

“All In: Giving God Our Heart” | Romans 12:1; Proverbs 4:23

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(Discussion questions on page 8)

Consider with me three famous statues and what they tell us about ourselves.

The first comes from ancient Greece: ***Hercules and the Cretan Bull***. The statue depicts the muscular Hercules, body taut and twisting, wrestling a massive bull to the ground by its horns. Here is an image of physical strength.

Next is Rodin’s ***The Thinker***: A bronze statue of a male figure deep in contemplation, his chin resting on his hand—a picture of creative and philosophical thought.

Third, is the ***Statue of the Sacred Heart***. Here, Jesus Christ stands upright, his hand pointing to his chest, where the observer’s eye is drawn to a revelation of his heart. Often encircled with thorns, his heart radiates beams of light and love. Not a picture of physical strength or intellectual prowess, but one of unending love.

Three statues highlighting three aspects of humanity—the body, the mind, and the heart. Which do you think is most important?

From Scripture’s opening chapters to its end, the Bible is a story about the heart. The purpose of human life—as summarized by Jesus—is to “love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself” (see Matt 11:22:37). People are to “keep their heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life” (Prov 4:23).

This morning, in our final sermon from our series, *All In*, we will ask what it would look like to give our hearts completely to God. We turn again to Paul’s vivid image in Romans 12:1, where he calls Christians “to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, (Rom 12:1). And we ask now, *What would it look like to present our hearts to God?*

To consider this we will move about in Scripture and highlight three facets required in giving our hearts to God: **(1) A Humble Knowledge of Our Heart; (2) A Deepening Healing of Our Heart; (3) A Mature Keeping of Our Heart**. So, knowing, healing, and keeping the heart—all necessary if we are to give our hearts to our Lord.

I. Knowing the Heart

At some point, modern people drew too sharp of a line between the head and the heart—thinking some people were *rationalists* but others were *romantics*. The truth is the categories of feeling and thinking and doing are more blended.

In Scripture, the heart refers to the deepest part of us—not just to our emotions. The heart is the control center of our lives, effecting our thinking and doing.

Our thoughts are shaped not only by our mind, but heart: “Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander” Jesus says (Matt 5:19).

So too, our actions emerge from here: “the good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good” (Luke 6:45).

And in Scripture, our hearts are the location and key to the most important things we do. So just from a cursory reading of Scripture, you could say that giving one’s heart to God would mean we are to

“love God with all our heart” (Deut 6:5; Matt 22:37), “seek God with our whole heart” (Ps 119:10); “fear God with an undivided heart” (Ps 86:11); “believe in Christ from our heart” (Rom 10:10); treasure “the law of God in the heart” (Ps 37:31); “obey” God “with all our heart” (Deut 30:2); and “praise” and “thank” God “with our whole heart” (Ps 111:1; 138:1).

But the problem we run into immediately, is that we can’t seem to do anything of these things—not fully, not completely. And if we turn back a few pages in Romans, Paul tells us two very important things about our heart we must know.

Darkened: First, Paul tells us that since our creation, our hearts have become “darkened.” This happened as humankind turned away from God:

Although [people] knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish **hearts** were darkened. (Rom 1:21-22).

So, your heart’s ability to understand and properly value things, is a little like a person trying to read in a dimly lit room. Our hearts have bad vision.

Desires: Second, Paul tells us that our hearts are filled with what he calls “lusts:”

People exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore, God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts [ἐπιθυμίαις τῶν καρδιῶν αὐτῶν] (Rom 1:23-24)

We tend to associate the word lust mainly with sexual desire, but for Paul it had a broader meaning. “Lusts” refers to all types of desires, longings, cravings, and often those that are inordinate in degree. The heart is a *craving* and *desiring* machine.

So, if we combined the two insights—darkened hearts fueled by lusts—we are like a car driving at night with no headlights, but with our foot on the gas.

Another image would be to think of yourself as a computer: your heart is like **software** and the rest of you like **hardware**. Even if all your hardware is in tip-top shape, if the software has a bug in it, it impacts *everything*.

