

A heart that is right with God

Acts 8:9-24

Introduction

When Philip was ministering in Samaria, he met Simon, who practiced sorcery. In the ancient world there was much fascination with astrology, and there were plenty of astrologers, sooth-sayers and magicians. Simon amazed everyone in Samaria, and they gave him their attention. He claimed to be was the divine power called the Great Power. Either people thought he was a great power because he was a god come to earth in his person, or else people thought he was a representative of God.

People of Samaria responded to the Gospel message and were baptised, and Simon was one who made a profession and was baptised. He followed Philip everywhere, and was astonished by the great signs and miracles he worked. Then when he saw the Holy Spirit was given when the Apostles laid on hands, Simon offered money to receive their power, so that he in turn could lay hands on people and have the Holy Spirit come on them. **Peter answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God."** (Acts 8:21-22). The real problem was that Simon's heart was not right before God. His conversion was bogus. He had not repented and asked for God's forgiveness. He was full of bitterness and a captive to sin. Simon asked for prayer.

We are going to concentrate today on Peter's words, "Your heart is not right before God". But first a few more aspects of Simon that are worth pointing out. There was much fascination with this figure of Simon in the post-New Testament church. It is said that there was a statue built of him in Rome, where he had subsequently continued his work. In the third century he was accused of being the originator of the heresy of Gnosticism. He was associated with a woman called Helena, who had been released from slavery by him. And his name became used in the English language – "Simony" is to buy ecclesiastical office.

This man made a profession and was baptised, but he was very superficial. He was still gripped by love of money and hoped to buy spiritual power. His only concern was with power and his own standing. He made profession, but there was no real change of heart by the grace of God. He did not understand the inward nature of the Gospel. There was no spiritual change.

This is a warning to us. It is possible to have made a profession, to have been baptised, to be interested in Christian things, and have the appearance of being a Christian, and yet for the heart to be unchanged. It is not that a person has to be perfect to be a Christian, but there must be certain marks of a new heart and life. These marks were not there in Simon's life. So he was not a true Christian.

Importance of the heart

The inner man, the core of the personality, the real person, the governing centre – that is what we mean by the heart. The head is not the main thing – we may know the whole truth as it is in Christ, and consent to it in our minds, even be clear and sound in doctrine, but still be on the broad road to destruction.

Neither is outward life the important thing. We may be very decent and respectable, but still be on the brink of eternal ruin, because all the time the heart is not right with God. The heart is the main thing. It is the hinge and turning point in the condition of the soul. If the heart is alive to God and quickened by the Spirit, the man is a living Christian. If the heart is dead and without the Spirit, he is dead before God.

It is not what we say or profess or where we go and what we do. But it is what we are inwardly. **Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart** (1 Samuel 16:7). **All a man's ways seem right to him, but the Lord weighs the heart** (Proverbs 21:2). Men are naturally content with outward religion, outward morality, and outward correctness. But the Lord looks further – He looks at motives, real inner desires. **I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind** (Jeremiah 17:10).

My son, give me your heart (Proverbs 23:26). We may give God a bowed head, a serious face, bodily presence in His house – but unless we first give Him our heart, we have given nothing of value. Jews in the time of Isaiah and in the time of Jesus had plenty of religion and worship, but it was only a matter of the lips. Their hearts were far from God (Matthew 15:8; Isaiah 29:13). The zeal of Jehu against idolatry was great, and he had idols pulled down. But there was one blot on his character: **Jehu was not careful to keep the law of the Lord, the God of Israel, with all his heart** (2 Kings 10:31).

The heart is what a husband desires to have in his wife, what a mother desires to have in her child. And that is what God wants in the Christian. Just as the physical blood-pumping heart is most important organ of the physical body, so the heart we are speaking of is life to the soul, in relationship to God. In the same way as the root is the source of life and fruitfulness to a tree. In the same way as the mainspring is crucial to a watch, the cause of its movement and so its usefulness. The heart is the mainspring of life to the soul.

This is the reason why multitudes have no interest in God, Christ, the Bible, the Lord's Day, eternity, heaven or hell. They are interested only in food, drink, money, and pleasure. The state of their heart is such that they have no appetite for spiritual things, no interest whatsoever. They need a new heart and a new mainspring. Why do many hear the Gospel unmoved? Why is there no effect and no response? They argue with their heads. Conscience is disturbed; feelings are moved, but no real response to Christ. Some secret sin and idol chains them and therefore they cannot move. They need a new heart.

Why will many be lost at the end, even though they have heard of God's great salvation? Christ has pleaded with them and invited them to come to Him. But their hearts are the cause of ruin. **You refuse to come to me to have life** (John 5:40). **How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing** (Matthew 23:37). Christ would have

saved them, but they would not be saved. They would not come to Christ because **men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil** (John 3:19). Is your heart right in the sight of God?

The heart that is wrong in God's sight

There are only two sorts of hearts – one that is right with God, and one that is wrong with God. The wrong one is the natural heart, with which we are born. No heart is right with God by nature. Since the Fall, all have been born with an inclination towards evil. Unless a heart has been changed by the Holy Spirit, it is wrong with God.

