

When Jeremiah blasts the human heart as devious and perverse, he is drawing on Hebrew thought which believed the heart to be the seat of reason, not emotion. Emotion was thought to reside in the abdomen: what we call “gut feelings.” The cheating or deceitful heart (v. 9) is a corrupted mind. Jeremiah displays a deep psychological awareness of the endless capacity of the human mind to deceive itself. The prophet warns that the Lord will “*test the mind and search the heart*” (v. 10). Both reason and emotion will endure the spotlight of God’s scrutiny.

Jeremiah’s prophecy seems strange to modern ears. Our optimistic, can-do, achievement-oriented culture is not inclined to regard sin as an inescapable condition. We do believe in *individual* sins. Bad behavior is out there for all to see, screaming from the headlines. But our culture’s pervasive individualism often leads us to claim all credit for our individual achievements, even as we blame forces beyond our control for our failures. The highest goal of modern culture is the right mix of ability and ambition so we can “make something of ourselves.” We encouraged are to “seek our fortune,” a turn of phrase that implies prosperity is a birthright that simply needs to be discovered and claimed.

Jeremiah’s prophecy is just the opposite. Those whose minds are deceived into thinking they can make it out there on their own, relying on the shallow roots they put down in the desert sand, will wither. Only those who live a life close to the Lord, taking their places among the grove of trees by the riverside, survive and flourish.

Christian philosopher Dallas Willard (*The Divine Conspiracy*) cautions us to beware of a distorted form of the Christian message which he calls “the gospel of sin management.” The gospel of sin management teaches that Christian discipleship is achieved simply by managing our sinful behaviors. The gospel of sin management says if we just stop sinning, or at least cut down on it, God will smile on us and reward us with eternal life. This misleading gospel promises that Jesus will clean up our sinful messes, kind of like a personal assistant. We can do whatever we want; Jesus will make it right.

Now, it is true that Jesus offers salvation if we accept him into our hearts and if we allow him to justify us by grace through faith. But we cannot separate his forgiveness from genuine transformation. We cannot be true disciples without doing some of the hard work of cleaning up our lives ourselves. When we separate forgiveness from genuine transformation we are practicing “bar code” faith. Willard says: “There is something about the Christian that works like the bar code. Some ritual, some belief, or some association with a group [that] affects God the way the bar code affects the scanner. God ‘scans’ it, and

forgiveness floods forth. An appropriate amount of righteousness is shifted from Christ’s account to our account in the bank of heaven....We are, accordingly, ‘saved.’” Bar code faith is cheap grace. It seeks the forgiveness without the transformation. The quick fix. The easy path.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century was a time when many people around the world turned from the church and sought sin-management help in other places. Communism proposed to replace the government with a benevolent central management system that makes sure all the world’s goods are distributed equally. Nazi ideology attempted to solve the world’s problems through selective breeding of human beings. Social Darwinism suggested we let the various tribes of modern society to fight it out in a survival of the fittest free-for-all.

These ideologies all propose to eliminate sin, not through the transforming love of Christ, but through individual efforts. Their proponents imagined they could remake humanity, building from the ashes of the past a new world where there would be no more sin or, at least, a whole lot less of it. None of them worked. In trying to manage sin, they subjected humanity to unspeakable horrors.

All this, Jeremiah counters, is a manifestation of the cheatin’ heart, the self-deceived mind. Try as we might, we cannot make ourselves holy. There is only One who is holy, and the only way to imbibe some of that holiness is by planting our roots deep in the well-watered riverbank beside God’s ever-flowing stream.

The gospel of sin management is a hard ideal to live up to. Cutting out all sinful behaviors is impossible. So, what are we to do? “*Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?*” the despairing Jeremiah asks in an earlier part of his book. Is there no doctor in the house of Judah to apply a treatment, so sin may be banished, and spiritual health restored?

Sin is not a behavior that can be managed, says Jeremiah, but an ailment that must be healed. For once, the prophet is not blasting the people for their immoral acts. Rather, he’s talking of sin as a condition that can only be healed by an outside power. Jeremiah knows no such miracle cure, although he seems confident one must exist, somewhere. There is, in fact, such a cure. We know it in the Christian tradition as the grace of God in Jesus Christ. “*Those who are well,*” said Jesus, “*have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.*” Jesus, the Great Physician, came to be that cure for us.

