

## 1 Sermon, August 14, 2011

Texts: Jeremiah 17:9, 1 Corinthians 3:18-23, Ephesians 2:1-10

Title: "The Deceitfulness of the Human Heart" (Sermon 123)

1. Like a country music song, "Your cheatin' heart" It has to be true.
2. Dirty rotten sinner (Wayne Hull) – yes, sin.
3. But add deceit to the sin – pretending to be sinful  
AA – confronting our own demons
4. If we focus only on our sin, we'll never be happy.
5. If we never focus on our sin, we'll never be healthy.
6. Wesley presents an either/or – but he would have admitted that change is possible
7. Unless you are born of God
8. All this seems very individualistic – but it's all about relationship

### 1. Like a country music song, "Your cheatin' heart" It has to be true.

Your cheatin' heart will make you weep  
You'll cry and cry and try to sleep  
But sleep won't come the whole night through  
Your cheatin' heart will tell on you  
When tears come down like falling rain  
You'll toss around and call my name  
You'll walk the floor the way I do  
your cheatin' heart will tell on you

That song was recorded by Hank Williams in 1952. But Hank Williams died before it was put on the radio. It tells the story of so many country songs, written out of the pain of love lost, covenants broken.

And it must be true. Our hearts must cheat and sin and lie, or songs like that would never be sung.

You can't hide your lying eyes.

### 2. Dirty rotten sinner (Wayne Hull) – yes, sin.

John Wesley quoted Jeremiah 17:9 - *"The heart of man is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: Who can know it?"*

Wayne Hull, former pastor at Fall River, puts it in simpler language. He says we're all "dirty, rotten sinners."

Let me say that this is not just name-calling. It is holding up a mirror – at least a partial mirror. Wesley talked about the deceitfulness of the human heart in order to urge repentance, not just labeling ourselves by a bad name. Wesley believed that people can change, and grow in grace and leave more and more of the sin behind.

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Now, If there was one thing that angered Wesley, it was people saying that they were not sinful. They didn't need this religion stuff. The First letter of John in the New Testament puts it this way:

"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us." 1 John 1:8-10, NRSV.

Wesley said:

It would be endless to enumerate all the species of wickedness, whether in thought, word, or action, that now overspread the earth... They all centre in this... either thinking of themselves more highly than they ought to think, or glorying in something which they have received, as though they had not received it... -  
- doing their *own* will, *not* the will of Him that made them.

### 3. But add deceit to the sin – pretending to be un sinful

But the problem is not just selfishness. It is not just ignoring God. It is lying to ourselves and others and pretending that we're more virtuous than we are.

Wesley said, the heart is not only "desperately wicked," but "deceitful above all things."

Wesley quotes a gentleman (meaning an upper-class man) who, being asked what he thought of the Bible answered, "I think it is the finest book I ever read in my life. Only that part of it which indicates the mediatorial scheme, I do not understand; for I do not conceive there is any need of a Mediator between God and man. If indeed," continued he, "I was a sinner, then I should need a Mediator; but I do not conceive I am. It is true, I often act wrong, for want of more understanding: And I frequently *feel* wrong tempers, particularly proneness to anger; but I cannot allow this to be a sin; for it depends on the motion of my blood and spirits, which I cannot help. Therefore it cannot be a sin; or, if it be, the blame must fall, not on *me*, but on him that made me."

To that, Wesley might quote one of today's scripture readings:

"Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.

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Wesley knew that we're all sinners, but so many of us try to deceive ourselves into thinking we're better than we are.

The attitude of the "gentleman" that Wesley quotes is a common one. It's an attitude of entitlement. I'm entitled to get angry, be rude, look down my nose at others. I'm not bound by somebody else's moral code. It's a free country. I can do what I want.

Yes, Wesley was right that we are sinners, and we do deceive ourselves.

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#### AA – confronting our own demons

Deceit, or the lack of it, is what separates recovering alcoholics from non-recovering alcoholics.

Recovering alcoholics are the sober ones for whom every sober day is a gift of God. They have admitted their craving for alcohol, and their former ways of denying they had a problem.

