

March 18, 2020  
Lent Sermon

## Open Our Hearts – An Uncomfortable Sermon

I used to watch The O'Reilly Factor and Bill O'Reilly always began with the quote: "Warning you are about to enter the no spin zone." Well tonight with our 4th Lenten service, I guess I could say the warning: "You are about to enter the uncomfortable sermon zone." Welcome to Lent; it's that time God's time 40 days of preparation, 40 days preparing us for Holy Week and for the message of Easter, 40 days of reflection, repentance, sorrow, grief and yet a certain amount of joy. Our theme this year has been Open. In our first week we looked at open our eyes. It's a prayer to God, 'open our eyes to see you to see you in the physical nature that you created and open our eyes to see the all sufficient, atoning sacrifice of Christ.' In fact, it's a prayer of open our eyes to see like Jesus, so that we might see those who He has died for and see them as He would see them.

In our second week the theme was open our hands. It all begins with asking God to open His hands and putting ourselves into His hands. Then we pray 'oh Lord, open our hands to be your hands' and just as Jesus consistently used touch to bring healing and comfort to those He was ministering to, we pray that our hands would become His hands.

Last week it was open our ears. Open our ears to hear the great truths of the Bible. Great truth that begin with the Shema. Hear oh Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And that's followed up immediately with: "and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart with all your soul and with all your mind." And that leads us to the uncomfortable sermon zone. Open our hearts. It begins with a study of the heart. I'm sure you have all heard someone say; "Oh he's a good person," or "oh, they have a good heart." You know you can't get more biblically UN correct or incorrect in such a saying, because the Bible tells us very clearly Jeremiah 17 verse 9 the heart is deceitful above all things; and proverbs 27:19 we read the heart of man reflects the man. In other words; what is in our heart is reflected in what we say and do. Then we do come again to what Jesus says in our gospel tonight; "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be.

But let's go back to the Shema; "love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind." Do we do we really love the Lord our God with all our heart? Do we

reflect that love? Consider these questions, do we live the Great Commission as found in Matthew 28:19-20? Is our heart devoted to going and making disciples of all nations? Is our heart devoted to fulfilling first Thessalonians chapter 5:17 to pray without ceasing? What about Jesus's own words to us in Matthew 5: 44? "Love your enemies pray for those who persecute you." Is that what is written on your heart? Or how about James 5 verse 16? "Pray for one another," is that where your heart is? Are you always praying for one another? Or how about Psalm 99 verse one; "we are to store up His word in our hearts." I'd have to ask, how can we store up God's word in our hearts unless we're actually opening the Bible reading it and studying it and making a concerted effort to make it a part of our hearts? In fact, is our heart committed to remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy?

Those questions probably made you a little uncomfortable. I know they made me uncomfortable because I realized my heart is not always devoted to that. The problem is my heart, our hearts are oftentimes devoted to other gods that lead us away. In fact, just as Jeremiah wrote; our hearts, my heart tends to be deceitful and wants to change God's command or change what He's really said or Pat myself on the back for doing some of it and thinking that is enough. You see, all too often, I think we; you and I, are like Kings Saul. Consider our Old Testament reading tonight from first Samuel chapter 15. In verse three, God gives a command to King Saul that is unbelievably politically incorrect by today's day and age. But I have a feeling it was politically incorrect at that time too. God said and I quote: "Go strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey. Can you imagine someone making such a degree today? But God knew what he was doing. The Amalekites were unbelievably hedonistic, paganistic people and if they had been allowed to stay, they would have coerced, they would have tempted the children of Israel to turn away from God. Their love for Him would go to the loves of the Amalekites. So what did Saul do? We read that Saul and the people spared Agag, the King and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fattened calves and the lambs and all that was good and would not utterly destroy them. Now listen to this next part; all that was despised and worthless they devoted to destruction. So, anything that wasn't worth anything; yeah, I will destroy that. I mean it would be like today we were invading some city and we were told you know, wipe everything out. And you come to a house and sitting out in front of the house is a brand, new Ferrari. We wouldn't want to destroy that, now would we? But let's say that right next door to it is, you know one of those things from back in the 1970s, VW made it. It was called "the thing." Or maybe a Yugo; two of the most despised cars ever made. We would probably look at that and say; 'I don't want it, so let's torch it.'