Anglican Reformer Thomas Cranmer put it this way,

What the heart loves, the will chooses, and the mind justifies.¹

So, our darkened and lust-filled hearts impact everything about us.

How this plays out in scripture is sometimes extreme but more often subtle. Sometimes Cain kills his brother Abel; but more often, our hearts quietly harbor envy, or resentment, or hate—and our thinking and actions are driven by an underlying lust for our own glory.

Thus, Paul, before he talks about putting our lives on the altar for God, explains in Romans that we have a heart problem. That problem is described in various ways in the Bible:

Our hearts are hard rather than soft,² unclean rather than pure,³ proud rather than humble,⁴ spiritually dead rather than animated by God's Spirit.⁵ Perhaps this is why when it comes to knowing the heart, the Prophet Jeremiah cautions:

The heart is deceitful above all things, desperately sick; who can understand it? (Jer 17:9).

Two things to draw from this:

First, is to recognize that the transformation we crave in life is less a matter of getting more information, or trying harder with our will, and more a matter of needing deep heart change. We don't need Hercules or The Thinker—we need a sacred heart like Jesus.

Second, is to approach giving our hearts to God—or anyone—with humility. We need to acknowledge that we don't always understand ourselves, don't always have mastery over ourselves, and need to walk humbly and carefully.

So, what can we do? This humble knowledge of the sickness of our heart leads to the second step in giving God our hearts: *let Him heal them*.

II. A Deepening Healing of Our Heart.

One of the most important promises in the Old Testament comes in the book of Ezekiel. The context is centuries of Israel's failure to love and obey God, and the subsequent punishment of exile. The people had been taken from their homes to Babylon (or Egypt), seen their land and cities plundered and burned and witnessed unspeakable atrocities against their most vulnerable. Their hearts are angry, terrified, and broken.

But God says to them the following:

¹ This summary of Cranmer's thought comes from the work of Ashley Null. See especially, Null, *Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of Repentance: Renewing the Power to Love* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

² "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion" (Hebrews 3:15).

³ "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me" (Psalm 51:10)

⁴ "But Hezekiah did not make return according to the benefit done to him, for his heart was proud. Therefore, wrath came upon him and Judah and Jerusalem" (2 Chronicles 32:25).

⁵ "They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God (=spiritually dead) because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart" (Eph 4:18).

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart.... I will remove the heart of stone (Ezek 36:25-26).

This is a promise of what we now call the New Covenant, where God will renew and deepen his relationship with His people not by only giving them his instructions, but by transforming their hearts.

This healing (or, heart transplant) takes place through the work of God in the Gospel and can be summarized in two parts.

The Heart Forgiven

First, the heart must be forgiven. This means we take ownership of our wrongdoings, before humankind and God. We feel our consciences pricked, the wages of our own sins weighing on us, the uncleanness of our own hearts unbearable. Jesus atones for our sin and releases the heart from guilt on the cross.

There is no deep healing of the heart without forgiveness. But there is no meaningful experience of forgiveness without **contrition**—an honest confession and sorrow over my specific sins. One by one, species by species, we must recognize and uproot—as best as we can—the sins in our hearts.⁶ A healthy heart is a contrite and repentant heart.

But forgiveness alone is not enough to heal the heart—we need something more.

The Heart Loved

Our hearts are made to be loved. And loved by God. Thus, the heart must not only be forgiven but embraced. Hence salvation in the Bible is not only described as forgiveness, but also reconciliation—re-union of man with God.

How does this heal the heart?

You might think of forgiveness as the *legal* or *judicial* side of salvation—the penalty for our sin is *pardoned*, wiped away. The jail door opens. We are free to go.

But what a freed person will need, to be fully healed, is to be embraced again by people that love him. To be freed to walk the world alone, to be seen as unwanted, is no healing at all.

In the Gospel, the jail door is opened by forgiveness—and we run out into the arms of our Heavenly Father—who saved us, because he loves us.

And in this embrace, Paul tells us that

God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5).

