

I. Set Up

A. Intro / Guests / etc.

B. In his book, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, New York University social psychologist Jonathan Haidt tells about an insight that struck him while he was riding on the back of an elephant. What he realized was that even though he had the reins and was technically in charge. The elephant would only comply when it didn't have desires of its own. He says, "When the elephant really wants to do something, I'm no match for him."

C. Haidt goes on to claim that this is the way our mind and heart interact. We may have an intellectual commitment to do something. But if our heart (our desires) wants to go in a different direction, our mind is just along for the ride.

D. The Apostle Paul has some related insights about this in his letter to the Colossians. Mike's sermon – the first of two about pursuing God - is based on this passage. Let me read it for you. Col. 3:1-3:

1. Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³ For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

II. Intro

A. Have you ever noticed that where ever you go, you're there?

1. I always like to say something profound, so today I am going for it right out of the gate.

2. Have you ever noticed, that where ever you go, you are there? Which means, we never get a break from ourselves.

B. The reason I bring this up is because I do get tired of myself. Sometimes I'd like to go somewhere and not be there. Take a vacation from myself.

1. Some of you are thinking, you are only just now getting tired of yourself? We've been tired of you for fifteen years!"

C. Joking aside, I am making a significant point. It would be nice to be better company for ourselves. And that happens as we are conformed to be more like Christ.

D. And some people are nothing like Christ even though they say they are following him. Maybe you.

E. Let me tell you about Chuck – who does not attend this church. Chuck is a friend who placed his faith in Christ and talked the talk, and studied the Bible quite a bit, but whose life was pretty much a mess. And he couldn't get along with many people or hold a job. He knew a lot and I do think he wanted to be better, but he wasn't getting better.

F. Remember, spiritual growth is its own reward. If we do this right, yield more and more of our life to the Spirit of God and are shaped by him then that results in: joy, peace, love, self-control.

G. That's a win for everyone – including us. We spend a lot of time with ourselves. It would be nice if we were nicer.

H. And it would be nicer for lots of others as well. I'm tired of disappointing myself, but I am also tired of disappointing those I care the most about.

I. The goal is to be better. The question is, is better possible?

- J. Some say no. “People do not change.”
1. When I hear this it always feels like as big of an attack on Christ as those who try to deny that he rose from the dead.
 2. This was the claim made by Javert in *Les Mis*. He was the detective and he represented the Law – and Victor Hugo (the author) sets him up in contrast to the priest who extends grace to Valjean.
 - a) The opening scene has Valjean being extended grace by a priest who says, you have been bought by God and can change. Javert says, “once a thief always a thief.”
 - b) That is the big tension in the novel.
 - c) And at one point Javert falls into the hands of Valjean. Javert is trying to capture him and arrest him. Valjean rescues Javert. He extends grace to him. And Javert can’t handle that.
 - d) *Les Mis* is a big contrast between Law and Grace. The question is, who wins?
- K. The Bible says we can change. In fact, it not only expects it. It says we do change. For better or worse we are being converted to something.
- L. And in Christ, we can be changed for the better.
1. I have seen it. I have experienced it. (Not as much as I would like, but I have experienced it).
 2. And I would not, could not do what I do if I did not deeply believe that we can change. To be clearer – that God can change us. That we can increasingly be conformed and transformed by God to be a nicer, kinder, more loving, joy-filled people. In short, to become more like Christ, which is our ultimate destiny.
 - a) In Romans 8:29 we are told that this is God’s plan.
 - b) In Philippians 1 we are promised that He will not give up until it’s accomplished.
- M. So, all of this raises two questions.
1. First: in what direction are you changing? Are you becoming more like Christ? Are you committed to following him?
 2. And question two – which is the issue today: if we are a Christ-follower, what are we supposed to be doing in order to change. In order to get better.
- III. The question before us today – and next week as well – is: “How do I get better? How do I improve?”
- A. How can I become a better person – a better husband or wife or friend? How do I become a better father or mother? How can I be shaped in the ways that honor God and reflect his definition of good and holy?”
 - B. Not just for a few days, but permanently? How do I become more like Christ?
 - C. Some of you stepped over the line years ago but there has not been much change. That means something is not right.
 - D. We get some insights in Colossians 3, which I invite you to turn to right now. It is a call to pursue God that offers some specifics.
 - E. Colossians is one of the letters written by Paul – who is exhibit A for being changed.

