

A Treacherous Heart
Jeremiah 17:5-8, Mark 7:6-23

Brothers and sisters in Christ, life should be simple for us. It should be relatively easy, because God has designed us with the capacity to understand how He's designed the world.

We are created with the ability to be able to recognize the Word in Creation and to then act in accordance with how the Word causes the creation to function, and living our daily lives in harmony with the Creation's design is called Wisdom.

And if we do this, if we live according to Wisdom... we will be blessed, won't we.

From the simple things that are just easier to do – like running the lid of the pickle jar under hot water to make it easier to twist off... to the more complex decisions in finance and business where we know which deals will provide good returns on our investments... to knowing how win friends and influence people so that we have good relationships and friendships which will help us to thrive.

If we live according to God's creation design - life will be good and we will reap the benefits. We will be healthy, wealthy and wise - it's that simple, and we all want a good life – don't we?

You would think so – but if you are observant as you go through your daily routine... you will notice there are quite a few people who don't want a good life!

Like people who lift with their back instead of their knees, people who play the lottery and gamble, people who are not getting enough sleep and exercise, people who are spending money they don't have on things they don't need to impress people who don't matter.

You get the picture don't you.

So what accounts for this foolishness? Why do we deliberately make life difficult for ourselves when simply living in harmony with God's design virtually guarantees us an easy and good life?

Is it a problem with our minds and how we think? Are we just that ignorant? Perhaps – but as the old saying goes – fool me once shame on you, fool me twice shame on me.

Do we not have enough will power? Are we just lazy? Perhaps – but if you have ever tried to get a child eat their vegetables you will discover humans have vast amounts of will power.

So why do we not consistently live in harmony with God's creation design? And I what does it say about human beings? That we can't even trust in our own self-interest and self-preservation to motivate us to live consistently by Wisdom?

And... if we are unwilling to live according to God's Word in creation or worse yet deny it and/or twist it! Then how would we ever expect to be able to recognize that Word becoming Flesh so that we might have everlasting life?

Well brothers and sisters I don't think this says anything terribly good about us as human beings, and I think that the Prophet Jeremiah's assessment of the situation and what is

says about the core of who we are, our hearts , is right on. Jeremiah says *"The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9)*

Indeed when we look at life from this simple perspective it's hard to understand what is going on in our hearts, that makes us willfully ignore the wisdom in God's creation.

And for Jeremiah it was even more puzzling, because God's people had been given the Law of Moses. And the Law contained very specific and direct instructions, which literally spelled out for them how to be obedient to God and how live in ways that were wise so they would be blessed, spiritually and physically. It doesn't get any easier than that!

And if the promise of blessing for following very specific instructions wasn't motivation enough, their Covenant relationship with Yahweh also contained consequences and punishment. So If you don't learn from reward, you can be sure you'll learn quickly by consequence – right?

But you've still learned – and you make the correction and live accordingly and you still reap the benefits. It's very simple.

And Jeremiah was constantly reminding Israel about this. In vs. 5-8 he warns them that a person whose heart turns away from God and trusts in humanity instead will be like a stunted shrub in the desert!

But, the person who trusts in God, and believes that His law is good and brings life and obeys it – they will be like a firmly rooted tree, that has access to water and grows tall and strong and can endure in spite of drought or storms, and still bears fruit in the midst of it all.

It's really pretty simple and easy to understand picture of living a wise life.

So... you would think Israel would have a fairly straight forward, blessed and easy existence – you would think that the history of their Covenant relationship with Yahweh would be pretty boring and uneventful because they are always loyal

and obedient to Yahweh and He blesses them, protects them from their enemies, and their life is always good and wonderful.

However that was not the case for the people of God, and we don't have time to look at ALL the instances in scripture where God's people deliberately turned away from His Law; how they neglected the Sabbath, intermarried with the nations around them, mistreated the poor, denied justice to widows and orphans, worshiped other gods, engaged in sexual immorality and even sacrificed their children to idols... we would be here all day.

Instead let me read how the Bible itself summarizes it in Judges 2:18-19 - *"Whenever the Lord raised up a judge for them [Israel], he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived... But- when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their ancestors, following other gods and serving and worshiping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways."*

This was the repeating pattern of unfaithfulness and betrayals which describes Israel's relationship with Yahweh.

But why would God's people act this way when God designed life to be so simple? When all they had to do was follow a clearly given law and be blessed? Why be so foolish?