God giving his heart to me, is the key that enables me to give me heart to him—and this means experiencing His particular Love. We are not here interested in the general affection God has for

⁶ See the phrase of Thomas Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 245, "One by one, that is, species by species, as best as I could, I tore out all those sins by their roots, like teeth."

all things which he has made. We are concerned with God's *particular* love of you: The Son of God sacrificed *for you*; The Son of God presenting *you* to the Father, asking the Father for things for you, pleading to the Father your name; God's Spirit put *in you*—your heart a new Bethlehem, a new Temple, where God comes to dwell. God's particular love—for *you*.

We have said two things so far: to give God our heart we must first know our hearts and second have our hearts healed. Finally, let us ask what it means to now *keep our hearts*.

III. Keeping the Heart

In a well-known passage in Proverbs, the language for stewarding the heart is “guard” or “keep”:

“Above all, **guard** your heart, for everything you do flows from it” (Prov 4:23 NIV). In the ESV, “**Keep** your heart above all else, for it is the source of life” (Prov 4:23 ESV).

This biblical command to guard and keep the heart tells us that giving our hearts to God, means *stewarding* them for his purposes. It means maintaining them for him—like tending a garden God wants to grow things in, or keeping pure a spring God wants to bless others with, or purifying a Temple God intends to dwell in.

How do we do this?

I want to note one way (there are many) we keep our hearts, and a few dynamic effects it has. We keep our hearts by keeping them in regular and close submersion in the Word of God. The Word of God—when understood and prayerfully taken—communicates God's heart to our heart. And that is the most important shaping factor for our hearts.

We tend to take for granted access to God's Word and under-estimate its power and importance. But the world was not always a place filled with Bibles and online access to Scripture. There were times in the past when God's people completely lost God's Word—and times when in rediscovering it, it radically reordered their hearts.

To illustrate the dynamic effects of the Word of God on the heart, we turn to a historical moment in the life a king of Israel.

Josiah and the cleansing, renewing, and orienting power of the Word

Josiah reigned in Judah 600 years before the days of Jesus, and he reigned for 31 years. His was one of the most important kingships in Israel's history.

He entered at a low point, when God's people had so neglected the Word of God that the land and Temple were filled with idols.

But one day Josiah's secretary and High Priest—sent into the Temple to gather the collection of money—rediscovered the “Book of the law” (2 Kings 22:8). They rush to read it to the king:

Shaphan the secretary told the king, “Hilkiah the priest has given me a book.” And Shaphan read it before the king. When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his clothes (2 Kings 22:10-11).

The Word begins to transform the heart of the King, and the hearts of the people. It sets in motion three dynamic effects.

Cleanses

The first effect is a *cleansing*: Josiah orders the vessels made for Baal to be removed from the Temple—and burns them (2 Kings 23:4).

He brings the “**Asherah pole** [a wooden statue dedicated to the Canaanite goddess **Asherah**] from the house of the LORD outside of Jerusalem to the brook of Kidron—burns it and beats it to dust and cast the dust of it upon the graves of the common people” (2 Kings 23:6).⁷

He roves outside of the city and breaks into pieces all the altars and pillars Solomon built toward the end of his life—altars to false gods of Ashtoreth, Chemosh [Cam-mosh] and Milcom—and he “filled their places with the bones of men”—meaning, he cursed them (2 Kings 23:13-14).

Like rinsing out a dirty sponge with soapy water, the Word of God is *cleansing* the people’s hearts—and land—from the filth of idolatry.

But there is more.

Rekindles

The Word rekindles true affections and true worship for God.

With the Temple cleared of garbage, Josiah now commands the people to

Keep the Passover to the LORD your God, as it is written in this Book of the Covenant.”²² For no such Passover had been kept since the days of the judges who judged Israel (2 Kings 23:21-22).

Scripture begins to renew our hearts in their love for God—it blows on the simmering goals and rekindles our desire to love God.

The Puritan John Flavel wrote in the 1600s,

The greatest difficulty in conversion is to win the heart to God; and the greatest difficulty after conversion is to keep the heart with God.⁸

Flavel and his fellow Puritans were concerned not just with doctrine, but with “religious experience;” how does a Christian keep her heart aflame for God. One of their answers, was prayerful mediation on God’s Word. Meditation meant not simply reading, but slowly and intentionally going deep on one verse, or one phrase.

