

What is Going on in Your Heart?

A Children's Talk by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

Bryn Athyn Church Community Worship Service - October 26, 2025

Jacob and Rachel's Argument

- Let's start with a story of an argument between a husband and a wife.
 - Jacob and his wife, Rachel, had been married for some years and they really wanted to have children together but, so far, they had not been able to have any children.
 - Now when Rachel saw that she did not give birth for Jacob, and Rachel was zealous against her sister, she said to Jacob, "Give me children and if not, I am dead."
 - And Jacob was fierce with anger against Rachel, and he said, "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" (Genesis 30:1,2)
- They were both very upset.
 - It says that Jacob was "fierce with anger." [😡]
- Let's look underneath.
 - Underneath their anger was sorrow – deep sadness and pain. [😞]
 - And underneath that sorrow really was love. [❤️]
 - They loved each other and they loved the idea of having children together and they were hurting because they hadn't been able to have children yet.

The Lord's Sorrow

- In the Word it sometimes looks like the Lord is angry. [😡]
- There was a time when the Lord wanted to heal someone and a bunch of people who were watching were not interested in the person getting healed but instead were watching to say that the Lord had done something wrong.
 - And it says that Jesus looked "around at them with anger, feeling sorrow at the hardness of their hearts" (Mark 3:5). [😞]
 - It looked like He was angry but He was actually feeling sorrow that they were so hard on the inside because He loved them. [❤️]

Sometimes We Are Actually Just Sad

- Sometimes when we're feeling angry, we're actually just sad.
- And it can be really useful to realize that.
 - I thought I was angry but actually I'm just sad that things didn't go how I wanted them to go.
 - "I wish things were different!"
- Can you make an angry face?
 - Now make a sad face?
 - Now make a loving face?
- Sometimes when we're sad or upset we end up hurting the people around us.
 - When we can recognize that we're actually just feeling sad, then sometimes we can choose to soften on the outside too. [🥹]




Sometimes Hatred is Underneath Anger

- But other times when people have anger on the outside [😡], it's because they have hatred and selfishness on the inside [👊].
- Think of the story of Pharaoh.
 - He and the Egyptians were enslaving the children of Israel and it says lots of times in the story that he hardened his heart and would not let them go.
 - He was hard on the outside and hard on the inside.
 - He had a heart of stone [🪨].

We Need to Pay Attention to Our Hearts

- The Lord can teach us to pay attention to what's going on in our hearts.
 - To notice when we are loving on the inside and when we are not loving on the inside.
 - And the Lord promises to help us with our hearts of stone. [🪨]
 - "I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will give among you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 36:26).
- He can help us to get rid of our hatred and selfishness and greed and nastiness.

Sometimes We Need to Be Brave

- There are times when we need to be harder on the outside. [ - Times when we need to be firm, when we need to be brave.
 - To stand up for what is right.
 - To be like a soldier going into battle to protect his people.
 - To “be strong and of good courage” like the Lord told Joshua to be (Joshua 1:7).
- But when we’re being hard on the outside, we still need to be trying to be loving on the inside. [ not 

Conclusion

- Pay attention to what’s going on inside you.
 - The Lord knows your heart; ask Him to help you understand what’s going on inside you.
 - Try to notice when you’re sad.
 - Try to notice when you’re disappointed.
 - Try to notice when you’re feeling hard and selfish on the inside.
- Ask the Lord to give you a good heart and He will help you.
 - Like the Lord helped Jacob and Rachel who did finally get to have children together.
 - And the child they had was worth the wait because he was Joseph who had a good heart and who did a lot of good for a lot of people.
- *Amen.*

Prayer

- Lord, please help us to pay attention to what is going on inside of our hearts. And Lord, please help us to let You give us good hearts. *Amen.*

Getting Our Hearts in the Right Place

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

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Introduction

- This is one of those cases where the Children's Talk might be enough, right?
 - Paying attention to what's going on in our hearts.
 - Noticing when our anger is really sorrow.
 - Trying to have a heart of flesh, even when we need to be firm and strong externally.
 - There is plenty for me to work on in all of that.
- Then again, maybe it would be useful to spend a bit more time on the *how* of all that – as in, "How on earth do we get all of that right?"
- Even when we are trying our hardest to do the right thing, it can be awfully difficult to figure out what we should be doing.

