

Rev. Janet Doyle
Elmer Presbyterian Church
Sunday, February 12, 2023
Scripture: Romans 2: 25-29

Sermon: Circumcision of the Heart

I looked up idiom expressions about the heart. Here are some that I found and you probably have heard before: “Break Someone’s Heart”; “Cross Your Heart and Hope to Die”; “Eat Your Heart Out”; “Follow Your Heart”; “From the Bottom of My Heart”; “Get at the Heart of the Matter”; “Be Half Hearted About Something”; “Have a Change of Heart”; “Have a Heart of Gold”; “Have a Heart of Stone”; “Have a Heart-to-Heart Talk”; “Have Your Heart in the Right Place”; “Know Something by Heart”; “Have One’s Heart Set on Something”; “One’s Heart Misses a Beat”; “Pour One’s Heart Out”; and “Take Heart”.

Tuesday is Valentine’s Day, February 14th, and we see red and pink hearts all over our stores and in many homes. Our culture tends to think of the heart as the home of our emotions. We send valentines and heart shaped candy to express our love and affection, but the Biblical concept of the heart is broader than the emotions. Pastor, teacher and theologian, Tim Keller, writes, “The heart is not just the seat of the emotions but also the source of our fundamental commitments, hopes, and trust. And from the heart flow our thinking, feelings, and actions. What the heart trusts, the mind justifies, the emotions desire, and the will carries out.”

Our actions and words that flow from us are a sample of the content that lies within our hearts. In the Bible, the writings of Paul, James and Peter all use language to describe the conflict that wages within us between our flesh and earthly passion and the work of the Spirit to redeem us and purify our desires. Our own desires, affections, thoughts, and actions are bent toward sin at all times, but by the grace of God this natural heart state is being transformed into a new creation. This is the message of the good news Jesus came to bring.

It is more natural for us to lead lives bent toward the desires of the flesh in this world, but we need to learn how to accept and return to

others the love of God; it takes practice. The Holy Spirit is working in us to transform us into the image of Christ as we struggle with sin and the temptations of the world.

Helen Keller said, “The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched—they must be felt with the heart.”

Augustine of Hippo in his Confessions said, “Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.”

Proverbs 4:23 says, “*Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life.*”

The greatest work of God is to win our hearts, and to keep our hearts. Proverbs 4: 21 says, “*Listen carefully to my words. Don’t lose sight of them. Let them penetrate deep into your heart, for they bring life to those who find them, and healing to their whole body.*”

Our passage of scripture this morning from Romans 2 is a powerful message for us to hear. Paul announces that it is the condition of one’s heart that makes him or her a true child of God.

While circumcision was a physical sign of God’s covenant with Israel, circumcision in the body could not change the heart. Abraham’s initial circumcision and all the males during his time was a circumcision of their choice. God had indeed commanded external circumcision as a sign of entrance into the Abrahamic covenant, the deeper significance was that this physical act was intended to be an act of obedience that flowed from your faith. The Jewish people, who had prided themselves in being circumcised, a physical sign showing they were a part of God’s chosen people. Circumcision represented the seal of a covenant made between God and Abraham. This covenant did not stop with Abraham but was to be continued on through the generations of the nation of Israel.

When you think of circumcision as a cutting away it gives us a perspective to understand how this applies to the heart. The process of the circumcision of the heart is what God wants to do in the heart of every believer.

In Deuteronomy 10:12, the Israelites were to walk in obedience to the Lord. It says, “*And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of*

you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.”

In Deuteronomy 10:16 it says, *“Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer.”* In this instance, the circumcision of the heart was a commitment to walk in obedience to the Lord. We should understand that circumcision of the heart is an inner commitment that is reflected in a changed life and is spiritual, not physical.

In Deuteronomy 30:6 it states, *“The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts, and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.”* Notice who was doing the circumcision; it was God. This circumcision of the heart was initiated by God, and it was done for one reason, so they could love him. We are like Israel because we also have no way to change our hearts unless God intervenes.

In Romans 2, Paul is making a clear distinction between religious tradition, which doesn't save, and the circumcision of the heart, which does. Circumcision of the heart cannot just be outward expressions, there must be an inward transformation; a cutting away of the things of this world; God cutting away things from your heart, which will result in transformation in your life.

When God does a circumcision of the heart, he is concerned about how you are inwardly. God changes the heart and in turn changes our behavior.

Your salvation is not just the forgiveness of your sin, it is about the transformation of your heart. When the Spirit of God transforms you, through circumcision of the heart, you then become a new creation. It will sometimes be painful because circumcision of the heart involves cutting and removing the sin in your life and the ways of the world, but you will be better for it. It is a lifelong process of learning how to live a Christ-filled life and keeping your heart healthy.

Colossians 2:11-12 says, *“In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism,*

in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.” It is a cutting away of your sinful nature and putting on the clothes of Christ. Those who clothe themselves with the Lord Jesus are believers who do not focus on gratifying the desires of the sinful nature.

Paul says in Romans 13:12, *“cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.”* Putting on Christ means to follow him in discipleship, letting our lives be conformed to the image of Jesus. (Romans 8:9) Rather than being of this world and adapting ourselves to the pattern of this world, we are to be changed in our hearts and renewed in our minds and then our behavior will model that of Christ’s life on earth.

Remember the physical circumcision in the Old Testament looked forward to the true and greater spiritual circumcision of the heart. It is a real spiritual union with Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit.

When you allow God to circumcise your heart you will have a Humble Heart, as Psalm 51:7 says, *“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”*

You will have a Believing Heart as Romans 10:9-10 states, *“If you confess with your mouth ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.”*

You will have a Loving Heart as 1 Peter 1:8 says, *“Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.”*

And you will have an Obedient Heart. *“I will give you a new heart...I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.”* Ezekiel 36:26-27 tells us. The prevailing desire of your heart governs the direction of your life. So, it is important to know your heart and to give your heart to the Lord to cut away that which is not healthy so what remains will be strong to pump life into you.

John Wesley, the well-known Methodist preacher, once wrote, “Have a pure intention of heart, a steadfast regard to his glory in all your actions. Fix your eyes upon the blessed hope of your calling and make all the things of the world minister unto it. For then, and not till then is that ‘mind in us which was also in Christ Jesus,’ when, in every motion of our heart, in every word of our tongue, in every work of our hands, we pursue nothing but in relation to him, and in subordination to his pleasure, when we too, neither think, nor speak, nor act, to fulfill our own will, but the will of him that sent us, when, whether we eat, or drink, or whatever we do, we do all to the glory of God.”

Remember what ultimately pleases God is the circumcision of the heart!