

The Church Must Guard Its Heart

The heart is the starting point of Christianity. This is made clear by the ministry of Christ and the entire New Testament. ~ Mark 12:28-31

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?"

Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."



What would you think about becoming best friends with a robot? You could "program" it to do nice things for you and say nice things to you. You could have it always agree with you. Still, not many of us would pick a robot for a friend, because a robot puts no "heart" behind its words or deeds. It is the ability of *choice* that gives meaning to words and deeds.

Yet, our religion can become like that of a robot. That was Jesus' complaint about religion when he came to live on earth. Folk were doing correct things, getting to the temple on time, praying at proper intervals, studying, quoting and debating the Scriptures, and analyzing the ten commandments. The problem was that they were, at the same time, "heartless." They guarded everything but their hearts.

Paul said, the "peace of God must guard your heart" (Philippians 4:7). At the beginning of our passage, we find the Jews debating and disputing theories, like one might do in some sort of philosophy class. That is the danger; what if Christianity were *just* theories? What if the theories did not *prove out* in the lives of the people?

This was the case when Jesus came; conduct had become some sort of legal vision of crime, punishment, and judgmentality; however, it didn't come from the heart. It was Jesus who took us the next step: Salvation was not to arise out of a system of lawyers, legislators, rules and codes, policemen, jails, punishment, and surveillance; it would have to take root in the heart, he said. People change only when they begin to love. The church must teach people to love. "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it" --everything you do flows from it (Proverbs 4:23).

It's not that you can't get people to look better than they really are with some pressure. For example, when I'm driving the interstate and see a police car, I immediately appear to become a better driver than I really am. However, down deep, nothing has changed; I'm still the same driver that I always

was. That is, I may do what I should do because I'm made to, but that doesn't make me any different. I still want to get where I want to go as fast as I can.

Jesus said that while the Jews did well outwardly, the lack could be found inside. There was no heart, no life, in there; they were full of dead men's bones. He said the essence of true religion is the heart that gives it rise. It is the moving of the Holy Spirit within the free spirit of redeemed people. Throughout human history this has been the "Hall Mark" of spirituality --the evidence of reality. Religion without heart is an act, a drama, a hypocrisy, as Jesus called it.

This is why Jesus taught that the *substance* of true religion is heart, not law. It is no great thing to have a robot friend, or to be a robot friend. When religion loses its heart, it becomes cold and empty. When heart is replaced with precedent, propriety, program or system, Christianity ceases to live in any real and vital sense.

Behind the robot mentality is the belief that spirituality itself can be forced in the same manner as a nasty, kicking cow is made to milk. While certain behaviors may be forced, what is given up is the chance for "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, goodness, faith, meekness, and self-control (rather than control by another or control of another)." These are feelings of the heart. It is the heart we must cultivate and guard. When relationship between God and others is lost --all is lost. Coercion cannot bring about genuine relationship with God or others. We cannot give up our focus on heart if we plan to see people truly change.

When the spontaneity of heart goes out of religion, so does the Christian-ness. To leave our feelings out is to leave the Spirit out. We must take time to wrestle with God, if truth is to do its work within us. We must not allow the calendar to crowd out the Spirit, or the face of the clock crowd out the face of God. Prayer must be the free breath of a ransomed soul rather than a duty; it must be a touching of God. Christianity must be a life that we live, rather than a role that we play. Here is a question from an highly respected reporter to a highly respected public servant:: "Why have Christians dropped their Christianity for p;olitics?" His answer? "I wish I knew." The reporter replied, "I know what a Christian is --we could use some about now."

Though there was much to commend in the Church at Ephesus, it lost its light when it lost its love. "But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place." When the Church loses love, it loses Christ --it loses light.

This brings us to the original creation and fall of man. Why didn't God create a man who had no choice, a man without alternatives? The question, as you may notice, is very similar to, "Why didn't God make robots instead of men?" The answer is simple, "Robots cannot love; they don't make the best kind of friends." Robots may not disappoint you, but they won't fulfill you either. The whole point of sending the Holy Spirit to the church is to enable us to do good things *from the heart by choice*.

Good things are nothing if they are not by choice. If it were possible for Christianity to be accomplished by legal, legislative means, we could have stopped at the Old Testament.

The outcome of Christ's work is that we do what we do out of love and with joy, because it is what we *want* to do. That is what gives our action meaning. The amazing thing in this world is not that many people choose to do bad, it is that so many people choose to do good --and there is the reality of love.