The Rise Above It Task

- There are a couple of things that got me thinking about this:
- One is the focus for this month on the second commandment.
 - In the *Rise Above It* program, the task for working on the commandment to not take the Lord's name in vain, is to use the Lord's name in the *right* way – to use it to pray to the Lord for the specific qualities that we are lacking.
 - This is a good task.
 - I recommend trying it out, even if you're not doing the *Rise Above It* program.
- However, it can be tricky.
 - For example, let's imagine that, in my parenting, I am praying to the Lord for the courage to set better boundaries with my boys – to do a better job of holding them accountable when they step out of line.
 - But maybe what I really need to be praying for is the willingness to let things go and be more patient and understanding.
 - Or maybe I had it right the first time.

- It makes me think of a parable that the Lord told about a Pharisee who was praying.
 - He prayed, "God, I thank You that I am not like other men...." (Luke 18:11).
 - He was praying – he was feeling and expressing gratitude to God.
 - And he was completely missing the point!
 - He was blind to his own pride and contempt for the people around him.
 - If that Pharisee were given the task to pray for the qualities that he lacked, would he have prayed for the right things?

Thane Glenn's Charter Day Address

- Another thing that got me thinking about this was [Thane Glenn's Charter Day address](#).
 - If you missed it, it's worth watching.
 - You can find it on the All Recent Services page on the Bryn Athyn Church website.
 - Anyway, one of things that Thane was talking about was how we can get twisted ideas of God and what He wants from us.
 - Thane said, "If the version of God that you worship demands that you kill children, brother, that ain't God. If [anyone] demands that you surrender things like humility, the truth, kindness, compassion,... sister, that ain't God."
 - The sobering truth that this again highlights is that we can *think* that we are serving God when we are *not* – when we are doing the exact opposite of what our God would have us do.
- How can we get this right?
 - How can we get our hearts in the right place, our heads in the right place, and have our actions actually be in service of what the Lord wants?
- We're going to explore these questions by means of what the Lord's Word teaches us about the heart.
 - Negative things said about the heart.
 - Positive things said about the heart.
 - And, most importantly, explanations of how the Lord can give us a new heart.

The Heart

Negative Descriptions of the Heart

- Let's start with the negative descriptions of the heart.
- The first instances of the word heart in the Old Testament come in the prelude to the story of the flood that destroys nearly everyone on earth because Jehovah "saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5).
- Even after the flood has happened and Noah and his family have come off the ark to repopulate the earth, Jehovah can still see that "the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Genesis 8:21).
 - Very briefly, this is a picture of how, ever since the earliest people turned away from the Lord, every one of their descendants – including each of us – is born with tendencies towards evil, with a heart that loves self and worldly things more than the Lord and other people.
- And this problem does not go away with time.
 - Much later, the prophet Jeremiah writes lots of negative things about the heart, including this:
 - The heart is deceitful above all things,
And desperately wicked;
Who can know it? (Jeremiah 17:9)
 - And in the New Testament the Lord says, "Those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies" (Matthew 15:18,19).
- So, we have a heart problem.
 - There is this thing in us – that we're born with – that loves evil, that loves selfishness, that's just looking out for itself, that's harmful, that's cruel.
 - When we're trying to figure out what to do, it is useful to know that we should not trust everything that we experience within us.
 - Some of what we experience within ourselves does not have other people's best interests at heart.
 - Some of what we experience within ourselves does not even have *our* best interests at heart.

Positive Descriptions of the Heart

- However, the Lord's Word also contains descriptions of good hearts.
- For example, in the Psalms we read,
 - My soul longs, yes, even faints
For the courts of the LORD;
My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God (84:2).
- And,
 - Though an army may encamp against me,
My heart shall not fear.... (27:3)
- In the New Testament the Lord says, "A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things...." (Matthew 12:35).
 - And in explaining the meaning of the parable of the Sower sowing seeds in a field, the Lord says, "But the [seeds] that fell on the good ground are those [people] who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience" (Luke 8:15).
- So it must be possible for each of us to have a heart that cries out for the living God, that does not fear, that is noble and good and contains good treasures to share with the world, and that can love the Lord our God above all things and our neighbors as ourselves.
 - We have a heart problem but also a heart solution.

How Do We Work Towards Having a Good Heart?

- How do we work towards having a good heart?
- When the Word describes changes of heart, it often talks about two things being changed within us.
- When King David had sinned and he wrote a psalm of repentance, he prayed,
 - Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a steadfast spirit within me. (Psalm 51:10)
- A clean heart *and* a steadfast spirit.
 - You might say "a clean heart and a steadfast pair of lungs."
 - The Old Testament doesn't talk about lungs but it does talk about spirit or breath.