Well brothers and sisters, Jeremiah's particular context proves that human foolishness truly is a matter of the heart – it's not just a lack of instruction or will power or motivating factors... So we must come face to face with the biblical truth that *"the human heart – our hearts - are deceitful above all things and beyond cure! Who can understand them?"*

Now that is a difficult truth for us to hear isn't it. That what constitutes the very core of who we are is in some way fraudulent... deceptive... duplicitous... that we can't fully trust what makes us who we are, or who we think we are... And that if we do we may discover later on, to our dismay, that it has betrayed us – that we have a treacherous heart.

Now many of us know what it is like to be on the receiving end of fraud and deception or betrayal, don't we? We've all experienced someone or something that failed to lived up to their promises and what we expected of them.

A dog that would not listen or obey no matter how much time you spent training them...

A car that was always breaking down on you when you needed it most...

A friend or a parent who says they will be there when you need them - but then isn't...

A spouse who doesn't keep their wedding vow to forsake all others....

But what is it like to have your own heart betray you? And I wonder brothers and sisters, have you encountered the treachery of your own heart yet?

Maybe you were the spouse who wasn't able to keep a wedding vow? When you got married you certainly meant

your vows with all your heart – but then your heart changed on you.

Or maybe you were the parent or the friend who swore they would be there – and in your heart you really meant it, it was genuinely sincere – you just didn't realize they would need you when it conflicted with something - that you have to admit – your heart considers more important.

Or you've experienced how you've been so inspired after a powerful worship service and you're determined to turn over a new page with Jesus and get serious about following Him – but that very evening your heart desires the very opposite of what Jesus wants for you, and you knowingly follow that heart's desire instead...

Brothers and sisters at some point in our lives – whether we will admit it or not – we will have to face the reality that our hearts will betray us and that they are treacherous.

Now what we need to realize is that for a betrayal or deception to successfully take place a basis of credibility and trust must first be established. The term “con-man” is short for “confidence-man” because he is skilled at gaining your confidence by following through on short-term promises so that you will trust him for something greater in which he intends to defraud you.

There are many ways in which our hearts do the same thing to us – provide us with reliable guidance and sound judgement in the short term so that we build up a level of trust in them. But then later on – they betray us in some way and the consequences can be drastic.

Especially when we are counting on our hearts to help us live wisely and be faithful and obedient covenant partners with God. Are you following what I'm laying out so far?

Now I'm sure that very few of us would dispute the deceitfulness of Israel's hearts in their covenant relationship

with Yahweh, or argue the foolishness of our own hearts when it comes to deliberately ignoring the Word in Creation.

So we'll agree that the "heart is deceitful above all things" but we're not fully convinced that its beyond cure - there must be a way to cure it, there has to be a way to fix it.

Now - since the Biblical definition of our Heart includes our mind, strength, beliefs, emotions, and desires and so on - people have long sought to diagnose the treachery of the heart by determining which of these elements is the rotten apple, which spoils the whole bunch.

So Rationalists are convinced our emotions betray us... and the Romantics believe its logic and reason that stifle us... and the moralist *"no – it's our lack of will-power and determination! Take responsibility and pull up your bootstraps!"* to which Trooper (the 80's rock band) says *"why bother dude - cuz we're here for a good time, not a long time."*

Here's something you need to know - at the root of all the philosophies, ideologies, political and economic systems, social trends and political correctness - is an attempt to fix what it wrong in the Human heart – and we idolize the cure.

And once we have diagnosed what we think is wrong (we demonize it) we prescribe a solution for it right? So if our hearts are deceitful because they are ignorant – well then education is the solution. If our hearts are deceptive because our emotions are repressed – then therapy and psychology is the solution. You see how this works?

So brothers and sisters - if our hearts are treacherous because something is preventing us from knowing what we really want in life – then the solution is liberation, the right to be freed from the design and order of the creation and from the consequences that come when we ignore it.

Do you see what is really going on now?

But this just might be the biggest con-job our hearts have ever pulled on us friends.

Because it seems so logical, and it feels so right, and we believe it's true because initially it seems to be life-giving to us. But this is just our hearts building up short term trust so that it can pull off a con-job bigger than Oceans 13.

In spite of the evidence to the contrary - we so desperately desire to be able to trust our hearts that we convince ourselves we can live outside the order and design of creation and somehow have a blessed life. Such is the deviousness of our hearts.

But scripture says in Prov 14:12 *"There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death."*

And again in Prov 16:25 it says *"There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death."*

Something that is repeated verbatim in two separate places in the scriptures is rare – so we would do well to pay attention to it and heed the warning!

