

ABOVE ALL THINGS

**"The heart is deceitful above all things,
and desperately wicked." Jeremiah 17:9**

True and faithful is the testimony of God. You can humor yourself and your friends with your empty, high resolution images of dignity, dreams of the powers of yourself, but every humble, truly enlightened mind, will see and acknowledge the declaration in the text, that the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked.

This is a truth which, like many other truths in the word of God, can only be learned from experience. As long as you simply just agree to it, only because it is in the Scriptures, you are a stranger to its nature, and you cannot understand exactly what it means. But, when you look in the mirror, your face answers to your face, and so does the heart of man answer to man. Human nature is always the same, whether in different ages and in different circumstances. When the Word of God makes obvious, the secrets of your heart, when you come to perceive the exactness of Scripture, compared to what is within you, you should be most thankful that you have been given the option of confessing, that between what's in you and what's in God's Word, you do not have the truth. God's Word is the truth. Since God searches your heart and tries your thoughts, who else could know so perfectly the inward workings of your mind, and those endless evils that are hidden from the view of all who know you.

I intend to speak only of the 'deceitfulness' of your heart, today. That's a subject I can dig to China in, not merely for one sermon, but for probably a hundred, and after all that I can say on it, there will remain in a large amount that is still not found or still unexplained, for who can know it?

The deceit that lodges in your heart is so complicated and so various, that it is impossible to trace it in all its windings. Any human mind can only discover a small part of it. Therefore, in the verse immediately following the text, God allocates this knowledge to himself alone as his peculiar prerogative; 'I the Lord search the heart, I try the thoughts, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.' Ouch!!! Did you hear that? Give every man *according to his ways and according to the fruit of his doings.*

Let's turn our attention to this deep subject. I want to point out some of the plainest truth of the deceitfulness of the heart, in which only scripture, observation, and experience can provide. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked."

I. The deceitfulness of the heart is evident from the general ignorance of your own character.

There is not anything in the history of mankind more surprising, or at first view more unaccountable, than the self-centeredness that prevails in man. It would be correct to imagine it should not be so hard to get to the knowledge of your real character because you have every possible advantage for arriving at it. You have constant access to yourself, and you are more interested in the discovery of what you want or wish, than in the gaining of any other knowledge. The knowledge we have about our self is the rarest and most uncommon. It's not very hard to account for this fact, since the heart is deceitful above all things.

Our devotion to self-love casts a veil over our understanding, and our judgment is warped by various circumstances, and you seem to be almost an entire stranger to your own character. You think, and reason, and judge quite differently in any thing that involves yourself, than what you do in those cases in which you have nothing personal at stake. Accordingly, we often hear you exposing faults in others, for which you, yourself are the master thereof; and talking with great relentlessness against the vices of others, of which, the whole knows you yourself are infamously guilty of yourself.

It is beyond belief how far you carry this self-ignorance and self-partiality! How often do you, blind yourself to your own character, but insensible say anything and everything that can be said to convince someone else of their mistake.

Every day these frequent instances in common life present themselves. The sacred history shows us an example, in the case of David, on one particular occasion: and I do say, only on one particular occasion, for the description that we have been giving by no means applies to David's general character. When Nathan the prophet was sent to him, in consequence of his grievous fall in the matter of Uriah, such was the insensibility, and self-ignorance which sin had produced, that he perceived not the application of the parable to himself, until the prophet declared, 'You are the man!'

From this and similar instances, if we trace this self-ignorance to its source, we will always find that it's not only to the partiality and fondness for ourselves, but also to the pervasiveness of our passions or interests, which alters our judgment in every case where a particular self passion or self interest is concerned.

We find that some men can reason and judge fairly enough, even in cases where they themselves are involved, provided it does not interfere with their passions or pursuits. So, even a man full of covet can perceive the evil of intemperance, and will condemn himself when he is guilty of this sin in a many instances. But he is altogether insensible when his predominant passion is involved.

Let's use the love of money as an example to shine some light on this. Money has become habitual to him. His mind is accustomed to it. He thrives on having money, and it is the most important thing in life to him, so in every case, where his interest is concerned, his mind is on the money in the situation and his judgment is warped. In these instances he is totally unacquainted with his own character. The same observation applies to other particular vices, such as sex, control of others, alcohol or cocaine. Replace money with anything you want.

Here then, is solid proof of the deceitfulness of the heart. It produces ignorance of ourselves. It keeps men strangers to their own character; and makes them fatally presume that they are in friendship with God, while they are enemies to him in their minds and by wicked works.

II. The deceitfulness of the heart appears from men's general disposition on all occasions to justify their own conduct.

This disposition our first parents discovered immediately upon their eating the fruit of the forbidden tree. When the Lord appeared to Adam and charged him with his guilt, he attempted to justify himself by saying, "The **woman** You gave to be with me, "she gave me *some fruit* from the tree, and I ate." And in like manner the woman replied, "It was the **serpent!** He deceived me, and I ate." This disposition is common to all our sin. We are all extremely partial to ourselves, and apt to view our own conduct in a different light from that in which we are accustomed to regard the conduct of our fellow man. We blame.