1. We meet him for the first time in Acts 9, where he shows up as Javert. Before coming to faith and being the first missionary and premier church-planter and writing a good part of the New Testament, Paul was Mr. Law. Mr. Religious Law.
2. No one was more zealous for the idea that we change ourselves by earning and striving than Saul of Tarsus. He believed this and excelled in pursuing it.
3. In Philippians three we get his bio. He gives it to us himself. He says:
 - a) **If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh** (in their abilities and efforts to get better and please God), **I have more** – and then he lists all the ways he was a perfect Jew -- **circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.**
4. If you know the story, you know he changes from Mr. Law to Mr. Grace. And no one will work harder to make the Gospel clearer than Paul.
5. Over and over he will strive to communicate that we are reconciled to God through Christ. It's a gift. In fact, in many of his letter he is renouncing his previous efforts to earn God's favor. In Phil 3 he writes:

a) **But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.**

- F. Please note, the issue before us is our sanctification not our justification.
1. These are 25 cent theological terms, but you need to know them both.
 2. Justification is a legal term. It means to declare righteous.
 - a) It does not mean we become perfect, but that as we stand in Christ we are viewed in Christ.
 - b) When God the Father looks at me he sees me clothed in Christ's righteousness. The Gospel does not simply claim that when we come to faith in Christ we are forgiven, but that Christ's perfection is transferred to our account.
 - c) We are going to be treated as if we were perfect even though at this moment we are not.
 - d) To cite Luther's famous line: Simul justus et peccator.
 - e) We are simultaneously just and a sinner. Justification is the process of being declared righteous.

3. Sanctification is the process of getting better. It's what we are focused on today because, in Colossians, Paul is writing to Christ-followers – those who have already been justified. And he is offering advice on how to get better.

- a) Unlike our justification – which is something that happens to us in a moment. It's all done by Christ. Our sanctification is an ongoing process that does not end this side of the grave.
- b) When we die the sanctification process is instantly completed. We are glorified. It's an act of God.
- c) Our sanctification is something we are involved in. (Ultimately it is still a gracious act of God. But we are expected to work at getting better. It doesn't happen by accident).

IV. Sorry for the long on-ramp today, but as noted, this is a two-part sermon – the question is: how do I get better? How am I sanctified?

V. If we stop and think about it we know what doesn't work.

A. Knowledge is not enough.

1. Nothing wrong with knowledge. In fact, we need it. We need to know. But in spite of our Modern – Enlightenment – bias that transformation automatically follows knowledge. That says: If we just think true thoughts rather than false ones, then we will automatically live the right way rather than the wrong way. It doesn't work. Knowledge is not enough.

B. In fact, knowledge about the Bible is not enough

1. We need to know what is in the book. This is a key way God has revealed himself. He is who He is and not who we think he might be. So we need – to quote Paul again – to study to present ourselves as those approved to God.

2. But, Jesus consistently lines up against people who had memorized the Bible. They “knew” it.

3. And, as an aside, you'd think that if knowledge was enough, we'd be hitting it out of the park. After all, we have access to a lot of knowledge about God. We are the richest, most resourced Christians who have ever lived. We have more Christians books, radio stations, movies, colleges and universities, conferences, churches, blogs, Bibles, music albums, merchandise, and devotionals than we can possibly engage. With all of these resources comes a lot of information about God. Much of it is good and many of us have filled our minds with these valuable truths.

4. Filling our minds with the doctrines and truths of God is important and too often ignored, but we must not neglect the role of the heart in our life with God. To go back to the comments made at the beginning of the service, it is the elephant in the room

5. It is often the heart which drives our decisions.

- a) To that I could add a related illustration of a train.
- b) When I came to faith, I saw this picture.

c) I think this one is more accurate. Like a locomotive, and the mind with its faculties of reason and cognition gets pulled along like boxcars on a rail. We create rational arguments for our behaviors only after our heart has already decided our course. Therefore, we must be careful to guard our hearts before they lead us astray. And it is the heart, far deeper than mere reason, where we must learn to commune with God.

6.

C. Faith is not enough.

D. Will power is not enough.

VI. What is necessary? Well, for today I want to focus on Paul's focus on our heart.

VII. Turn to Colossians 3.

A. In Col. 2 the subject was the Gospel and the freeness of God's love. It was an indictment on religion. The belief that we earn God's favor. That was what the Pharisees were teaching.

B. Religion is

C. It turns out that Jesus and Paul have a few things in common with Bill Maher, Sam Harris, the late Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins and others – they all hate religion.

