

## **“Your Cheatin’ Heart”<sup>1</sup>**

**Jeremiah 17:5-10**

**February 17, 2019**

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*“The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse –  
who can understand it?”*

- **Jeremiah 17:9**

### **Prayer of Preparation**

O God, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable unto you, our Refuge, Redeemer, and Friend. Amen.

### **Sermon Message**

He was only 29 years old when he died. The cause was heart failure brought on by alcohol and drug abuse. In his short life and career as a country music star he managed to score 11 Number One hits on the Billboard Charts and another 24 that made the top 10. He managed this remarkable feat without ever learning how to read music.

Despite this success, however, Hank Williams Sr. was in many ways a broken man. Most country music fans, though, didn’t care much. His simple but gritty songs made up for the rough edges.

Among William’s best-known hits was a little-cry-into-your beer ditty that you may recognize:

Your cheatin’ heart will make you weep.  
You’ll cry and cry and try to sleep.  
But sleep won’t come.  
The whole night through.  
Your cheatin’ heart will tell on you.

The cheatin’ heart in question, of course, belongs to a woman who has done her fella wrong. What a song!

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of this sermon were inspired from “Your Cheatin’ Heart” in Homiletics (January-February 2019) at [www.homileticsonline.com](http://www.homileticsonline.com).

## **Jeremiah's Warning**

But that's not the only thing a cheatin' heart is. In fact, the prophet Jeremiah thinks everyone has a cheatin' heart! He writes: "The heart is devious above all else: it is perverse – who can understand it?" (v. 9). Not exactly what we shared on Valentine's Day is it?

Lots of people think that Jeremiah pours it on pretty thick. Devious above all else? Perverse?

Reading the prophet Jeremiah, we are reminded of what many of the Protestant Reformers wrote, like John Calvin and John Wesley. In them, we also hear similar language of how the human heart is wicked, or of how the soul is hostile to God, utterly depraved and lost, a servant to sin.

Your cheatin' heart!

I have a feeling that many of us don't like to think about the human heart in such terms. Calling the human heart devious or perverse runs counter to the spirit of our age (though we see the fruit of wickedness in many places I think).

I would imagine (and I may be wrong) that many people, if they had to choose on a test, would probably pick the box that says that "people deep down are basically good, honest."

I remember taking such tests when I was in seminary: are people basically good or bad? I think that one of our cultural doctrines is to believe so – that we are basically good – even though such cheery optimism about the human condition runs contrary to much of scripture, as there is stress on the need for a Redeemer to liberate us from sin and bondage.

So here's the question: is Jeremiah's lament about throwing in the towel and giving up on us as human beings, or is he on to something?

## **Hard-Times Prophet**

Well, let's remember that the prophet Jeremiah was a prophet during a hard time in Israel. All hell was fixing to break loose as the Babylonia Army loomed on the outskirts of Jerusalem, a sign of God's coming judgment. Times were difficult.

Following King Josiah, there was a brief period of reform and good in the land. However, after King Jehoiakim assumed the throne, things went from good to

bad to worse, as the people enjoyed material more and more pleasures, forgetting God's laws and purposes.

And so, when Jeremiah blasts the human heart, he is seeing firsthand what can go wrong when people are being unfaithful, or when a ruler goes bad.

Now remember something here: in Jewish thought the human heart is the seat of reason. Emotion resides in the abdomen, or in what we call "gut feelings." The cheating heart, therefore, is actually a corrupted or a deceitful mind, a way of not seeing clearly.

Persons become deceived when they think they are better than others. There is a kind of thinking that wants to take credit for the good things and then blame others when the problems come. What the prophet Jeremiah wants us to do is wake up and live in a place close to God's heart, making sure we have roots deep in the ground of God's mercy (v. 8).

The problem is that we normally stay on the surface, or on the level of blame and denial. We easily become prideful.

### **Sin Management**

And it is easy to do! It is easy to distort the gospel into what Dallas Willard calls the gospel of sin management.

The gospel of sin management, Willard contends, is preached by church leaders on the left and the right.<sup>2</sup>

As we shared a couple weeks ago, we see how such groups and leaders have their own legal codes and sin-lists, doctrines and creeds, temples and priests. Such groups and leaders try to manage the sins of others, often by blame and shame, and then they can cast out those who do not toe the line.

The problem with this approach, however, is it reduces sin and faith to what is nothing more than a bar-code at the store. God scans our sin, the cash register beeps our sin, and then poof there is forgiveness: sin is gone, I am good, and you had better get on with the program if you are going to be as good as me! How could we not be Christian?<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1997), 41.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

The problem with this, says Willard, is that we have not connected forgiveness to following Jesus, to the changing of heart and mind. There remains a disconnect between forgiveness and discipleship, between receiving grace and living faith. The heart is not fully transformed.<sup>4</sup>

This is only a problem in the church. Modern movements like Nazism and Communism also tried to manage sin: they did all they could do to remake the world in their own image, trying to make it pure by eliminating what they saw as sin in others. They only made matters worse. They failed to look deep within.

It reminds me of that great line in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's famous book *Life Together* where he says that every dream or idea that we have that we try to impose on others, or that we lift up in place of Christ – destroys Christian community.<sup>5</sup>

We intend well, but our intentions can also deceive us. Try as we might we cannot make the church perfect, or any community, or nation. Only God in God's wisdom and love can do that. We can try, but we must realize that there are limits, that it usually takes a long time to bring meaningful change.

I think our founders of our country knew this, and it is why they created a government of checks and balances. They knew that human beings were frail and that human heart could go in many different directions: over here, then there. Our hearts can have mixed motives, and it is why we need others to help us see different perspectives, or to place a check on our own impulses. Even in church and families, this principle applies. We need others to remind us that we need help to correct us. If we love our ideals and convictions more than the Christian community itself, Bonhoeffer says, we will destroy the latter.

I think that Jesus knew this better than anyone. In the Sermon on the Mount, he said that only a good tree can bear good fruit. Unless the tree is planted in good soil, it won't grow well: it will die. Such is the way of the heart without God: it needs to be planted in God (Matthew 7:17-18).

Later in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus would speak in agricultural images in terms of weeds and wheat and how there is a tendency on the part of the gardener

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>5</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), 26.

when the weeds grow and take over the garden to destroy the weeds, only then to destroy the wheat too (Matthew 13:35-46).

His point was that we must realize that weeds and wheat grow together. When we try to make the garden into our own image, trying to make it perfect, we can end up destroying the whole garden, weeds and wheat and all. Better to let God make the final judgment (Matthew 13:46).

Perhaps this is why we may have such problems with sin, for it is in the nature of sin to think of ourselves as superior, that in our rush to judgment we can make matters worse. We can forget that we are fallen, too, missing the mark of God's glory.

Perhaps this is what it means when in the *Book of Common Prayer*, we say that our sin is ever before us: That is, we are constantly in the need of God's grace and forgiveness. We are constantly in need of making sure our hearts are ever close to God, to see ourselves for who we really are, so that whatever is happening in our lives – we may take our hearts to the Lord: to ask God to search us and know us and to trust then that we are known and loved beyond all grace, blessed and forgiven – cheatin' hearts and all! Amen.