- And in the passage from Ezekiel about the heart of stone and the heart of flesh, notice that it also mentions a new spirit or new way of breathing.
 - Thus says the Lord Jehovih;.... "I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will give among you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My spirit among you, and make you to walk in My statutes, and you shall keep My judgments, and do them (Ezekiel 36:26,27).
- We're looking for a double spiritual transplant.
 - A lung transplant and a heart transplant.
 - A change of our intellect and a change of our will.
 - And the teachings for the New Church explain that the way the Lord changes our will is *by means of* our intellect.
 - He performs a heart transplant by means of a lung transplant.
 - In the language of Ezekiel, when He puts His spirit among us and we walk in His statutes and keep His judgments, then He can give us a heart of flesh.
- Here's how the teachings for the New Church say that same thing:
 - We are reformed by means of truths that our intellect receives. Truths teach us who to believe in, what to believe, and also what to do and what to will. Since our will is evil from the day we are born, and since our intellect teaches us what is evil and what is good and that it is possible for us to will one and not the other, it follows that our intellect is the means by which we have to be reformed. During the phase called our reformation, we come to mentally see and admit that evil is evil and goodness is good, and make the decision to choose what is good. When we actually try to abstain from evil and do what is good, the phase called our regeneration begins (*True Christianity* 587; cf. *Heaven and Hell* 424).
- So you have a selfish heart and I have a selfish heart.
 - It's not our fault that we have it, but we do have to deal with it.
- And, in spite of our selfish hearts, we can still – at least intellectually – understand what the Lord teaches in His Word about what is right and wrong.
 - If we can manage to change our behavior and stop doing the things that the Lord says are evil and start doing the things that the Lord says are good, because the Lord said so, then He can begin to give us a new heart.
- That's enough theory; let's try it out.

In Practice

- How can these ideas help us in practice?
- The Lord's Word can give us concepts and words to talk about, understand, and untangle the confusing mess that is our internal experience.

What's Going on Underneath?

- When you have a difficult interaction with your spouse, or your family member, or your coworker, chances are that, at first, it will just feel unpleasant.
 - From there, it's pretty easy to go straight to finding fault.
 - It's their fault! They're making me feel bad! They did this wrong or that wrong! They deserve to hurt!
 - Our heart of stone is so quick to tell us exactly how we should think about the situation and about other people!
 - But with a more steadfast spirit within you, you can start to separate out some of the different things that you are experiencing.
 - There are other options available.
 - Listen to this passage from the teachings for the New Church about what can be going on underneath something that looks like anger on the outside.
 - Real spiritual indignation does not originate at all in the anger of the earthly self, but from the inner essence of zeal. To outward appearance such zeal does indeed look like anger, but inwardly it is neither anger nor even the indignation of anger. Instead, it is a kind of sorrow accompanied by a prayerful wish that the situation were different....
(*Arcana Coelestia* 3909)
- We may first feel anger in a situation, but it might that what we're really feeling is sorrow or sadness and "a prayerful wish that the situation were different."
- This is true for other people in the interaction too.
 - They may be expressing anger but our spouse, our child, our coworker may actually be experiencing sorrow and just wishing that things were different.
 - Is there an opportunity to connect around that shared wish instead of fighting about who's to blame?

What if Their Heart of Stone is Active?

- Likely, in most situations, it will not be as simple as getting past the external difficult feelings to connect with the genuine heart underneath.
 - It's worth a try, but it's not always going to be that way.
- Part of what makes hard situations hard is that, often, at least one person's heart of stone has come into play.
 - Someone is being self-centered, or controlling, or unkind, or unfair, or disobedient, or cruel, or disrespectful, or uncaring, any of the countless other ways that a heart of stone will make us be.
 - Without the light from the Lord's Word, we would not be able to recognize what's going on.
 - With the light from the Lord's Word, we can recognize the influence of hell for what it is.
 - Just for argument's sake, let's imagine that it is the other person in this interaction who is acting from their heart of stone.
 - It would be so easy to then say, "See what they did wrong? That was wrong! Now I'm justified in punishing them for what they did wrong!"
 - But, of course, that's just *our* heart of stone wanting to take charge.
- Instead of giving our heart of stone the reins and letting it do what it wants, can we, with our intellect, imagine what a heart of flesh might encourage us to do?
 - What if we just took a moment before responding?
 - "Wait on the LORD;
Be of good courage,
And He shall strengthen your heart.... (Psalm 27:14)
 - It might feel a little overly dramatic, but what if, like the Lord on the cross, we said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34)?
- Now maybe we are pretty sure that this person that we're dealing with is being selfish and they *do* know what they're doing.
 - It might be that it is time to become more firm to defend ourselves and to stand up for what is right, but you can know that it is *never* the right course of action to harden on the inside.