The African slaves of the American South knew of this cure. Held captive and oppressed all their days, they sang songs to lift their spirits as they worked. One of them is based on Jeremiah 8:22. “There Is a Balm in Gilead” is the answer to Jeremiah’s lament and the only reliable cure for this deadly disease known as sin. *Sometimes I feel discouraged, and think my work’s in vain, but then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again...If you can’t preach like Peter, if you can’t pray like Paul, just tell the love of Jesus, and say He died for all.*

The cure for sin is the transforming love of Jesus and the reviving work of the Holy Spirit. There are some who claim the church is preoccupied with sin to the point of obsession. The prayers of confession, they complain, are thoroughly unnecessary, maybe even harmful, because they make people feel bad about themselves. Better to be optimistic about the human condition. Better to push sin to the background and find a way to manage it.

Yet, who’s more optimistic: the sin-deniers or the sin-acknowledgers? The sin-deniers have yet to come up with a concept that works better. The sin-deniers have cheatin’ hearts. They don’t accept the truth. We acknowledge our sin and we acknowledge a remedy more powerful than the stain of sin: the love of Jesus incredibly displayed on the cross of Calvary.

Jeremiah indeed asks the question: “The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse — who can understand it?” Then comes the answer: *“I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings”* (v. 10). So, no more cheatin’ hearts. No more cryin’ and weeping into the night. No more cheatin’ heart that’s going to “tell on you.” We take our cheatin’ hearts to the Lord and we ask the Lord to *“Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting”* (Psalm 139:23-24).

Prayer: Lord, I confess there is sin in my life. I’ve dismissed it, justified it, tried to convince myself it isn’t as bad as I know it really is. Lord, I need your strength to defeat this sin. I am thankful that your power is made perfect in my weakness. I don’t boast in my sin but boast in you who works through my weakness to make me more like you. Give me wisdom and perspective in the moment I am tempted to sin – help me in that moment see my sin as you see it, and not do the sin my heart longs to do. Thank you, Lord, for rescuing me and saving me from my sinfulness. It is only in your grace that I am saved. In your name I pray, Amen!

**Source:** Willard, Dallas. *The Divine Conspiracy*. HarperCollins, 2009, 11, 36.

## Your Cheatin' Heart

Sunday, February 10, 2019

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Jeremiah 17:5-10

Luke 5:29-32

Hank Williams Sr. was only 29 when he died of heart failure brought on by alcohol and drug abuse. In his short life and career, he managed to score eleven No. 1 hits on the Billboard charts and another twenty-four that made the top 10. Williams managed this remarkable feat without ever learning how to read music. Williams was one of the first two inductees to Nashville’s Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in 1961. Despite his success, Williams was a broken man. But country music fans didn’t much care. There was simple truth in the gritty songs of Hank Williams. His music made up for all the rough edges. Among Williams’ best-known hits is a little cry-into-your-beer ditty, which goes like this: “Your cheatin’ heart will make you weep. You’ll cry and cry and try to sleep. But sleep won’t come the whole night through. Your cheatin’ heart will tell on you.”

The cheatin’ heart in question, of course, belongs to a woman who has done her fella wrong. But that’s not the only sort of cheatin’ heart there is. The prophet Jeremiah thinks every person has a cheatin’ heart. *“The heart is devious above all else,”* he complains. *“It is perverse — who can understand it?”* (v. 9).

How are we to take Jeremiah’s words? Is he being a pessimist? Devious above all else? Perverse? That’s laying it on a bit thick! Or is Jeremiah on to something? We don’t like to think about the human heart in such terms. Calling the human heart devious and perverse runs counter to the spirit of our age. We prefer to think that, deep down, people are basically good. So, what do we make of Jeremiah’s lament about the cheatin’ heart?

Jeremiah was a prophet during hard times. All hell is fixing to break loose around him. After the brief and encouraging reign of good king, Josiah, the people of Judah are backsliding under their new king, Jehoiakim. They worship foreign gods and practice all manner of immorality. A Babylonian invasion looms on the horizon, a sign of the Lord’s imminent judgment, while Judah’s corrupt monarch enjoys the pleasures of being king.

But there are a few people who remain loyal to God. Jeremiah says this faithful remnant is *“like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream”* (v. 8). Jeremiah draws a sharp distinction between those who trust in *“mere mortals”* (v. 5) and those who trust in the Lord (v. 7). The faithless are like a short-lived desert plants that wilt and die under the blazing sun. The faithful have spiritual roots sunk deep in well-watered soil, and they flourish.