

A Matter of the Heart
Sermon on Mark 7:14-15, 21-23 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, September 3, 2006

The American Heart Association estimates that for the year 2003, 71,300,000 Americans had one or more forms of cardiovascular disease. Cardiovascular disease caused an estimated 910,614 deaths that year, amounting to 37.3 percent of all deaths or 1 of every 2.7 deaths. That makes heart disease the leading cause of death in the United States, claiming more lives than all cancers, accidents, and cases of HIV/AIDS combined.¹

It is not simply medical professionals like physicians, researchers, and the Heart Association that will tell you that heart disease is a problem. All of scripture points to the problem of heart disease. Only scripture doesn't employ sophisticated medical terminology such as atherosclerosis, myocardial infarction, or angina pectoris to describe it. Scripture calls heart disease sin.

I need to be very clear that I am talking about two very different types of heart disease, though both are real and have potentially deadly consequences if they are left unaddressed. Because we are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27) and because our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19), we have a divine obligation to care for our physical bodies. It is our duty to ourselves and to the God who made us to pursue physical health. And here I am preaching to myself as much as I am to you. My favorite exercise is fork lifts: lifting my fork from my plate to my mouth. I claim to suffer a severe allergic reaction to gymnasias and fitness centers. But in this regard I am a hypochondriac. The reality is that I need to do what my doctor has recommended in order to have a healthy heart: eat a balanced diet of moderate proportions and engage in some form of exercise or physical activity for thirty minutes a day four or five times a week. And no, channel surfing does not count as exercise.

¹ American Heart Association's Cardiovascular Disease Statistics found at <http://www.americanheart.org>.

On the whole, we as a country have become more aware of the importance of heart health and physical fitness: We are exercising in greater numbers and are trying to change our diets to decrease our intake of calories and fats. But have we as Christians been at least as concerned with soul health and spiritual fitness? Jesus puts that question to us in a very pointed way when he says, “there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile” (Mk. 7:15). While Jesus is definitely not recommending a steady diet of pizza, burgers, and Twinkies, he is pointing to the idea that we need to be aware of the source of that heart disease that we Christians call sin.

Jesus is very clear about that source. Beginning in 7:20, Jesus tells the crowd gathered around him, “It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person” (7:20-23).

In a debate about ritual purity and the cleanness of food, Jesus makes clear that people are not made unclean by the food they eat, even if they do so with unwashed hands. As opposed to our physical health, what makes us spiritually clean and morally pure has very little to do with what foods we eat or how we prepare them. What makes our actions morally good is the intention behind them. That makes our behavior, indeed all of our life a matter of the heart, for the heart is “the source of all spiritual and moral conduct.”²

And the problem is that as human beings, beings who are sinful by nature and prone to sin by choice, we don’t have healthy hearts. Our hearts, though they are made by God in order to love God, in fact are inclined toward evil. In the time before the Great Flood, the writer of

² William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich. and Cambridge, England: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974) 254.

Genesis tells us that “every inclination of the thoughts of [people’s] hearts was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5). In fact, if humanity were a radio station, our motto would be “All evil, all the time.” And just to prove that I’m not making this up for that dramatic hellfire and brimstone effect uncommon in Methodist preachers today, let us remember that both the Psalms and St. Paul in Romans 3:12 affirm that “All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one” (NIV). As far as the Bible is concerned, 100% of human beings are afflicted with spiritual heart disease, or sin.

And what causes sin? Many of us, myself included, like to think the devil made me do it. The line seems to have worked for respectable people like Eve and David, people who walked closely with God and should have known better. But another respectable person, a seventh-century English monk named the Venerable Bede dispels that excuse. He reminds us that Jesus’ claim that it is from within that evil comes “[I]s an answer to those who consider that evil thoughts are simply injected by the devil and that they do not spring from our will.”³ Jesus lovingly but insistently points to our hearts and says there’s the source of the trouble.

The trouble is that in a world that offers an infinite variety of pleasurable people and places and products, our hearts don’t know where to turn. All too often, then, as Martin Luther explained, our hearts turn in upon themselves. Deformed by their captivity to sin, unable to withstand the pure light of Christ, our hearts curve inward. Turned in upon themselves, our hearts can conceive of no higher pleasures than those of the flesh, so we commit the soap opera sins of fornication, adultery, and licentiousness. Turned in upon themselves, our hearts are not open to receive what God would give us, so we steal and covet and envy what belongs to others. Turned in upon themselves, our hearts do not recognize the divine image in others, and so we

³ Bede the Venerable, *Exposition on the Gospel of Mark 2.7.20-21* quoted in *Mark*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament vol. 2, ed. Thomas C. Oden and Christopher A. Hall (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998) 94.

commit murder and wickedness. Turned in upon themselves, our hearts do not behold what is true, and so we practice deceit, slander, pride and folly. “These acts and dispositions, Jesus affirms, are what defile a [person] and they have their source in a heart which is in open rebellion against God.”⁴

Having heard the prognosis, that sin is a heart disease to which no one of us is immune, is there any hope for a cure? The good news is that there is indeed a wonderful, indeed a miraculous, cure. The cure for the sin that afflicts and would kill us is Jesus Christ. The religion of Jesus, says John Wesley,

[I]s *θεραπεια ψυχης*, God’s method of healing a soul which is *thus diseased*. Hereby the great Physician of souls applies medicines to heal *this sickness*; to restore human nature, totally corrupted in all its faculties. God heals all our atheism by the knowledge of himself, and of Jesus Christ whom he hath sent; by giving us faith, a divine evidence and conviction of God, and of the things of God—in particular of this important truth: Christ loved *me*, and gave himself for *me*.⁵

That is the cure for the heart disease of sin: God allows us to know him by sending Jesus into the world. It is by looking to Jesus and knowing his life and death on our behalf that makes us aware of our sin, our various acts of open rebellion against God. But God gives us faith, that “divine evidence and conviction” that in Jesus God has acted to make peace with us, to restore us to unity with God, to heal our sin-sick souls. The medicine that God applies is his healing love: Christ loved us and gave himself for us, accepting our sin-sickness as his own. The prophet Isaiah speaks of Jesus when he says, “Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; ... He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed” (Isa. 53:4a-5).

⁴ Lane, 257.

⁵ John Wesley from the sermon, “Original Sin” reprinted in *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology*, ed. By Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991) 333.

Friends, brothers and sisters, each of us has the heart disease of sin. There is within each of us evil intentions, and we each are guilty of sin. But we are not condemned to suffer this illness nor death, for Jesus loves us and offered himself in our place. Because of Jesus, we can be healed, restored, and forgiven. Jesus' death and resurrection make us clean and whole. Let us celebrate that we are "From every sickness, by Thy word, / From every foul disease, / Saved, and to perfect health restored, / To perfect holiness."⁶

⁶ From "Perfection in This Life," Chapter Four of *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* by John Wesley.