D. In chapter two of Colossians we get a celebration of the Gospel. And we find an argument against the idea that if God's love is free, then I will not change.

E. What is being set up is the idea that embracing the Gospel is the path for change.

VIII. I am reading now: Col. 3:1-3, 9-10

A. Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

B. Then dropping to verse 9: Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.

IX. Colossians 3 is loaded. For our purposes today I want to focus on verse one.

A. I jumped down to verses 9 and 10 because they talk about a new self. I want to note Paul's belief that we should change so much that we are a new person – that our beliefs and practices change so much that we change. We see that in verse 9 and 10.

B. With this in mind I want to double back to verse 1, which reads: **Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God**

C. What should we do in order to get better? How do we change? How do we grow? The first thing we are told is that we need to attend to our heart. **Set your heart on things above.**

X. What is our heart? What does Paul mean when he says this?

A. The Bible talks about our heart a lot. Almost 1,000 times.

1. In Deuteronomy we are told to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all our might

2. In Proverbs we are told to guard our heart, for everything we do flows from it.
 3. Jesus says when we do good it is because of our heart and when we do bad it is because of our heart.
 4. It is important. So, what is it?
- XI. Five Things You Need to Understand About your heart
- A. It's central command.
 1. In the Bible, the 'heart' is not a muscle that pumps blood or code for romance and love, it is the core of our being, the hub of our personality and the source of a lot of things we would otherwise ascribe to our mind.¹
 2. I have a handful of descriptions here from various scholars. The heart is:
 - a) an amalgamation of ideas, beliefs, values, feelings, and memories.
 - b) It is the interior motivational structure that produces behavior.
 - c) The heart is not just the seat of our emotions, it is also the place we do our thinking,² willing and decision making. It is the source of our fundamental commitments, hopes, and trust.
 3. One writer suggested, what the heart trusts, the mind justifies, the emotions desire, and the will carries out.
 4. This is what is behind Blaise Pascal - the 17th-century French philosopher's famous line: "We know the truth not only through reason but also through the heart... The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing."
 - B. It's the problem – or at least, one of our big problems:
 1. The prophet Jeremiah wrote that, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" In Matthew 15, Jesus told the disciples the same thing. The Pharisees had attacked Jesus for not undergoing the ritual cleansing they were so big on. All of these purification rites to not be defiled. And Jesus says, "spiritually speaking, the problem isn't germs." They had pages and pages of rules about how to wash your hands to be pure.
 - a) **Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart....** And it's out of the heart that we get evil thoughts—**murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them.**
 2. Those who think their problems come from outside influences (e.g., the culture, the world or the flesh) and those who think their problems come from a lack of understanding, are both wrong.
 3. This does not mean that challenges from the outside are not real. They are. Nor does it mean that we cannot get in trouble for lack of understanding. We can. But the Bible suggests the real problem is what lies within us.³ We often know the right thing to do but chose to do otherwise. Our problem is our heart.
 4. To double back to Haidt's elephant illustration, no matter how much good theology the rider may know, he's no match for an elephant pursuing the idols of power, fame, money, sex, or safety.

5. If we are to love God with our hearts and minds, we need to have both our thoughts and affections—our riders and our elephants—reoriented toward Christ.
- C. Point Three: Our Heart Deceives us.
1. This is a double whammy. It would be bad enough if we had a problem and knew it. What the Bible says is, our heart deceives us.
 2. I just mentioned Jeremiah's famous passage – the heart is deceitful above all things - but it's worth looking at it again because many misunderstand it. The point Jeremiah is making is not that sin is deceitful, but that your heart is deceiving you.
 3. David suggests that same thing when – in Psalm 51 - he asks God to search his heart and see if there is any wickedness in him. He realizes that he is often unable to see the sin in his own life.
 4. My experience as a pastor is that lots of people live in denial about the true state of their heart. And my experience as a person is that it takes a lot of work to pull the curtain back on my own life far enough for me to see myself.
 - a) On two occasions as an adult I have gone to see a therapist because of tension in our marriage that eventually
 - 5.
 - 6.
 7. Here's my point here: our ability to rationalize our own behavior is nearly limitless.
 - a) This is something recently substantiated in studies conducted at Duke. In his book, *The Honest Truth About Dishonesty: How We Lie to Everyone – Especially Ourselves*, professor Dan Ariely notes that people lie for two basic reasons: first, for selfish gain – i.e., we want something so much that we are willing to lie, cheat or deceive to get it; and second, to be able to look in the mirror and think well of ourselves.
 8. These two motivations are in obvious conflict. How can we enable selfish deceit on the one hand but at the same time view ourselves as honest and good people? Ariely writes that this is where our “amazing cognitive flexibility” comes into play.
 9. What Ariely calls our “amazing cognitive flexibility,” and what we more frequently refer to as rationalization, the Bible identifies as sin.
 - a) In Romans 1 we read about people who “suppress the truth.”⁴
 - b) In Jeremiah we are told that our heart is deceitful.
 10. The Duke study confirms what the Bible has said for 2,000 years: we are so broken that it takes a lot of honesty, effort and help to see how broken we are.
 11. And just to be clear – it takes a lot more honesty and effort than most people are willing to invest most of the time.
 12. What we need to understand about our heart is that we not only cannot change it without God's help. We often cannot even see it clearly.
 - 13.
 - 14.
- D. Our Heart Can Grow Hard:

