentions, attitudes, and devotions arise, are not pure. Why else would a "clean heart" be foremost in the mind of King David?

In Psalm 51 David asks God to *“create in me a clean heart” ...“restore to me the joy of your salvation and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit.”* David is asking God to place in us that which is apparently no longer in us – to recreate in us something lost in Eden. In Mark 7:21-23 Jesus said, *“it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come...All these evil things come from within, and they make dirty a person”*.

From the heart Jesus said, come envy, slander, pride, foolishness, coveting. But if it can be said God has a human heart - it beat inside of Jesus, and from His come patience, kindness, faithfulness, compassion, charity, and self-control. No wonder Jesus - ears attuned to Psalm 51 one suspects, said, *“blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God”*.

Jesus was that person of course...he saw God and lets us see God correctly as well. In John 6, he said, *“my food is to do the will of my Father”*. He ate and drank doing the will of the Father. He loved God totally and so he loved those whom the Father loved – and he loves you. Jesus agreed with the Old Testament teaching of Deuteronomy that we should *‘love the Lord our God with heart, soul, mind and strength’*, but added *“and love your neighbor as yourself”*. Jesus says his will is to give us the will to do that – to recreate in us something lost. Matthew 11:29-30 says *“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. For my burden is easy and my yoke is light.”*

We might wonder how that “yoke of Christ” could be easy and light. How can releasing anger, jealousy, pride, envy, bitterness, lust, be easy? It’s not, so many don’t even try. Many advocate *“saying what’s on our mind...being ourselves....not bottling up our feelings”*. To follow this line of thinking, it might actually be bad for a person not to express the very feelings Jesus says were “evil.” But Jesus does not advocate bottling up anything. He advocates taking our destructive feelings and behaviors and giving them to Him thus creating in us clean hearts. Besides, when have you ever truly enjoyed being angry, bitter, and greedy?

But know Jesus faced the pressure to what we do - live for himself. In Philippians 2:6 however it says, *“though he was in the very form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be exploited, but ...humbled himself”*. That great passage of the Bible goes on to say that because Jesus humbled himself, *God ‘highly exalted him....and made his name great’*. That is what God does when in humility and confession, we *“let the same mind and heart be in us that was in Christ Jesus”*.

Who owns your heart? Pray humbly but confidently as with Psalm 139, which says *“Search me O God and know my heart. Try me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there be any wicked way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.”* Then the pure, devoted, forgiving, loving, faithful heart of Christ, so mindful of you that it bled for you on the cross will be yours. AMEN