When we witness improper or immoral conduct in others, the impropriety strikes us at once. Sin appears to us in its true and genuine colors, and we are ready to judge and condemn, sometimes with too much severity. But when looking at ourselves, the action is seen through a deceitful medium. The judgment is perverted by self-love, and a thousand excuses or reasons are created, to vindicate, or make it appear reasonable, or at least to apologize for our conduct. If we cannot justify the action itself, we attempt to deny some of the guilt from the peculiar circumstances of the case. We are deceived into believing we were placed in a particular situation, which we could not avoid, or our temptations were strong and we did not go the lengths that many others would have gone in a similar situation. Anyway, we arrange the facts, so the general rightness of our conduct is more than adequate to defeat any wrong doing on our part. Thus, on all occasions, we will do what we have to justify our own conduct.

We even learn to call our favorite vices by softer names. Such as we don't fornicate, we have sex. Isn't that a lot softer on us? We don't steal, we procure, or borrow, we aren't greedy, we just want what we think we deserve. With our vices softened, intemperance becomes only the desire of good fellowship; vulgarity becomes gallantry, or the love of pleasure; pride, a just sense of our own dignity; and covetousness, or the love of money, a sensible regard to our worldly interest. It is only through mental masturbation do we think that by

changing the names of our vices to a softer name, we can change the nature of our vices, and make them not as bad as they were. The fact remains that what is detestable in God, is still detestable in God even though we have made them excusable in ourselves!

But it is known that besides these acts of wickedness, there are endless cases in which the wickedness cannot be exactly defined. It consists in a general course of action, or in the habitual neglect of some obligation, whose boundaries are not precisely fixed. This is the peculiar province of self-deceit. It is here, most of all, where men justify their conduct, no matter how plain and deliberately wrong. Anyone who researches human life will see that the greatest part of the fellowship among mankind cannot be reduced to fixed, determined rules. Yet there is a right and a wrong, and conduct that is sinful and immoral, and a conduct, that is virtuous and praise-worthy, but it is impossible to determine the exact limits of each.

To give an example: There is not a word in our language that expresses more detestable wickedness than 'oppression'. Yet the nature of this vice cannot be so exactly stated, or the boundaries of it be determined, to a point where we can say, in every instance, where justice ends, and oppression begins.

In like manner, it's impossible to determine how much of every man's income ought to be devoted to charitable purposes: the boundaries cannot be exactly marked; but we are always ready to perceive the difference between a liberal and generous man, and one of a hard-hearted and stingy disposition.

In these cases, there is great grey area for every man to decide in his own favor, and consequently to deceive himself; and in instances as these, that men are ready to justify their conduct, however criminal. Because they are not chargeable with single determinate acts of gross wickedness, because you cannot precisely point out to them, in so many words, where they have gone off the screen, they falsely conclude, that their conduct is unexceptionable; though, without possibility, their general temper and behavior is uniformly wrong, inconsistent with the spirit of the gospel, and contrary to morality.

III. That the deceitfulness of the heart is directly proportional to the difficulty with which men are brought to acknowledge their faults, even when they are conscious that they have done wrong.

This necessarily follows from the disposition on all occasions to justify our own conduct. Disposition, not position. There is a difference and you all know it. So, man in general is feels he is backward to acknowledge his faults, and is very displeased with anyone who points them out.

Not many want or can bear to be told their faults! This is the most sure and fastest way to make enemies, even though you administer the reproof in the

gentlest, and most prudent manner. Instead of reflecting on their own conduct, many, set themselves immediately to discover the faults in their faithful reprovers, or in those, who, they suspect, may have informed their reprovers, and turn away their attention entirely from themselves. They are only interested in finding equal, or greater blemishes in others. Deceitful is the heart of man. We wish always to entertain a favorable opinion of ourselves and of our own conduct, and are displeased with those who try to change this opinion, though it be done with the best, and most friendly intention.

But how unreasonable is this degree of self-love! If we are alive to our true interests, we would wish to become better acquainted with our faults, and would esteem our faithful reprovers as our best friends. Instead of feeling any resentment against them, we would turn all our resentment against ourselves in the strength of divine grace, to correct those evils in which, if were we not so blinded by self-love, we might easily find them ourselves. But through the deceitfulness of the heart, men are generally disposed to justify their own conduct, and ready to throw the blame of what is not right on anything else, rather than on themselves.

IV. The deceitfulness of the heart appears from the disposition which men discover to rest in mere notions and forms of religion, while they are destitute of its power.

In the purest ages of the church, there have been people of this character, men who, from selfish or worldly motives have assumed a profession of religion, without understanding its nature, or feeling its power; having a name to live, but being spiritually dead. It is not easy for informed people, in any degree, to divest themselves entirely of religious impressions. The fears that naturally accompany guilt, will at times, project themselves on even the most giddy and thoughtless. But the pure, spiritual and humbling doctrines of the gospel are not agreeable to the natural mind. It's not at all surprising that those who have some uneasiness of the truth of religion, but no acquaintance with the power of the Gospel, should eagerly grasp at anything which might give them hope beyond the grave, while at the same time it leaves them in the secret possession of their beloved lusts!

