



God's Tattoo on Your Heart

Psalm 51:10-17, Jeremiah 31:31-34

The Fifth Sunday of Lent
April 2, 2006

I was talking with a friend about deciding to follow Jesus. My friend's life had been a series of failures and reforms followed by more failures. More than once, when he seemed to be doing well, when he had everything going for him, he would find a way to make a mess of his life. At the point of our conversation, he had just gotten through another failure, and now seemed to be back on the right track, but for how long? I was worried about that, and so was he.

He was very up front about his fear: "What if I turn to God, and then mess up again? I'd feel worse than I ever had before!" What if I make this commitment to God, but cannot keep it? What if I start this and can't finish it? It was as if he had "loser" written on his heart with permanent ink. Jeremiah once described his own people the same way, saying that their sin was "written with an iron pen, with a diamond point it is engraved on the tablet of their hearts. (Jer. 17.1) That's just the way my friend felt about himself. If he did indeed join the church, then wouldn't that just end up being an outward show while inside him the indelible truth still lurked?

I had no quick answer for that. I just listened. In fact, what he said reminded me of my own mess-ups. What he said reminded me of the time Paul himself confessed his own mess-ups: "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ... Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:19, 24)

The 51st Psalm wrestles with the same problem. The first nine verses contain one of the most vivid confessions ever made:

Have mercy on me, O God
According to your steadfast love;
According to your abundant mercy
Blot out my transgressions. (51:1)

Hide your face from my sins,
And blot out my iniquities. (51:9)

But having experienced the forgiveness of God, this person is still worried. He is worried that after being forgiven, he would just go back to his old ways, so he asks for two things more. He asks for a new heart:

Create in me a clean heart, O God (51:10)

And he asks for God to stay with him:

Do not cast me away from your presence,
And do not take your holy spirit from me (51:11)

What he is saying is, “God, I’ve made a new start with you. But I know myself too well. There is no way I can keep to this on my own as I am. The only way I’ll be able to keep my promise to you is if you create in me a whole new heart. The only way I’ll be able to stay on your way is if you stay with me.”

It’s powerful language in more ways than one. “CREATE in me a clean heart.” It’s the same verb that was used when God created the heavens and the earth. “Sustain in me a willing SPIRIT.” That’s the same Spirit of God that hovered over the waters in Genesis and brought order to the chaos.

When my friend, or you, or I, try to turn back to God, we simply cannot do it on our own. We need nothing less than the heaven-and-earth creative power of God to remake us from the inside out. Otherwise all our outward religious actions are just going through the motions, while deep inside us we still have a heart defaced by our sin, and a will whose first inclination will still be to do the very thing we don’t want to do. It is as if our hearts were permanently tattooed over with the name of the Evil One, declaring that no matter what we do on the outside, inside we still belong to that dark Accuser.

So the psalmist cries out to God, and we with him, “Create in me a clean heart, O God...”

The prophet Jeremiah understood. His people were at their own crisis point. They had come through the consequences of their own failures. They had forgotten God, and as a result they had been invaded and defeated and exiled. Now they had an opportunity for a new start, a chance to know God’s forgiveness and to get back on the right track. But once life got better and they got back on the right track, how could they be sure that they would not just fall back to old patterns? What would break up the cycle?

Through Jeremiah, God promised to break the cycle. God would make a new covenant with them, not like the covenant God made with their ancestors out of Egypt in the wilderness, a covenant written on tablets which were broken. Now God’s covenant would be new and different:

I will put my law WITHIN them, and I will write in on their HEARTS; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

This is a covenant of a whole other order: a covenant that will not depend on frail human power to keep it, but a covenant that will be kept by the grace of God. This is a new relationship that will change us to our very core. God will reach in to our very own

hearts, our defaced and twisted hearts, and on our hearts, God will write God's teaching, right on our hearts. It will be as if God had put God's own tattoo on our hearts, and the tattoo will read, "You are mine. I am yours." And then, marked for life with God's indelible mark, we will know God's teachings *by heart*. In short, God will change us to our core so we can keep God's covenant. That, after all, is God's specialty: restoration, rehabilitation, re-creation!

Now, just when will that happen? Jeremiah says the days are surely coming, but when? We believe God started that new covenant in Christ. To see Jesus on the cross is a sight that cuts us to the heart. Seeing him on the cross, we feel God starting to do something with our hearts, starting to put God's own mark on our hearts, writing, "You are mine. I am yours."

Notice I said, STARTING to. In Christ the process has begun, but it is not yet complete. It is obviously not complete. It's not complete because you and I still haven't learned God's teaching completely. Jeremiah prophesied:

No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, ... (Jer. 31:34)

Well, that hasn't completely come true yet. We still have a lot to learn about God. We still need a lot of teaching. And all of us don't know the Lord yet. And we who do still haven't gotten to the point that we can do God's will without even having to think about it. We haven't arrived to that point of godliness yet.

So we're not yet where we ought to be in God's new covenant. But thank God we're not where we used to be, because the new covenant has broken into our time through Christ. It's not all here yet, but it is coming. We're not all holy yet, but God is working on us. And in the meantime, whenever we do fall short, and act from our lower nature, we have the assurance that that will not be the last word about us. Yes, we still do sin from time to time. But we are no longer given over to sin. By the grace of God, the last word about us will not be our mess-ups. The last word about us will be what God is even now tattooing upon our hearts: "You are mine. I am yours." I will be your God, and you shall be my people."

So to my friend who was afraid to turn to Christ and then mess up again, I can now say what I wish I'd said back then: "Sure, you will mess up again. And I will mess up again. But God is not going to let our mess-ups be the last word anymore. The last word will be words like these: "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ." "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away. Behold, the new has come."

(Philippians 1:6, 2 Corinthians 5:17)

-- Douglas E. Murray