Now I could give you examples of how this has worked out in the development and spread of false religions, cults, trusting too much in science and technology and so on, but the deception that we must be wary of today is repeating the foolishness of Israel that led Jeremiah to declare that *"the heart is deceptive above all things!"*

Brothers and sisters it is unwise to convince ourselves that we can ignore the Word in Creation for the purposes of making a quick buck, securing a promotion, gaining an advantage over a competitor and risking the consequences of such actions.

But it is a whole other level of willful foolishness to think that we can not only ignore the Word in Scripture when our hearts desire that which is contrary to God's Law and offends Him – but to then deliberately twist God's Word in support of those desires!

It's exactly the kind of foolishness Jesus rebukes in Mark 7:9 when he said *"You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!"*

The Pharisees wanted to keep money for themselves so they twisted God's law to create a loop-hole to exploit and keep money they were supposed to use to support their parents.

We do the same thing when we want to pursue the desires of our heart that are contrary to the commands of God.

We create a loop-hole out of God's Love, which we then exploit in order to justify our blatant disobedience of His Word in Scripture – and His Word in Creation.

Brothers and sisters pay very close attention to what reasoning people are using these days to claim that they are following God and living wise lives – there is a good chance they are just being deceived by their own treacherous hearts and twisting scripture to justify it.

So – this is all rather depressing isn't it? If you are taking this seriously you're probably having serious doubts about your own heart right now and whether or not it's mislead you!

However there is good news and really really good news.

And the really really good news is that God has promised that he will do something about the treachery of our hearts. He says in Ezekiel 36:26 that he's not just going to repair our deceitful hearts he's going to do a complete upgrade. *"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."*

But that's our sermon topic for next week – so I'm not going to say anything more about that at this point – you'll just need to come back to get the really really good news next Sunday.

But I will give you the good news today so that we are equipped to know how to handle our treacherous hearts for at least one more week.

Jeremiah 17:10 says that God *“searches our heart and examine the mind to reward each person according to their conduct, according to what their deeds deserve.”*

And this is good news brothers and sisters because while we may not be able to discern if our heart is deceiving us and leading us down a path that seems right – but only leads to death, God can.

God can see the very depths of our heart and sort out our motives and thoughts so accurately to clearly determine what the rewards or consequences ought to be.

So we don't have to jettison our hearts and the purpose for which they are created just because they can be deceitful or treacherous – we merely need to do our due diligence with them, as the scripture says *“All a man's ways are pure in his own eyes, but his motives are weighed by the LORD. Commit your works to the LORD, and your plans will be achieved.”*
(Prov 16:2-3)

And we read two weeks ago in Ps 37:5 *“Commit your way to the Lord and He will make your paths straight”*

God can evaluate what our hearts desire and tell us how well it lines up with His Word – in Scripture and Creation, and bring our desires back in line with His ways when we are off.

So we simply pray what King David wrote in Ps 139:23-24 *“Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”*

Brothers and sisters, one of the ways God lets you know if your heart is deceiving you, if there are any offensive ways residing in our hearts is what can happen when we start to put God's Word in our hearts – as we talked about last Sunday.
(read the sermon online if you missed it)

The Apostle Paul describes how God's Word actually triggers the sin in our hearts in Romans 7:7-8, he says *“For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said,*

“You shall not covet.” But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of coveting. For apart from the law, sin was dead.”

So if there are parts of God’s Word which not only challenge your thoughts, or your beliefs, or your words, or your deeds, but which deeply offend you when you hear them and “trigger” you as they say, it’s a good bet that God is showing you the treacherous parts of your heart in that.

And if you have been made aware that we all have treacherous hearts – then you’ll understand what is going on and instead of foolishly rejecting the Word of God, you can pray that God will show you how to speak more of His truth to that deception in your heart.

And you can reach out for the support of fellow Christians and your pastor for help on how to deal with the feelings of self-contradiction that inevitably come when doing what is right - feels wrong to our hearts.

Because brothers and sisters, feeling like we are not being true to ourselves is the greatest danger to our faith as we seek to faithfully follow Jesus in these times.

But be encouraged friends, when our own hearts condemn us for being inauthentic and disingenuous speak God’s Word from 1 John 3:19 -20 to your treacherous heart - it says *“This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.”*

And don’t get too worried brothers and sisters – because you’re on the list to get a new heart next week anyways.

Amen.