One of the greatest things about AA is the accountability within the AA group. Each person around the room remembers what it is like to lie to themselves and others about their problem. They *remember* sneaking alcohol when no one was looking, they *remember* intentionally miscounting the number of drinks they'd had, putting on a good face. They remember the feeling of helplessness, of not knowing where to turn.

So they are quick to pick up on it when another person in the group is lying to themselves. They confront each other about the tendency to lie to oneself.

One alcoholic online said:

Despite my deep desire to get straight, I find that I cannot. I know for a fact that I cannot have even one drink, because to drink one leads me to more drinking or using drugs! I know this with out a doubt in my mind, but yet when that craving hits, i am so good at lying to myself that I believe it when i tell myself that this time i will just have one.

#### 4. If we focus only on our sin, we'll never be happy.

We are sinners. And we deceive ourselves.

It may be as small a thing as saying, "I meant to call you..." when we really had no such intention. Or our sin and deceit can be much more.

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BUT – HOWEVER –

If we focus only on our sin, we'll never be happy.

If we are continually grinding ourselves down because of our mistakes, we won't be able to be as kind as we'd like, as authentic as we'd like, as capable as we'd like.

Yes, we are sinners, but:

The grace of God is always greater than our sin.

You know people who are always belittling themselves, and you wish they'd just "stop it." Enough with the humility already! You want them to claim the grace in their lives. You want them to see the possibilities.

So there's a balance here:

If we focus *only* on our sin, we'll never be happy.

If we *never* focus on our sin, we'll never be healthy.

#### 5. If we never focus on our sin, we'll never be healthy.

John Wesley wanted us to focus on sin because a big step for him was the step of repentance. You had to admit your own sinfulness in order to receive the goodness of God. Repentance is like changing directions. Instead of going North east, you turn and go South. Seeing your sin is like looking at your feet and discovering that you've entered a marsh with not-so-secure footing. So you repent, and turn around, and find a way to higher ground.

John Wesley always wanted to emphasize the higher ground, which was and is obedience to God, trying to serve God's kingdom, living your faith.

#### 6. Wesley presents an either/or – but ...

In John Wesley's sermon on the deceitfulness of the human heart, it seems rather black and white. Either you're hopelessly lost, or you're born of God. Wesley did that in order to convince people passionately and logically that they ought to change direction, and pay more attention to the things of God.

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### 7. Unless you are born of God

Wesley said,

But is there no exception as to the wickedness of man's heart? Yes, in those that are born of God. "He that is born of God . . . has "purified his heart by faith," so that his wickedness is departed from him. "Old things are passed away, and all things" in him "are become new." So that his heart is no longer desperately wicked, but "renewed in righteousness and true holiness." Only let it be remembered, that the heart, even of a believer, is not wholly purified when he is justified. Sin is then overcome, but it is not rooted out; it is conquered, but not destroyed. Experience shows him, First, that the roots of sin, self-will, pride, and idolatry, remain still in his heart. But as long as he continues to watch and pray, none of them can prevail against him.

### 8. All this seems very individualistic – but it's all about relationship

This is Wesley's theology. We are sinners, who need to repent, and once repented, God can bring us closer and closer.

It sounds very individualistic, like this is just about me.

But it's not individualistic – it's about relationships.

First, I have to accept myself enough to admit my sin. That means that I need to be honest in my relationship with myself.

Then it's about God, we confess to God our sin, because it is only the grace of God that can transform us into something better. So it's about relationship to God.

Lastly, it's about relationship to other people and the whole creation. Because once I am aware of my sin, I can start to work on it, and that improves my relationship with other people. It affects how we treat dogs and cats, and it affects the respect I have for the land I live on.

Thanks be to God, who doesn't leave us stuck in sin, but offers us a relationship that encourages, transforms and ultimately saves us.

Amen.

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"Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness," and again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile." So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God." 1 Corinthians 3:18-23, NRSV.

"You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." Ephesians 2:1-10, NRSV.