This is exactly the attitude the Israelites had. In verse 13 we read Samuel came to Saul. Samuel the Prophet, the one who had told him God says go strike Amalek. Samuel comes to Saul, and Saul responds to seeing Samuel with these words. Listen carefully; “blessed be you to the Lord, I...” Isn't that a huge word one letter long I? “I have performed the commandment of the Lord.” Saul is saying to Samuel look at what I did what a great job I've done. And Samuel's response is one of the most classic responses you can find in the Bible. I can imagine him putting his hand up to his ear and saying; “What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the oxen that I hear?” Listen again carefully to Saul's response. Remember he said, “I have performed the commandment of the Lord;” patting himself on the back and when Samuel points out, ‘Gee I hear some sheep and I hear some oxen lowing. where did those come from?’ Saul's response is one of deception. ‘They have brought them the worthless, they devoted to destruction but the best we kept all of these as a sacrifice to the Lord.’ Deception, or rewriting- it's a deceitful heart in action, taking what God had said and twisting it to what we want it to be so that it sounds good. How does Samuel respond? “Stop it!” Basically, so quit talking, you're digging yourself a grave. He says to Saul; “I will tell you what the Lord said to me.” ‘The Lord anointed you King, that might be little in your own eyes, but it is huge in God's eyes because all the people look to you. You have not fallowed. “The Lord sent you on a mission saying, ‘devote to destruction the sinners the Amalekites in fight till they are consumed.’ Why then did you not obey? Saul comes right back again with an answer from the heart, a deceitful heart, a heart that's going to try to rationalize; “I have obeyed, I devoted them to destruction but...” and of course we all know what but is a giant eraser that erases everything you just said. “But the people.” He deflects the attention away from himself. “The people took the spoil.” This is where Samuel speaks again to Saul; one of the most profound statements in the Bible and one that we would do well to memorize. “To obey is better than sacrifice.” Saul it would have been better for you to devote the stuff to destruction because that is exactly what God told you to do. Yes, He's told you to sacrifice, but His command to you was to do this and to obey God is better than; ‘well I'm going to give Him sacrifice to make up for it.’

How serious is God about that, that obedience is better than sacrifice? Samuel fallows it up with, ‘He, God has rejected you from being King.’ And why, because of reality. The reality is a very scary thought and it's what really makes this sermon very uncomfortable. First Samuel 16 verse 7 says, “The Lord looks on the heart.” The Lord knew what was in Saul's heart. It didn't matter what he said. The Lord knew the thoughts of Saul's heart and the Lord looks on our heart and when you really think about that, that He knows the innermost feelings, the innermost driving forces

within us, innermost thoughts, the deepest thoughts of our mind, in our heart, we may end up asking as the people did at the time of Pentecost; 'how then can we be saved?'

Let's look at that how can we be saved. Acts 16; verse 14; again, I ask you to pay very close attention to this because it is a teaching straight from the Bible that flies in the face of so much of what we are told today. "The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said." It is a reference to Lydia, the seller of purple goods from our New Testament reading this evening. Paul and Silas and Luke were evangelizing; and notice what is written. It is not that Lydia listened and she asked Jesus into her heart; no, what happened was the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said. Who did the opening of the heart? God did. This is the work of the Holy Spirit and notice what happens when God opens the heart there's action. She and her whole household were immediately baptized, and she prevailed upon Paul, Silas and Luke to stay. She cared for them. These are my brothers in Christ who brought Salvation here. They are the instruments of God's word; I must care for them. This is how transformation begins. It is not us saying Jesus come into my heart, we can't do that unless if God Himself has first opened our heart to pay attention to what is being said and to begin that transformation. Because our sinful hearts are set against God and we are doomed unless again Ezekiel 36:26 "What does God say? I will give you a new heart." It is God who transforms our heart and He does it. Jeremiah 31 verse 33 says by writing His law on our hearts He does it. Galatians 4 verse 6 says, by sending His spirit into our hearts and He does it. Ephesians 3:17 by Christ dwelling within our hearts.

So, we go back to that Pentecost sermon; why did the people say, 'what we do to be saved?' Because I quote: "they were cut to the heart." And so this 4th week of lent, our prayer, in addition to opening our eyes, opening our hands, opening our ears; we pray that the Lord would open our hearts like He opened the heart of Lydia and her family and that we like Lydia, would then live for Him love Him with all our hearts and then from the heart take His love and His precepts to others in our savior's name.

Amen