

THE DEPRAVITY OF THE HEART

Jeremiah 13:1 to 19:15

Chapters 1-3 of Genesis clearly teach that man was originally created in the image of God. Then sin entered into the Garden and the image became marred although still present (Genesis 5:3). Jeremiah adds to this picture the convictions born of his own experience. It is not necessary to go to the Bible to know that man is depraved. One only has to look deep into his own heart. If any man ever walked closely with God, Jeremiah did. His call experience bears no mark of any consciousness of sin. The living presence of God brought no dismay to the young Hebrew. No one ever wanted to do the will of God more than Jeremiah. He was consumed by a desire to represent God to his nation. Yet in spite of his good intentions and genuine love, Jeremiah soon discovered that his own heart was betraying him. What he longed to do for God his own nature rebelled against. If a sincere and dedicated believer had trouble with himself, how much more would this characterize others.

I. The Deceitfulness of the Heart (17:9-10)

The Hebrews used the term "heart" in quite a different way from our own use. Whereas to us the heart is either the organ that pumps blood or the center of the emotional life, to the ancients it was all this and more! All the functions of the inner man were attributed to it.

1. Likened to Jacob

In Jeremiah 17:9 the prophet described the heart as deceitful. This word is from the same root as the proper noun "Jacob," which means a deceiver or trickster. Even as Jacob tricked his brother Esau and fooled his father, Isaac, just so every man's heart will deceive him. "Your heart will bear constant watching," he claimed, "for it is likely to fool you." How right he was.

2. Its Incomparable Deceitfulness

Not only is the heart a deceiver, the prophet pointed out, but it is the worst of all deceitful things. There are many things and people that are likely to fool a man, but his own heart is the worst of all. His own inner voice is the most dangerous enemy he has. Of all things the heart is the most misleading.

II. The Heart Incurably Afflicted

The trouble with the heart is that it is afflicted with a dread disease that has three direct consequences.

1. The Blinding Nature of Sin (13:22; 16:10)

The disease of the heart is all the more serious because the afflicted person does not know he is ill. The affliction gives no warning of its presence; the victim is not aware of the danger. Israel could see no reason why God was so concerned about her. Nothing was wrong so far as she could see (13:22). If iniquity was within her heart, she had not detected it (16:10).

It is alarming to realize that one can go all through his life feeling quite certain that he is heading for heaven, when hell is his real destination.

2. The Enslaving Power of Sin (13:23)

Just as the Ethiopian cannot change his dark skin or the leopard his spots, even so a sinful man cannot change his own disposition to sin. A harmful habit a man can conquer by a supreme effort of will. When a man goes too far in sin and becomes accustomed to it, a condition results that affects the will itself. The man who continues to sin so weakens his will that he is incapable of willing a change in his behavior.

Neither can outward reform change his inner motivation. Providing education and better housing conditions for the underprivileged makes life more pleasant for them, but it does not guarantee marital bliss or parental faithfulness.

3. Sin unto Death (17:9)

The disease of the will is a fatal one. The phrase translated "desperately wicked" literally means mortally ill. The sickness is so severe that unless something is done immediately, death will result. Not only is every heart a Jacob and the most deceitful voice a man hears, but the malady with which it is afflicted is a fatal one.

The sinning soul will die, not just as a consequence of an act of God but because of the nature of the disease. It is incurable in its very nature; death is its invariable result. All men are sinners, regardless of how it comes about, and as sinners they are doomed to die.

III. The Cure of the Heart

Is there any hope for man? Can anything be done for his wretched condition? The prophet is convinced that there is a way out.

1. Only God Can Diagnose (17:9-10)

Since man's own conscience will not tell him the truth about himself, he must look elsewhere for an accurate evaluation. Other men cannot give him a reliable analysis, for they have the same kind of heart as his own. Only God can see clearly into the inner recesses of the heart. Why do we behave the way we do? Only God can tell us. We would do well to listen to him, for one day we will be judged upon the basis of what he knows about us, rather than our own opinion of ourselves.

There is no way that a man can know the true condition of his heart unless he listens to what God has to say. This is the primary purpose of the Bible. As we hear God speaking there, we are made aware of our true condition. We would do well, therefore, to let him show us where we stand today.

2. Balm from Gilead (8:18 to 9:1)

However, if the people continued to try to summon their own physician and use their own balm, there was no hope. It was already too late.

The most pessimistic passage in Jeremiah is 14:1 to 15:9. Here a dialogue ensued between Jeremiah and God. A drought had come upon the land, and the prophet, speaking for the people, prayed for divine help (14:1-9). The Lord replied that he could do nothing for them until they changed their ways. It would do no good to pray for them as long as they refused to repent (14:10-12).

This message of Jeremiah is a moving commentary upon the conditions that mark our country today. The reason why we are a sick country is because we will not ask his counsel or accept his prescriptions for our ills. Unless America repents of its materialism and immorality, our wounds will have no healing.

IV. The Freedom of the Heart (18:1 to 19:15)

In a real sense, the will of man is not free. Before he comes to God he is the slave of sin. Afterward he is the servant of God. Yet he must be free to choose his master. It is possible for him either to yield to God or to resist him. To this extent man's heart decides its own destiny.

1. Free Will and Divine Sovereignty

There is no more intricate problem in Christian theology than the relationship between the sovereignty of God and man's free will. Both are true. God is the absolute ruler of the universe. Yet man is free to decide his own direction.

As Jeremiah watched a potter at work on his wheel, he was given divine insight into the ways of God with men, whether individuals or nations.

(1) The potter had a purpose. - First Jeremiah noticed that the potter had a purpose for the clay (18:3). Before he began his work, in his mind's eye was a picture of the completed vessel. Just so, God works with man. Before man's life (or a nation's) begins, God has a plan for each one, even as he had for Jeremiah and Israel. And it is a good purpose. No good potter would design a poor vessel. A man need not fear the will of God for his life or shrink from it. Nothing better could happen to him.

(2) The clay was marred in the potter's hand (18:4). - This marring of the clay was not due to the artisan's inefficiency, of course, but to some stubborn spot in the clay. What a tragic truth. Although God has the highest good in mind for every life, that life can become marred. Man can resist the will of God. Such a man will never find happiness, but he can say no to God. God permits everything that occurs, but what happens is not always his active will. Jesus taught us to pray: "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). There would be no point in our praying that God's will should be done in earth if it is already being done.

So much of what goes on in this world is not the way God plans it. The clay is always becoming marred in the potter's hand.

(3) The potter made another vessel (18:4). Man can resist the will of God, but God does not immediately destroy him. He works with

the stubborn spot until he gets it out. Then he forms another vessel. It may not be the same one that he first planned but it will be a useful one. There is only one thing that keeps a man from being useful to God: the stubbornness of his own heart. Whenever a man will yield himself to God, the divine potter will reshape his life. Perhaps he can never be what he could have been at first but he can find his place of service.

(4) Sometimes it is too late for the clay to be molded. - In chapter 19, Jeremiah took a potter's vessel that had already been baked in the oven and led the elders to the city dump. There he held the vessel up for their inspection and cast it upon the rocks. Hardened in the oven, it could not be reshaped again. Broken on the rocks it could not be refashioned.