

Written on Our Hearts

A Sermon on Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Galatians 2: 19-20 by Rich Holmes

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A second grade teacher was once having a conversation with his students. He posed this question to them: "Suppose you were to walk into a store one day and you saw your favorite candy bar sitting on the shelf, would it be wrong of you to take it when the clerk wasn't looking?"

That was an easy question. "Yes! Yes!" they all said as they burst into a chorus of agreement.

But then the question the teacher asked was "Okay, now why would it be wrong?" The students all paused and scratched their heads. A much tougher question for second graders. But slowly the hands came up, and they had some ideas.

One student said, "It would be wrong because there might be a policeman right behind me, and he might catch me doing it."

Another student: "It would be wrong because if my parents found out about it, they might punish me for doing it."

Another student: "It would be wrong because a friend of mine might see me doing it and they wouldn't want to be friends with me anymore."

We would, of course, expect these kinds of answers from second graders, but the problem is that each of these answers really misses the reason why taking the candy bar is wrong. The psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg would even say that this kind of thinking is pre-moral thinking, it is a necessary way of thinking about right and wrong as we develop morally, but it is also an immature kind of thinking about morality because it is a way of thinking about morality as a

system in which there is something in it for me. What benefits me about being moral is that I don't get punished, or I get to keep my friends or I don't get caught. Well, it's perfectly normal for a second grader to have this pre-moral thinking, but we would say there is something wrong with an adult who thinks that way.

But I now want to tell you something that is going to make you think that I have finally lost my mind. What I want to tell you is that I think most people, most adult people never get past such a selfish way of thinking about right and wrong. Now, to be clear, I am not saying that most adult people couldn't give better answers than these second graders, or that they don't know how to talk about morality in a more sophisticated way. But what people say about morality doesn't tell you what they believe, it's what they do which tells you what they believe—and based on what they do, most people never advance beyond these second graders in the things they believe about right and wrong.

Now, it may be that I'm being too pessimistic and things can't be so bad. But if you think I have too little faith in humanity, and you are ashamed of your pastor's cynicism and pessimism, then of course that means that when you left the house this morning you left the front door unlocked didn't you? Or (it means) that if I were to walk out in the parking lot, I would find your car unlocked, or you would be happy to find your social security number and all your credit card numbers printed on the front page of the *Canton Repository* for thousands of people to see. Now, I know what some of you are saying, some of you are saying "No, I wouldn't do any of these things, Pastor Rich, but I don't lock my car and lock my house and hide away my social security number because I am afraid of what most people will do, I do these things because I am afraid of what a few people will do." I understand. But remember, you are afraid of what a

few people will do in a society with laws, and police. If you can't trust a minority of people in a society with laws and police, then do you really think you could trust the majority of people in a society with no laws and no police?

Maybe it doesn't seem that most people are so selfish or so morally immature, and yet how often we continue to be shocked when people are caught doing selfish things that they never thought anyone would see. We say "How could he" or "How could she" or "He seemed like such a good person." Maybe it is time to ask ourselves how many times we have to be shocked before we realize that most people are only interested in right and wrong because they want to know what's in it for them. How does it benefit them, and if it doesn't benefit them, then why should they care about it?

The thing about having the love of God in your heart, and the love of Christ in your heart, though, is that it makes you different from the way most people are. When you have the love of God in your heart, you realize that it is wrong to steal not because you might get caught and you might get punished, but because it harms the person you're stealing from. When you have the love of God in your heart, you realize it is wrong to betray a friend not because God might punish you, or you might lose the friend because of it, but because it harms someone who put their trust in you. When you have the love of God in your heart, finally you realize what nonsense most things you hear about right and wrong really are, like when you hear it said "You better be nice to people on the way up because you'll meet the same people on the way back down." That's not why you should be nice. The reason you should be nice and kind is because being cruel and unkind hurts the people you are cruel and unkind to, and if that's not reason enough for someone to be kind then they don't understand what the love of God is.

Back when I was in my first years of ministry, there was one woman whom I loved dearly but for whom my style of preaching was never quite her cup of tea, and she used to say "You know Rich, all you ever talk about is love this and love that. Why don't you ever preach hellfire and damnation?" Well, I don't know. I suppose I could preach hellfire and damnation if I wanted to. But I guess I have always thought that if you obey God because you think God's gonna get you otherwise, then you are really obeying God for selfish reasons. And if you obey God for selfish reasons, then are you really any better than anyone else.