The Bible's description of the heart that is wrong with God: **The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure** (Jeremiah 17:9) – Hebrew word means incurable, utterly malignant. **From within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.'** (Mark 7:21-23). This is a truly humbling picture. The seeds of these things are in the heart of everyone born into the world.

But there is one term which sums up every heart which God has not changed, and it gives us a striking and instructive picture: A **heart of stone** (Ezekiel 11:19). A stone is hard, unyielding, unbending, unimpressible. It can be broken, but not bent. The natural heart is hard and unmoved. Afflictions, mercies, losses, crosses, sermons, books, exhortations – all unable to soften it. Until God moves to change it, there it is in hardness and stubbornness.

Stone is also cold, icy, chilling, unlike flesh or wood. There are stones and marble statues in many a church that have heard hundreds of sermons – but no response or feeling shown. So with the natural heart – it cares less for the story of Christ's death on the Cross than the latest novel, or TV series, or debate in Parliament. Needs fire sent from heaven to warm it.

A stone is barren. You do not reap a harvest from rocks. You never fill barns with corn from off the top of Ben Nevis or Snowdon. There is no wheat to be gathered off granite or slate. So with the spiritual life of men – there will be no penitence, faith, love, holiness till God is at work and causes it to bear fruit.

This is the natural heart from birth. Look at it. Think about it. Examine yourself in the light of this picture. Has your heart ever been changed from this stony state? Is it still the same as it was when you were born? Still wrong in the sight of God?

The reason why few believe the Gospel and respond to Christ is that at the root of the matter is their state of heart. Men do not see or know what is for their good. The surprise is not that few are converted but that any are converted. There is no real hope for man's condition if he dies with a heart which is not right with God. Jesus words, **You must be born again** (John 3:7), are no empty talk, there is no option. He presents an absolute and urgent necessity. Is your own heart right in the sight of God?

The heart which is right with God

Again the Bible has many pictures of the heart which is right with God. **I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh** (Ezekiel 36:26). We are not born with this new heart; it is given by the Holy Spirit. It means new tastes, joys, sorrows, desires, fears, like and dislikes, new views about sin, God, Christ, salvation, Bible, prayer, Sunday, holiness, the world. **The old has gone, the new has come!** (2 Corinthians 5:17). This is why the new Christian is such a mystery to the man of the world.

A broken and contrite heart (Psalm 51:17), broken from pride and self-righteousness, from the former arrogant thoughts about self and what God owes me. Cracked and shattered to pieces. Realizing truth about own unworthiness of God's mercy, a realization of how corrupt I am. The former stubbornness and insensitiveness is thawed and passed away. Careful about offending God. Afraid of running into sin. Once we feared death, but not sin. Now we fear sin, but not death. The broken and contrite heart believes in Christ for salvation. **It is with your heart that you believe** (Romans 10:10). **Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith** (Ephesians 3:17).

The new heart rests all hopes of pardon and eternal life on Christ, His atonement and mediation. Turns to Christ as compass needle turns to North. Looks daily to Him for peace, help and grace. Feeds on Him. Submits to Him. Leans on Him. Cleaves to Him. Builds on Him. Special fitness to meet wants and requirements.

The new heart is a **purified heart** (Acts 15:9). It loves holiness and hates sin. Abhors what is evil and clings to what is good. Delights in God's law and longs to keep it more perfectly. Affections are set on things above. Loves God, His will, glory, ways and day. Inclined towards God, and loving to talk to Him. God is a friend, and we can spread our needs before Him, tell Him our secrets, and hold nothing back.

Yet the new heart is also one which feels a conflict (Galatians 5:17). Two opposing principles – the old nature and the new nature, between which there is constant warfare. This is in fact a good sign that we are regenerate.

Questions arising

What sort of heart is yours? A right one or a wrong one? If wrong, it is high time to get the matter straight and ask God to change it. Do not take refuge in your own respectability, your external life. Do not just hope for the best. There is no substitute for the heart set right with God. And it is a most urgent matter to sort this out.

What are our tastes? Where are our affections set? What do we hate most? What do we love most? A tree is known by its fruits. True Christians are known by their tastes, affections and direction in life. Do not put this enquiry off to a more convenient season. You may have to meet your God at any time. Will your heart be right or wrong with Him? There is only a step between us and everlasting death.

What should we do if the heart is wrong with God? Go at once to Christ, and ask for pardon. Ask for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Cannot make own heart right, but Christ can. Look at Christ. Seek Him. Complete salvation is in Him – from the guilt of sin

and the power of sin. Christ is no half-Saviour. He not only forgives, but also pours His Spirit in, and gives a new heart. He can create and renew us. Can turn death into life, weakness into strength, sickness into health, famine into plenty. Come to Him at once.

To those whose hearts are right with God, who are alive to God, be thankful for what He has done. Be humble and watchful, for you are still in the world with all its seductions and the Devil is near. Watch and pray and ask God to keep you. This is why fellowship with those of like mind is so important. Give your heart to Him each day. Give Him the keys to every door of your life. **He who trusts in himself is a fool** (Proverbs 28:26). Be hopeful for others. If we have been made new, so can others. Work on, speak on, pray on. Never despair of any man while he is alive.