

Christ Reformation Church

Tillamook, Oregon

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Wise as Serpents – A Practical Theology of Evil

**(Part 24 – Does the Christian
Still Have an Evil Heart?)**

June 12, 2016

Sermon Text: Jeremiah 17:7-10

Scripture Reading: Jeremiah 31:31-40

"Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit."

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? "I the LORD search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds." (Jer 17:7-10)

This morning as we continue to become wise as serpents regarding evil, we want to identify and correct a very common unbiblical idea that is really quite rampant among professing Christians, taught in our pulpits, and put into practical application that wreaks havoc in people's lives. It concerns the very nature of who a Christian is as a new creation.

Listen to some excerpts from an article by Leslie Vernick which was sent to me by one of the ACFJ readers last week. It actually is a very good article in that Vernick is recognizing that not all sinners are the same and that in fact there are hearts that are just plain evil.

[www.crosswalk.com/faith/spiritual-life/5-indicators-of-an-evil-and-wicked-heart.html]

"As Christian counselors, pastors and people helpers we often have a hard time discerning between an evil heart and an ordinary sinner

who messes up, who isn't perfect, and full of weakness and sin.

I think one of the reasons we don't "see" evil is because we find it so difficult to believe that evil individuals actually exist. We can't imagine someone deceiving us with no conscience, hurting others with no remorse, spinning outrageous fabrications to ruin someone's reputation, or pretending he or she is spiritually committed yet has no fear of God before his or her eyes."

She goes on to list and describe from excellent insights into the traits that an evil person possesses –

1. Evil hearts are experts at creating confusion and contention.

2. Evil hearts are experts at fooling others with their smooth speech and flattering words.

3. Evil hearts crave and demand control, and their highest authority is their own self-reference.

4. Evil hearts play on the sympathies of good-willed people, often trumping the grace card.

5. Evil hearts have no conscience, no remorse.

And then Vernick notes two typical tenets that an evil heart holds to:

1. Their horrible actions should have no serious or painful consequences.

When they say "I'm sorry," they look to you as the pastor or Christian counselor to be their advocate for amnesty with the person he or she has harmed. They believe grace means they are immediately granted immunity from the relational fallout of their serious sin. They believe forgiveness entitles them to full reconciliation and will pressure you and their victim to comply.

2. That if I talk like a gospel-believing Christian I am one, even if my actions don't line up with my talk.

If week after week you hear the talk but there is no change in the walk, you have every reason to question someone's relationship with God. Part of our maturity as spiritual leaders is that we have been trained to discern between good and evil. Why is that so important?

It's important because evil usually pretends to be good, and without discernment we can be easily fooled (**Hebrews 5:14**).

When you confront evil, chances are good that the evil heart will stop counseling with you because the darkness hates the light (**John 3:20**) and the foolish and evil heart reject correction (**Proverbs 9:7,8**). But that outcome is far better than allowing the evil heart to believe you are on his or her side, or that "he's not that bad" or "that he's really sorry" or "that he's changing" when, in fact, he is not.

[Note: Here, Vernick really does get it right and her statement that we are about to critique regarding the Christian's heart being inclined to evil shows, in my opinion, that she has not yet quite sorted out some of the wrong teaching she has been taught, just as most of us were taught growing up in the church]

This is all very excellent and accurate wisdom which we wholeheartedly agree with.

But there is a portion of her article that is an example of wrong-thinking or at least foggy-thinking regarding *just who a Christian is*. This is the very

subject we want to examine this morning. Listen once more:

The **Bible** clearly tells us that among God's people there are wolves that wear sheep's clothing (**Jeremiah 23:14; Titus 1:10; Revelations 2:2**).

[Quite true]

It's true that every human heart is inclined toward sin (**Romans 3:23**), and that includes evil (**Genesis 8:21; James 1:4**). We all miss God' mark of moral perfection. However, most ordinary sinners do not happily indulge evil urges, nor do we feel good about having them. We feel ashamed and guilty, rightly so (**Romans 7:19-21**). These things are not true of the evil heart.