Now, on the outside, for everyone who sees you, when you have the love of God in your heart, you aren't going to look any differently from anybody else. The person who doesn't steal or doesn't murder, or who doesn't harm others because they have the love of God in their heart, and the person who doesn't steal or doesn't murder because they're afraid of getting caught, when you put them side by side, on the outside, they look the same. They both don't steal, they both don't murder. They look the same on the outside, but on the inside, in the place where their hearts are, they couldn't be any more different.

Is there anyone who can look at two such people, though, and see a difference? I don't know. Maybe God's eyes can see a difference. In our Old Testament lesson for today, in a time six hundred years before the birth of Christ, the word of God comes to us through the lips of the prophet Jeremiah, as God says "The days are surely coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, and the new covenant," God says, "will not be like the old covenant which my people broke, a covenant with laws that were written on tablets of stone." God says "with this new covenant, my laws will be within my people, and I will write them on their hearts."

Maybe when you come to have the love of God in your heart, that is what God sees.

Maybe God can look inside your chest and see the laws of God literally written on your heart. I do not know what God sees. I trust that one day I will know.

In the book of Deuteronomy, there is a famous passage which you probably know which says "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might." What you may not know though is the part which comes immediately after it, which says "Keep these words that I am commanding you today. Recite them to your children," and it says "bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."

To this day, you can find orthodox Jews all over the world who do just that. They literally take these words which say "love the lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might," and not only do they attach them to their doorposts in little boxes called *mezuzas*, but they even tie them up in pouches called *tefflin* to their foreheads and their hands. They literally affix the written law of God to their bodies. Maybe God sees something like that when he looks at us. I just don't know. But while I look forward to knowing these kinds of things one day, the fact is it really doesn't matter. When you have the love of God in your heart, you are different, regardless of whether anyone can see how different you are or not.

I don't know if you've ever watched the show *Brain Games* but I discovered it a few years ago, and it quickly became one of my favorite shows. It is all about how your brain can play tricks on you. And on what is perhaps my favorite episode, they showed this one experiment called the rubber hand experiment where they make you sit down in a chair and they hide your hand behind a curtain, while what they place in front of you is a rubber hand that looks like

your hand and that is attached to a rubber arm that looks like your arm. Now, to get to you to associate the rubber hand with your own hand, what the experimenter will do is to start lightly stroking your hand with a brush at the same time that he is stroking the rubber hand with a brush, so that while you see the rubber hand being stroked with a brush you will feel your own hand that you can't see being stroked, and your brain will be tricked into thinking, *hey, this rubber hand must be my hand*. Now, you aren't aware that your brain is being tricked but you soon find out your brain is being tricked, because the next thing that happens in the experiment is the part that blows your mind. All of the sudden, when you least expect it, the experimenter grabs a hammer and hits the rubber hand as hard as he can. And when he does that, the mind blowing thing is that you flinch and you actually feel as though your hand is the one that's been hit by a hammer. You will feel pain in your hand, even though the only thing that's been hit is a rubber hand. Doesn't that blow your mind? Isn't that unbelievable? Because your brain has been tricked into thinking the rubber hand it sees is your hand, you come to feel pain, even when your hand isn't in pain at all.

Well, you know what? That is sort of like what happens to us, when we come to have the love of God in our hearts. When you have the love of God in your heart, you begin to experience both the pain and the joy that other people experience, even if it doesn't actually happen to you. And just as you would do anything you can to keep yourself from suffering pain, you would do anything you can to keep others from suffering pain because their pain is your pain. And just as you would do anything you can to experience joy, you would do anything you can so that others experience joy because their joy is your joy. In our New Testament lesson for today the apostle Paul says "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but

Christ who lives in me.” He says “what happened to Jesus on the cross happened to me. Jesus didn’t just die for me, when he died, I died.”

Just like when people say “when my child died, a part of me died with them”, or “when my spouse died I died with them”, as Christians it is such a central part of our faith that what happens to any of us happens to all of us that Paul says “when Christ died on the cross, I died too.” That’s what you say when you have the love of God in your heart.

If you have the love of God in your heart, you may look just like everyone else. You might walk and talk like everyone else. You might obey the law just like everyone else, you might be kind to your neighbor just like everyone else. But you are not like everyone else, and let us not soon forget that.