THE DECEITFUL HEART
Jeremiah 17:9-10

As we continue our series, *Spiritual Cardiology*, I invite you to open your Bible to Jeremiah 17:9-10. We’re thinking together about matters of the heart. We’re looking at Bible texts that speak about the heart, and we’re praying that Dr. God will use His word to bring healing to any heart disease we suffer and to shape our hearts to look more like His. Last Sunday we considered the hard heart. This week, we’re thinking about the deceitful heart.

You notice the EKG screen we’re using with this series. Last week one of our docs caught me in the foyer after the service. He said, “You know that EKG you’re showing on the screen? Your patient needs a pacemaker.” He said it’s missing some kind of rhythm. How would I know? I’m not that kind of doctor. And chances are without a doc or a cardiologist looking at that EKG, the patient probably doesn’t realize his situation either. He may think he’s just got indigestion or that he hurt his shoulder or his arm somehow. He may not even thing heart problem at all. The heart is a deceitful thing—and not just physically but spiritually too. Hear the word of the Lord through Jeremiah ...

(Read the text).

I

God gave Jeremiah a tough job. God called Jeremiah to preach to the people of God who had lost their way. They were a people who covered their eyes to what was going on around them, lied to themselves about what was going on within them, and put their fingers in their ears to the word of God that was spoken to them. I’ve got a cartoon in my files. The caption reads, “Preaching 101.” The picture is of a preacher standing behind a pulpit set directly in front of a brick wall. That preacher could be Jeremiah. The people of Judah were up to their necks in their own sins. And this was their attitude: “Big deal! We’re God’s people. We’ve got God temple in our midst. God’s got to give us a free pass.”

“No!” declared Jeremiah. “Your sins, your injustices, your idolatries have piled up before God like so much stinking garbage. You’ve had your chance to turn back but you have not. Destruction is on the way.”
And as we learn in our text, the heart of their problem is exactly that: the heart. It’s not just the things they do. The things they do, what Jeremiah calls their ways and the fruit of their deeds, grow out of an internal condition of the heart. Look at the way Jeremiah describes the heart in the context of our passage:

- In v. 1 — “The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron; with a point of diamond it is engraved on the tablet of their heart ....” This is a heart problem.

- And in v. 5 — “Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the Lord.” This is a heart problem.

- And then in our text in v. 9 — “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick ....”

We cough because we have a cold. The cough is the symptom of a deeper malady: a cold bacteria that has settled in our sinuses or our lungs. In the same way, we sin because we’re sinners. Our sins are the symptom of a deeper malady: a sin bacteria that takes root in a deceitful heart that is desperately sick. Sin is engraved on our hearts. We are born with a bent to sin. Did anyone teach you how to sin? You figured that out all by yourself, didn’t you? And even when we are old enough to know better, we sin by choice. Sinners by nature, sinners by choice: that’s you and me.

But because “the heart is deceitful above all things,” we can be so blind to our sin, or we can downplay our sin. Instead of recognizing that our sin is full-blown treason against the King of the universe, we treat it like its trivial and no big deal. Instead of recognizing that our sin is a class A felony against our holy God, we treat it like it’s a class D misdemeanor worthy of little more than a slap on the wrist or a brief timeout in the corner, or a kind little wink and nod from God. Oh how we lie to ourselves about our sin.

Bill Hybels, who pastors Willow Creek church outside of Chicago, shares a conversation he had with someone early in the life of that church. After Bill had given a talk on sin, a guy came up to him after the service and said, “All this talk about sin is making me feel really bad. I for one don’t consider myself much of a sinner.”
Bill felt he could shoot straight with this guy, so he said, "Well, maybe you're not. Let me ask you a few questions. You've been married twenty-five years. Have you been absolutely one hundred percent faithful to your wife the whole time?"

He laughed and said, "Well, you know, I'm in sales. I travel a lot." They both knew what he was admitting to.

"Okay," Bill said. "When you fill out your expense account, do you ever add something that wasn't strictly business?"

"Everybody does that," he replied.

"Okay," Bill said. "And when you are out there selling your product, do you ever exaggerate—say it will do something it won't, or promise to ship it tomorrow when you know it won't go out until next Tuesday?"

The guy replied, "That's the industry standard."

Then Bill looked straight at him and said, "Do you realize what you have just told me? You just told me that you are an adulterer, a cheater, and a liar." The guy's eyes got wide and turned angry. He said, "Those are awful words! Don't use words like that. I only said there was a little something on the side, a little this and a little that." And Bill said, "Friend, nothing is gained by watering this down. Just say it like it is. You're an adulterer, a cheater, and a liar."

Oh how we tend to downplay our sin, to water it down, to tell ourselves it's no big deal or not as bad as our neighbor's sin! Jeremiah's Judah was doing that. We do that. And Jeremiah is just pointing out the obvious truth for anyone who will look at it honestly: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick."