It is so that many are hearers of the word only, and not doers also, deceiving their own selves. Hence it is that so many show great zeal about small and unimportant matters in religion, and are shamefully deficient in some of its plainest and most essential duties; that so many are punctual in their observance of religious institutions, who are unjust and uncharitable in their conduct towards their fellow creatures; that so many can talk and yell and jump around and praise fluently and correctly on religious subjects, who are visibly under the dominion of evil tempers or evil habits. Many are thorough and exact in what regards the externals of religion, but don't cultivate its genuine spirit, or perform its most substantial duties. Like the Pharisees of old, who paid tithes of anise, mint, and

cummin, but they neglected the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith.

Hypocrisy in all its forms and appearances flows from the deceitfulness of the heart; For general purposes, men always deceive themselves, before they attempt to deceive others. Few are so bold as to lay down a plan of imposing on the world, without first imposing the idea on their own minds. Nor is it difficult, when the mind is strongly biased by the love of any particular sin, or the pursuit of any particular interest, to persuade ourselves that our conduct is excusable, if not innocent. A dishonest mind is satisfied with evasions! And people who wish to be deceived into a good opinion of their conduct, are seldom at a loss to accomplish their purpose.

Balaam was a remarkable instance of this. He was a man of extensive knowledge and superior gifts. He was not a stranger to the impressions of religion, for in his calm reflecting moments, he desired to die the death of the righteous, nor could any consideration prevail with him to oppose the divine commandment, by cursing those whom God had blessed. But he loved the wages of unrighteousness. Covetousness was his ruling passion, and led him, by the advice which he gave to Balak, to contradict the whole spirit and design of the very prohibition, for the letter of which he professed so sacred a regard. It would be easy to multiply particulars on this subject, But I only add, in the last place,

5. That the deceitfulness of the heart appears in the highest degree, when men overlook the real motives of their conduct, and mistake the workings of their own corruptions, "for the fruits of the Spirit of God.

There is much deceitfulness in the world. Think about it. Consider the shocking enormities that have been committed under the sacred name of religion. In many cases, these enormities have been committed by people who were conscious of their motives when they employed religion as the engine to attain their objectives. But in other cases men have concealed from themselves the motive of their conduct, and even mistaken the workings of their corruptions for the fruits of the Spirit of God.

We have several examples of this in scripture. It occurs in the conduct of Jehu, who, when shedding the blood of Jezreel to serve the purposes of his own ambition, said to Jehonadab, 'Come, see my zeal for the Lord!. It is not improbable, that at the time he imagined himself to be influenced by zeal for God, that in what he did he was motivated by the 'love of power'.

Our Lord, Jesus, forewarns his disciples, that the time would come when whoever killed them, would think that they did God a service. In like manner as the prophet Isaiah had declared concerning the persecuted people of God in his time,

Listen to what the Lord says. "Because you are faithful to me, some of your own people hate you and will have nothing to do with you. They will mock you and say, 'Let the Lord show his greatness and save you, so that we may see you rejoice.' But they themselves will be disgraced!" (Isaiah 66:5)

We are shocked when we read about the outrageous persecutions the different ages have carried out against the faithful servants of Christ, by the blood-thirsty actions of Rome, and yet these men claimed zeal for the glory of God!

Nor is it unlikely that many of them deceive themselves so far as to imagine they were doing God a service, while shedding the blood of his saints. This is the highest example of the extreme deceitfulness and desperate wickedness of the human heart, and the most awful proof of being given up of God to a reprobate mind. But, in a lesser degree, men frequently practice this kind of deceit upon themselves, crediting their acts to the word and to the Spirit of God, "what is evidently their own ignorance, wickedness and corruption. On the whole, since the ways in which men deceive themselves are so various, can we be too jealous over our own hearts?

He who trusts his own heart', says the wise man, 'is a fool!' And the reason is obvious, because the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked.

Let us therefore, brethren, accustom ourselves to self-examination. Instead of pandering to our disapproving nature, and looking to discover the faults of our neighbors, let us descend into our own bosoms, and search out the plagues of our own hearts. Let us attend, not only to our outward actions, but to the principles and motives from where these outward actions breed. Let us consider our conduct, not the way self-love and self-partiality presents it to our minds, but in the light in which God's Word teaches us to consider it, and in the light in which it will be judged when God shall bring to light all the hidden things of darkness, and makes visible the secrets of all hearts.

We are all more or less accountable for self-deceit; and those who think they are the least self-deceitful are the most under its dominion. Let us therefore distrust our own judgment, and our own ignorance and liableness to mistake, let us pray to God for his divine teaching; saying, with Elihu in the book of job, 'That which I see not, teach me'; and with the Psalmist, 'Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts, and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."