John Ball, also writing in the 17th century, in his *Treatise on Divine Mediation*, writes,

⁷ The altars that the evil kings had made to other gods, “he pulled down and broke into pieces” (2 Kings 23:12).

⁸ Cited in Matthew Bingham, *A Heart Aflame*, pg. 23.

A Christian without meditation is like a soldier without weapons, or a workman without tools.⁹

If you think of your heart like a fireplace, meant to warm your whole life, then meditative time in God's Word is like adding logs, and giving oxygen, to that fire. You must keep it warm.

Reorients

And finally, the Word *reorients*, or *aims*, Josiah's heart in a new trajectory—it “turns” him godward. As the writer of Second Kings summarizes:

Before [Josiah] there was no king like him, who **turned** to the LORD with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the Law of Moses (2 Kings 22:25).

Notice, Josiah is now “turned” (decidedly reoriented) toward the Lord *from his heart*. The heart is like the rudder of the ship—it sets the course of a life.

Steady reading of God's word reveals what the orientation of our life is—what we are aiming at, living for, ordering ourselves according to. And it consistently seeks to reorient us around living for the glory of God.

We close with two brief thoughts.

First, giving our hearts to God will be a daily action in this life. They will turn away again and again to other gods, to fears, to idols. We must constantly tend to them by bathing them in the Word of God—and prayer, and worship, and Christian friendship, and so much else—, we must “keep them with all vigilance. For from them flow the springs of life” (Prov 4:23.).

Second, we've seen that we cannot give our hearts to God until we experience Him giving His heart to us.

For several years when our church had no building, I would go and pray in the evenings at St. James over in Falls Church. I would sit in a pew near a statue in their sanctuary. It was a statue of the sacred heart of Jesus. On some weary nights, as I sat by this reminder of my savior's heart for me, it was not herculean strength I needed, nor the intellectual brilliance of a thinker—I needed the heart of God, pouring out God's love for me.

It is the love of God, experienced through the Son of God, poured into our hearts by the Spirit of God, the heals and moves our hearts toward God. “We love him, because he first loved us” (1 Jn 4:19).

Give your heart to God, dear friend—for He has already given His Heart to you.

⁹ John Ball, *A Treatise of Divine Meditation* (London: Printed by E. G. for Edward Brewster, 1660). Referred to in Matthew Bingham, *A Heart Aflame*.

Small Group Questions | Giving God Our Heart

1. The sermon's first point addressing "knowing" our hearts. How well do you think people know their heart? Can science or philosophy explain how our hearts work? Where do most people turn to understand their hearts—the passions, movements, and longings that impact and drive them?
2. In Scripture, we are often told that our hearts are "darkened" (Rom 1:21-22), "hardened" (Heb 3:15), and filled with "lusts" (Rom 1:23-24). Where do you see this in our culture? Where might you see it in your own life? How might this biblical diagnoses of the (sinful) heart make us more humble in how we go about our lives?
3. How does God heal our heart? The sermon highlights God's promise to give us a new heart (Ezek 36:25-26)—the true healing. It also highlights two features of this healing as involving the hearts experience of forgiveness and embrace. What are some ways the Gospel—forgiveness through Jesus' death and embrace through Jesus' work of reconciling us with the Father—has changed your heart? What are some ways you see our culture offering alternative "healings" of the heart? How do they differ from the Gospel way?
4. Proverbs 4:23 calls us to "keep" or "guard" our hearts above all else. The sermon noted that one way to do this is through regular intake of the Word of God. How does the Word of God keep a heart? Consider the example of Josiah's reforms in the third point of the sermon—where the Word led to *cleansing*, *rekindling*, and *reorientation*.
5. The sermon ended by stating that the most important factor in giving God our hearts is knowing He has already given His heart to us. How has experiencing God's love for you—perhaps in a moment of weakness, sorrow, or worship—helped you give more of your heart back to Him?
6. What would "going all in" for God, in terms of giving God your heart, look like for *you* this week?