Vernick actually words these ideas more accurately than many, but do you see the imprecision and fogginess that leaves us wondering just exactly WHO we are in our very personhood in Christ?

- "It's true that every human heart is inclined towards sin." Then she applies Romans 3:23 to every human heart –

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, (Rom 3:21-24)

Does this passage teach that the Christian's heart is "inclined toward evil? No it does not. Paul is speaking about the unregenerate human heart, whether Jew or Gentile, which is in need of justification through the redemption in Christ Jesus.

Vernick underscores that she believes the Christian's heart is inclined toward evil by also quoting the following scripture -

And when the LORD smelled the pleasing aroma, the LORD said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. (Gen 8:21)

Is this verse teaching that the intention of the Christian's heart is evil from his youth? No. Clearly it is speaking of

man in general. Unregenerate man. Fallen man. The kind of humanity that the Lord had just wiped out in the Flood.

And so you see the problem. Jeremiah's statement, for example which we read earlier is taken by such teaching as being true of the Christian as well as the unregenerate –

"Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit."

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? "I the LORD search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds." (Jer 17:7-10)

Is this true? Is the regenerated heart of the Christian who is a new creation in Christ *deceitful above all things and desperately sick*? No. What the Lord is saying here through Jeremiah is His blessing upon the man who trusts in the Lord, and that even though the wicked man's heart is so deceitful that no human being can sort out its webs

of lies, *the Lord can and does!* And thus the righteous man can be encouraged because the Lord without error *gives to every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds.*

For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few. "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. (Mat 7:14-21)

We can indeed recognize the evil person. *There is a vast difference between the heart of the Christian and that of the unregenerate man.* And yes, we can even judge if a person is a Christian or not.

This is where the great error is among Christians and churches today. Over

and over again we hear it – that no one but the Lord can know the heart, no one but the Lord knows if a person is a Christian or not, *and therefore if a person claims to have faith in Christ we must take them at their word because after all, the inclination of even the Christian's heart is evil.*

Often at this point in this discussion the interpretation of Romans 7 arises:

Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?
(Rom 7:24)

But consider the context:

Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. (Rom 7:20-25)

WHO is the person of whom Paul speaks here? What is the nature of the

essence of his being? He is a person who:

- Does not want to sin but has sin dwelling in him, ultimately to be set free by Christ at the resurrection
- He is a person whose flesh (members) has a principle (law) of sin operative in it, warring against the true person he is in his inner being, that person “delighting in the law of God.”
- Evil then lies close at hand, but is not who he is in his very identity. It used to be. But now anymore.

See it? This is the whole thesis of the book we went through in the women’s study these past few months by David Needham, *Birthright: Christian, Do You Know Who You Are?*

Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin,

which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. (Rom 6:13-18)

For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. (Rom 8:3-9)

We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. (1Jn 3:14-15)

And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: (1Jn 2:3-5)

In a week or two we are going to publish a blog post that contains quite a number of responses that victims of evil have received from their pastors when they have asked for help. Notice the thread in these – *they assume that the wicked one is a Christian --*

Pastor #1 - *It is never right to give up on anyone. Jesus wants to save everyone and he can. It is wrong for us to put an abuser out of the church. He says he is a Christian and we must take him at his confession.*

Pastor #2 - *You are being disrespectful to your husband.*

The victim had told her pastor that she yells at her husband if he raises his hand to hit her. She yells: "You

BETTER not hit me!!!” It works. When she asked her pastor what she should do if her husband tries to hit her, his answer was, “*Well, the worst thing that can happen is that you would die. And then you would go to heaven.*” When she said, “Then he would go to hell,” the pastor replied, “*Not if he repents.*”

And then in conclusion, listen to these real, actual stories from victims who suffered at the hands of wicked, evil domestic abusers who paraded as Christians *and who were accepted by their churches as Christians!*

I have spent two decades doing exactly what she [a self-proclaimed “Christian” blogger who enables evil] says. Affair after affair and unkindness after unkindness and deceit after deceit and I would tell myself I was a sinner too and try to love him more, be thankful I had a husband, and forgive and forget. Of course he didn’t think I forgave enough because I just couldn’t forget (esp. not when he continued to repeat his evil). He has left me shipwrecked now, but with the help of a Christian therapist I am seeing him for what he is and seeing God for the Father and husband and giver of justice He says He is. Thank God I am free.