In the Christian faith, it is not so much the deed as the intent. It was, for example, David's intent to build a house for God; of course he never got to do it. Yet, God did not say, "Why haven't you built me that house that you promised?" Rather, he said, "You did well that it was in your heart to build me a house," and God counted the thought for the deed.

When Jesus came, he set a whole new ethical standard for morality. People were not to keep laws as robots can, but out of love, and a glowing desire in their hearts, out of free choice. He pointed out that the law was never given for its own sake, or to prove who is boss. He said, it is not as if the law is primary and man was created to serve it; but rather, man is primary and the law is created to serve him. We get this mixed up; I think, because of military ideas of "You do this because I said so, and I'm about to show you that I have two more stripes than you do." It was by this kind of reasoning that Hitler was able to come to power. That is not the purpose of God's law.

When God created man, he knew that nature had some "hot spots;" the law is simply a manual that describes how to avoid them. It is no different than looking both ways before you cross the street. Parents don't teach children to do that just so they can show the kids who is the boss.

Jesus said the first law is to love God, while the second is to love your neighbor. These two laws, he said, are the sum of all the laws and all the prophets. How does that work? I'm not going to steal from my neighbor. Why? Because number eight says not to. No! Rather, it is because I love my neighbor, the thought never crossed my mind. I'm going to attend church today, because law number four says that I should. No! Rather, it is because I love God and I want to honor and serve him the best that I can. I *want* to attend church today --even if it is by this "contraption".

Jesus said that there is something *inside* that makes a fig tree bear figs and an apple tree bear apples. It is at this point that the concept of spirituality varies so greatly. To some people the person who talks religion continually is thought to be really spiritual, other people think spirituality is exuberance, while others think it is he or she who prays the longest.

It is important that we understand that these do not, in themselves, constitute or prove the presence of spirituality. Real spirituality manifests itself in certain strong desires of the heart. These desires are ever-present, deep-seated, settled wants sufficiently powerful to motivate as well as control our lives. Here they are:

The desire to be holy. In today's language it is the desire to be pure, fair, honest, truthful, ethical, on the level, to do right. The desire not to hurt is included. That is why it is linked with "holy, harmless, and undefiled." Wilford Brimley might just say, "It's the right thing to do."

The spiritual person wants to see the honor of God advanced through his or her life. "Hallowed be Thy name; Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven." The honor of God is necessary to this person. This person took no pleasure in Madalyn O'Hara's speeches as she crusaded against God and for atheism. Yet, Madalyn O'Hara is a perfect example of the principle Jesus is teaching here. Madalyn O'Hair fought her battle in the legislature. While she may have won some legal battles, that is not the same as winning hearts over to atheism. Despite her legislative success, recent polling indicates that 81 to 83 percent of us still do believe in God. The difference is that you may win the legislation, but fail to win the heart. The front line of Christian battle is not fought in congress; it has always been fought in the heart. In fact, often in our attempts to make it a battle of "flesh and blood" we actually *lose the hearts* of the on-lookers who have seen far too much nastiness already. Most people do not equate God with "nasty."

Another mark of the spiritual person is that he or she desires to see other people advance. There is no envy in his or her heart; when another person is honored, he or she is pleased. We call this humility. William Temple said this about humility, "Humility does not mean thinking less of yourself than others, nor does it mean having a low opinion of your own gifts. It means freedom from thinking about yourself at all."

Spiritual people habitually make eternity-judgments, rather than time-judgments. They look to the "long run" outcome. By faith they rise above the tug of earth and the flow of time, and learn to think and feel as though they have already left this world and have come to look at it from Heaven's enlightened vantage point.

Such a person would rather be useful than famous. Such a person would rather serve than be served. No person can learn to love in this way without God. The first fruit of his Holy Spirit is love. We must not be satisfied unless we feel our Christianity. We must cry, we must laugh, we must hurt, we must heal, we must struggle, we must hope, we must delight, we must feel sorrow, we must feel gratitude, we must feel blessing.

Spirituality comes from the innermost place where God's Holy Spirit lives and seeks to work. Let him work. You cannot "act it out," or "work it up." From the very creation, what God wanted was our hearts. Do not be satisfied with being a robot Christian; purpose to be a real one! Christianity is a matter of the heart. What is God's request to us? "Give me your heart" (Psalm 23:26). For a Bible to make a difference, you must first open it –then, you must look for Jesus on its pages (1 John 5:39). Then, you must accept and follow that Jesus. That is Christianity.