1. I hate to pile on the bad news, but hearts – which can be trouble already – can grow worse: colder and harder and calloused.
2. This happens as a result of sin.
 - a) If we confess our sins we are forgiven. If we do not, they can have a cumulative and desensitizing effect on our conscience – making it harder to tell right from wrong. This is where we get the idea of a seared conscience.⁵
 - b) Pride undoes us as well, with Pharaoh being exhibit A here.⁶
 - c) Life can harden us if we are not careful. Set backs and disappointments that we do not process can make us hard and jaded.
3. I have always understood that when we harden our heart, it's pretty hard to get it soft again.
4. My sense is that if I do not obey the still small voice I hear, it will be harder to hear the next time.
5. I suspect there is some overlap in the images of a hard heart and hard ground.⁷
6. I went back and reread the parable of the sower with the four soils. It's interesting to note. :
 - a) The sower is constant and generous.
7. The more we sin the more we are inclined to sin. There is no “let me just get it out of my system.” Do it once and you do it twice.
8. You might wonder, is my heart hard:
 - a) Do I celebrate? Do I cry?
 - b) Do I care?
 - c) Do I believe the best about people?.

E. Heart Keeping is Key:

1. The Proverb I used to kick off today's reading is key. “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.” You would do well to memorize it, and also to realize, on this side of the grave, you will need to “guard your heart.” This gets easier, but it is never easy. I wish I could tell you that it's easy to “guard your heart.” What I can tell you is that JO p. 13-15
2. Only the Holy Spirit can change the heart, yet the Spirit chooses regularly to use the preaching of the Word to save and sanctify. The Word is water that cleanses, milk that nourishes, a sword that pieces, a lamp for guidance, fire that purifies, seed that grows and bears fruit, a mirror that shows us our true selves, and a hammer that breaks stone.⁸
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

XII. So what is the path forward? How do we avoid this, or how do we move back Two things. First, we Need to Let the Gospel re-shape our heart (4.2A and 4.3A) and second, we need to cultivate godly habits

- A. We are focusing today on the first.

B.

¹ The web site Got Questions, includes the following quote while explaining, What are the causes and solutions for a hardened heart: Scripture informs us that grief ([John 14:1](#)); desires ([Matthew 5:28](#)); joy ([Ephesians 5:19](#)); understanding ([Isaiah 6:10](#); [Matthew 13:15](#)); thoughts and reasoning ([Genesis 6:5](#); [Hebrews 4:12](#); [Mark 2:8](#)); and, most importantly, faith and belief ([Hebrews 3:12](#); [Romans 10:10](#); [Mark 11:23](#)) are all products of the heart. Also, Jesus tells us that the heart is a repository for good and evil and that what comes out of our mouth – good or bad – begins in the heart ([Luke 6:43-45](#)).

² Genesis 6:5; Prov. 23:7; Daniel 2:30

³ James 4:17

⁴ Cited in John Ortberg's *Soul Keeping: Caring for the Most Important Part of You*. Zondervan, 2014, p. 74.

⁵ Paul speaks of a seared conscience in I Tim. 4:12

⁶ Even in the face of great evidence, he would not change his heart. See also Obadiah 3.

⁷ Much here also taken from Ortberg, p. 54-61.

⁸ Jeffrey Arthurs, "The Worlds of the Listener" in *The Worlds of the Preacher: Navigating Biblical, Cultural, and Personal Contexts*, ed. Scott M. Gibson, (Baker Academic, 2018), pgs. 94-95.