I've been in my abusive marriage for twenty-four years, but the divorce will be final soon. Both of my children suffer depression and anxiety, as well as a deep sense of rejection since one of my husband's favorite tactics toward his family is abuse-by-extreme-neglect. And, like you said, my younger child is rejecting the faith because of not only what her "Christian" father has done, but also the church that ex-communicated me. ...Frankly, I can't say I blame her. It has made a very deep impression on her about the way "Christians" treat others and she wants no part of it.

Goodness, but I wish there were fewer well-intentioned Christian advice websites out there and more genuine Christians interested discerning what real evil (which God tells us about over and over and over in His Word) is and how abusers masquerade as sheep in the church. These wolves are all the more aided and abetted by that website's counsel. [website referred to is a very bad one maintained by one Michelle Lindsey]

I was taught that marriage should be for life. But what I really had wasn't marriage, it was captivity, a partnership of predator and unwilling

prey. Captivity that was sanctioned and enforced by the evangelical church. I didn't choose to be married to an abuser, I was entrapped by a very slick liar who fooled me and just about everyone else.

What I write here is the tip of the iceberg. My story is too graphic, vulgar, and disgusting. It is only by God's grace, and my hard work in therapy, and my continuous attitude to persevere through it all for the price of freedom. God has proven himself a million times over to me: this broken in mind and spirit girl, youth, and woman. I am amazed. I wrote all of this to encourage women to continue moving forward. I should not be alive by any account. How I survived childhood, or adulthood is nothing short of a miracle.

I have painted a rosy picture but it was anything but. It was grueling terror surviving. Anyhow what I originally wanted to say to the owners of this site was WOW. Finally, a Biblical sense of JUSTICE.

Deep in my heart , I knew my mother was no Christian. To survive , I have always just told myself there is a God and He is JUST. And when she dies she will face any and all justice measured out to her. I had no idea

where to put the concept of grace....I just could not entertain that idea. I don't mean to be spiteful. (I walked away from my mother nearly three decades ago, and never looked back)

My mother sat and still sits in church somewhere, where grace abounds. My abusers at church still sit in a grace filled environment and it is nice to be able to read your blog....I was blown away. They are old people now. Some have passed away, and some are nearing that doorway in life.

I was in utter shock, and applause for this blog post.....it kind of makes my stomach hurt because these are things that I don't let my mind wander to. For all of my therapy, and years of healing, I have never ever faced the evil my mother did to me, and let others do to me. I fear that will send me straight away to the psychiatric ward, I avoid this like the plague. I dealt with other abuse and avoided mother abuse. I am mentally healthy at this point and don't want to stir the waters. But, I want you to know, that reading your blog in regards to sin, and abuse in the church, I will be grateful for these words and the work you do providing a platform for people to learn and heal. Reading and learning about the violence, abuse, in the church today under such rampant evil doctrine.....is grotesque. The attitude in church , towards abuse, in all forms does nothing but to

eliminate any sort of validation of the abuse, thus minimizing the victim's pain into nothing...I hate it.

And the Lord hates it as well. These are things that we cannot get wrong. We must reject any teaching that a person walking in habitual, unrepentant, ongoing sin is a Christian. That person is not to be allowed refuge in our churches. We must forcefully reject the notion that a Christian's heart is inclined toward evil and that because we are all sinners, we must not and cannot judge anyone.

Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us. But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge. I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth. Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also. Let what you heard from the beginning abide in

you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is the promise that he made to us—eternal life. I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you. But the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie—just as it has taught you, abide in him. And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming. If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him. (1Jn 2:18-29)