

The Heart of It All

Jeremiah 17:5-10

Introduction

If I were to give you a blank piece of paper and have you list the images or symbols you most closely associate with Valentines Day, together we could probably come very close to agreeing on the same top four things that are on the official list – that is, the top four symbols as determined by a non-scientific survey done a year ago by Women's World magazine. In order, the four most recognizable symbols for this holiday are ...

1. Cupid
 - Cupid was a depiction of the Greek god Eros, the god of love, a chubby little guy flying around and shooting love arrows at unsuspecting people. I am not sure I would have listed that one as #1, but it would have made my list.
2. Chocolates
 - Since the days of the Aztecs almost every culture has believed to some degree that chocolates are an aphrodisiac, so that one makes sense too.
3. Red roses
 - Roses were a luxury of the wealthy. The red ones were especially prized because red dye was very expensive, so giving red roses came to symbolize the great sacrifices you were willing to make for your beloved.
4. Hearts

I am stunned hearts came in fourth on this list. It is difficult to think about Valentines Day without thinking about hearts. That was my #1. Think about it. Hearts are everywhere.

- Chocolates come in heart shaped boxes, and those heart shaped boxes are delivered alongside a dozen red roses.
- It's all about the heart.

Interestingly, hearts only came to be associated with romantic love in the 14th and 15th century. English poets like William Shakespeare and John Donne are the ones who popularized it.

- Even throughout the Bible the heart was not seen as a place of romance. Instead it was a reflection of your character, including your mind and your will.

It is a New Testament verse, but you might remember these words of words of Jesus:

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:21)

The things you value determine the location of your heart.

- If you value the right stuff, then your heart is in a good place.
- But if you don't ...

I don't think he was the first to say it, but this quote by Warren Wiersbe was the first of its kind that I found when I was preparing for the message.

At the heart of every problem is the problem of the heart. (Warren Wiersbe)

He uses that quote in connection with verse 9 from our text:

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?
(Jeremiah 17:9)

We could say it about romantic love too, but even if you understand your heart to be a matter of character, it isn't hard to agree with Warren Wiersbe: "At the heart of every problem is the problem of the heart.

Our Old Testament reading in Jeremiah speaks to that quite plainly as it contrasts the focus of the human heart. The text talks about two kinds of people.

#1: THE PERSON WHO IS CURSED

Look again at verse 5:

Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who draws strength from mere flesh and whose heart turns away from the Lord. (Jeremiah 17:5)

The key here is a heart that turns away from the Lord.

- Instead of a heart focused on God, this heart relies on "flesh and blood" people when it needs help and direction.
- It "draws strength" from other people.

Jeremiah was prophesying to the Jewish people when he first spoke these words.

- Even though God had rescued them from captivity, brought them through the wilderness and into the promised land, they chose to rely on others for their strength
- Last fall we had a Bible study on the book of Hosea. Throughout that book Hosea was preaching the same message. The Jews were making treaties with Assyria and Egypt – both of whom were taking advantage of them and wanted to see them eliminated.
 - Hosea considered that to be the equivalent of adultery – you belong to God and are prostituting yourself with other lovers

Look at what happens to the person who does that:

That person will be like a bush in the wastelands; they will not see prosperity when it comes. They will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives. (Jeremiah 17:6)

There is no life, no success. Nothing of value. It is the picture of a wasted life.

- That's kind of blunt, isn't it? But the truth of Scripture is that a life lived apart from God is a wasted life.
- No matter what you accomplish, it ultimately doesn't matter.

#2: THE PERSON WHO IS BLESSED

But by contrast the person whose heart is focused on God is described like this. Look at verse 8:

They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit." (Jeremiah 17:8)

One modern paraphrase states it like this:

They're like trees replanted in Eden, putting down roots near the rivers—Never a worry through the hottest of summers, never dropping a leaf, Serene and calm through droughts, bearing fresh fruit every season. (Jeremiah 17:8, The Message)

It is a picture of a life well-lived, a life free of anxiety and full of fruit. In each and every circumstance of life God takes care of him – of the one whose heart is focused on God.

It is an amazing contrast. On the one hand you have the wasted life and on the other you have the life that is blessed. That begs the question ...

If the differences are so clear, why doesn't every heart focus on God?

#3: THE PROBLEMATIC HEART

Remember Warren Wiersbe's quote?

At the heart of every problem is the problem of the heart. (Warren Wiersbe)

Look at verse 9:

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. (Jeremiah 17:9)

The Bible and Hallmark will disagree at this point.

- Hallmark will tell you to trust your heart.
- The Bible says your heart lies to you.

Who do I trust?

I conducted a very official scientific study this week as I was preparing this sermon. Someone left a box of those candy conversation hearts on my desk, so I opened them to see what the hearts had to say. Maybe, I thought, I could find some wisdom there.

- Two of them were blank. So I ate them.
- Three of them told me I was “cool.”
- Two thought I was “cute.”
- One instructed me to “be nice.”
- Another offered “hugs.”

I don't know that my experiment produced anything remotely reliable, but it did illustrate the point of this message. By itself, your heart cannot be trusted.

APPLICATION

According to these words of Jeremiah, there are two and only two types of people. And they are opposites.

- Some trust in themselves, and in other human beings.
 - They choose weak, fragile, and flawed people as their source of strength and direction.
 - They mold their lives after what others do and think.
 - They look to themselves instead of God for their security and hope and righteousness.
 - In short, they are curved in upon themselves and make themselves the god of their lives.
- Others trust in God.
 - They find life, security, hope, strength, and meaning in a relationship with God.
 - They look outside of themselves and away from themselves, and instead they rely on their Maker and Savior.

The difference between these two types of people is not that some believe and others do not. Everyone believes. The difference lies in the object of their faith, God or themselves.

You live in a culture that highly values individual autonomy and self-sufficiency.

- Our text warns against adopting those values in any ultimate sense.
- Self-reliance, self-sufficiency, and self-autonomy are nothing more than self-idolatry, and self-idolatry is a recipe for burnout.
- It has a curse pronounced upon it.
- That kind of life survives only as long as it can sustain and nourish itself. And no one can do that forever.
- Each of us individually and all of us collectively make for a pretty weak god.
- Those who rely on themselves cannot give themselves life, cannot save themselves or help themselves in any significant way, certainly not when the trials of life come around.

But on those who trust in God, on those who have God as their source of strength and hope, our text pronounces a blessing.

- When Yahweh is the object of faith, there is a continual source of water to enliven and nourish, come what may. Yahweh is “the fountain of living water” that never dries up (Jer. 17:13), the living and life-giving water.

What kind of God is the God of Israel? He is the God who abounds in steadfast love even for his arrogant and idolatrous creatures.

- In fact, God so loved his world that in the fullness of time he sent his only Son to live our life and to die our death.
- Jesus Christ redeemed us from the curse pronounced upon us by becoming a curse for us, as it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree” (Gal. 3:13).
- On the third day God raised Jesus Christ from the dead to be the living and life-giving Lord.
- Through the life-giving waters of baptism the Lord has pronounced us “blessed,” and he promises to sustain and nourish us through his Word and Supper.
- With the cross and the open tomb we see what kind of God we have, a much better God than we could ever be.

So let us turn away from ourselves and turn to him in faith. Then we will bear much fruit even when the tough times come around. Then we will be like a tree and not a desert shrub.

Amen.