Hardening on the Outside But Not the Inside

- What does that mean?
 - Let's take a fun side trip to some Hebrew word analysis.
- When the evil Pharaoh in Egypt hardens his heart and refuses to let the children of Israel go, there are actually three different Hebrew words for his heart being hard or hardening.
- One of those words – *ḥāzaq* – is the same word that is used later by the Lord in the book of Joshua when He tells Joshua, "Be strong – *ḥāzaq* – and of good courage...." (Joshua 1:7).
 - So there is a *bad* kind of hardening and a *good* kind of hardening.
 - Good people in the Word *ḥāzaq* their hands (Zechariah 8:13), their faces (Ezekiel 3:8), and themselves (1 Samuel 30:6), but they never *ḥāzaq* their hearts.
- This gets back to practical application in that there are times when the Lord calls on us to be firm, strong – even hard – on the outside, but that is *never* the way He wants us to be in our hearts.
 - There will be times when we need to strengthen ourselves to set boundaries; to have the courage to tell people things that they don't want to hear; to be firm about what is and is not acceptable behavior, and so on.
 - But, if we're doing it right, we will always be coming from a heart of flesh, not a heart of stone.
 - Always coming from a warm, soft, humble heart of love for the person we're interacting with, not cold, hard, proud heart of hatred.
- We can think of it like the role of our bones as opposed to the role of our organs.
 - We need a backbone; we need to have a spine; we need uprightness in our lives; we need to have a hard, rigid ribcage to protect our heart and lungs.
 - But we do *not* want our heart and lungs to be hard or rigid.

How Does This Help Us?

- Let's now return to our original questions about how we can pray for the right things and how we can avoid worshiping a false version of God.
- How do we figure out how the Lord wants us to be in this or that situation?
 - Does He want us to be more gentle or more firm?
 - More persistent or more adaptable?
 - Should we speak up about something that's not as it should be, or quietly let it go?
- Here are four points from what we read about hearts that might help:
- 1) It's just useful to know that hearts of stone are part of the landscape.
 - We've got one.
 - Other people have them.
 - We're going to bang into each other's hearts of stone as we go through life.
 - Knowing this we can waste less time thinking that we're totally perfect and everyone else must be at fault.
 - When, in King Solomon's words, "each one knows the plague of his own heart" (1 Kings 8:38), then we can be a little more merciful, a little more forgiving of the faults of others.
- 2) We need to learn from the Lord about what's right and wrong.
 - Our heart of stone is not going to tell us the truth.
 - We need to be reading the Word enough that it has the chance to make us uncomfortable, to help us realize places where we are not doing well.
 - If the Pharisee in that story who was praying about how much better he was than everyone else, if he had spent even a little bit of time listening to the Lord preach, he would have heard some rather uncomfortable truths about people who try to put themselves first.
 - If we don't know what to pray for, then we need to do some more reading of the Lord's Word and praying for the Lord to heal our blindness.
 - If we want a new heart, then we need a new understanding too and that takes putting in the work to learn and then to examine ourselves based on what we've learned.

- 3) Regardless of the circumstances, the right course of action is never to act from a hard heart.
 - "All the paths of the LORD are mercy and truth...." (Psalm 25:10).
 - If we can't connect with love for the person we're interacting with, then maybe we need to not take any action yet.
 - Maybe we need to do more praying to the Lord for Him to flow into us with His love for that person.
 - When we get our hearts in the right place, even if our actions might not be quite right at first, it will be much easier for the Lord to guide us in the right direction.
- 4) Sometimes what's really going on is that we, or the person we're dealing with, are just sad or wishing that things were different.
 - Don't let that harden into hatred or overwhelm you with despair.
 - Maybe we can grieve together instead of fighting.

Conclusion

- Hearts are hard to understand.
 - As Jeremiah said, "Who can know it?"
 - The Lord – the Lord can know it.
 - The Lord "alone know[s] the hearts of all the children of men...." (1 Kings 8:39).
 - And He can help us to know our hearts, get our hearts in the right place, and find a way to muddle through even the most difficult of situations, if we pray to Him for help.
 - Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me and know my anxieties.
And see if there be any grieving way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting. (Psalm 139:23,24)
- Amen.

If you would like to talk more about this topic, get in touch with Malcolm at malcolm.smith@brynathynchurch.org.