II

"Desperately sick" can be translated "beyond cure." I've known people and you have too who received the hard word from their cardiologist

---

that their heart was beyond repair, beyond cure. Nothing more they could do. Surgery can’t fix it. Stents can’t fix it. Medicines can’t fix it. Their hearts are desperately sick and beyond cure. This only affects certain people in the population.

But in the spiritual realm it affects us all—you, me, every single one of us. Your heart, my heart, our hearts are deceitful above all things and desperately sick. Our sinful hearts are beyond cure. The doctor can’t fix it. Mama and Daddy can’t fix it. You can’t fix it. The right diet can’t fix it. Walnuts and fish oil can’t fix it. Exercise can’t fix it. The preacher can’t fix it. Church attendance can’t fix it. Good deeds can’t fix it. There’s not one thing you can do to fix it.

And the prognosis is death. Not just physical death, not just that moment when the heart stops beating, when the pulse shuts down, when we can’t take one more breath—not just physical death. But spiritual death: what Romans 3:23 describes as separation from God now and forever. The prognosis is death, and the destiny is hell—that awful place imaged in the Bible as torment and darkness and fire and isolation and separation from all things beautiful and life-giving and joyous: separation from God ... forever.

III

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” Well, God can—only God can. He searches the heart and tests the mind. He can see past your deeds to your intentions. You and I get deceived by our hearts on a regular basis. God does not. Only God understands our deceitful hearts.

And only God can fix them. Jeremiah hints at this fix over in chapter 31 when God says through the prophet:

I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke. ... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people ... For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more (Jer. 31:31-34).
Do you see how God fixes our deceitful hearts? God treats our hearts as if they are a re-writable computer disc. In our text, in 17:1 where Jeremiah says that with the point of a diamond our sins are engraved on our hearts, God writes a new covenant over that sin engraving that forgives our sins and remembers them no more. That’s an Old Testament hint—that’s Jeremiah pointing a few centuries out to that day in this same Jerusalem when on a hill just outside the gates, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is murdered on a cross for your sins and mine.

We can’t fix our deceitful hearts. Our attempts to fix them are like trying to clean them with a filthy rag. The cure to our deceitful hearts must come from outside of us. So God provides the cure. God takes all the sin our deceitful hearts can dream and think and do, and God puts it all on Christ on that cross. Because Jesus had a pure heart rather than a deceitful one, because Jesus had never sinned even once, He could bear our sins in His body and kill their penalty and their power over us once and for all.

And to prove that the sacrifice took, God raised Jesus from the dead on the third day. Yes, Jesus is the Son of God. Yes, Jesus, is the perfect, efficient, sufficient, and acceptable sacrifice for our sins. Yes, Dr. Jesus alone, can provide the cure for our deceitful hearts. His blood covers our sins. It rewrites the disc of our heart with that new covenant in which God forgives our sins and remembers them no more.

And by sending us His Holy Spirit to take up residence in our hearts, God takes a deceitful heart that was dead in its transgression and sins and makes it alive in Jesus Christ the Lord. When we trust that what Jesus did on the cross He did for us, when we believe in our hearts that Jesus died for our sins and profess with our mouth that God raised Him from the dead, we will be saved. We are, to use Jesus’ term, “born again.” We get a new start and a new heart that will live in the presence of God now and forever. “The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 3:23). Goodbye hell; hello heaven!

And every time we come to the table of the Lord and take in our hands the bread—which is Christ’s body broken for us—and the cup—which is Christ’s blood poured out for the forgiveness of our sins, we are reminded of the grace of God that alone can cure our sinful, deceitful hearts. We are reminded that we can be honest about our deepest sins because God’s grace
and forgiveness are even deeper. And we are reminded that when we trust Christ and receive His grace, every sin—past, present, and future—is covered by His blood and forgiven forever.

Only God can cure the deceitful heart. He does it on a spiritual level. But He was kind enough to provide these symbols at the table of the only medicine that can make us well: the body and blood of Christ given on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins.

IV

I say this to myself a lot, and I say it to you plenty too. It’s my favorite John Newton quote. At the end of his life this former slave trader turned Christian pastor said, “My memory is nearly gone; but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior.”

Come to the table today, and remember that too.

INVITATION TO THE TABLE

As we prepare to come to the table, I want to give you an opportunity to profess your faith. I will share a Scripture text and ask you to respond.

“The saying is trustworthy and deserving of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the chief” (1 Tim. 1:15). Say, “I believe.”

“If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us of all unrighteousness” (1 Jn. 1:9). Say, “I confess.”

“But to all who did receive Jesus, who believed in the power of his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (Jn. 1:12-13). Say, “I receive.”

---

Now come to the Table, receive these elements, meet Christ in them, and find healing for your sin-sick heart.

**PRAYER**

We give you thanks, our Father, for the way you can take the common elements of bread and juice, infuse them with spiritual meaning, and bring the blessing of your grace to our hearts and our lives. We humbly receive these gifts freely, gladly, and gratefully at your Table. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.

Preached: February 9, 2014
First Baptist Church, Hot Springs, AR
John Scott McCallum II