

Midweek 4

Psalm 51:6

Remembering God's Perfect Demands

- I. God demands that our hearts be holy (v. 6a).
- II. God teaches us where to look for that holiness (v. 6b).

A friend of mine told me about the cardiologist he saw after having a heart attack. His doctor was the picture of health. He had very little body fat. He ran and worked out every day. I think he even competed in triathlons. He never smoked. He rarely drank. And one day while out for a jog, he suffered a massive heart attack and was dead before he hit the ground. This heart doctor, who did all the right things to take care of his heart, died of a heart attack.

The truth is that even if you do everything the way you're supposed to, you may just have a bad heart, and there's not much you can do about it. We can apply that truth to our spiritual lives as well. This Lenten season, we've been looking at sin from different angles as we study King David's treatise on sin and repentance in Psalm 51. In doing this, we hope to grow in God's grace as we remember why we need Jesus so badly and as we appreciate the sweet message of forgiveness through faith in him. Last week, we looked at original or inherited sin: how we are by very nature sinful and deserve only God's wrath and punishment. Today in verse 6 we're going to remember that because we are born sinful, we are spiritually like the cardiologist my friend told me about. Even if we know all the right things to do and carry out those things well throughout life, we still have sinful hearts by nature. While we can't live sinlessly in this world, we need to **remember God's perfect demands** of us. God demands that our hearts be holy, and in his mercy, he teaches us where to look for that holiness.

I. God demands that our hearts be holy.

Last week, we reviewed Adam and Eve's fall into sin in the Garden of Eden. God created man and woman in his holy image. They were perfect, without sin, eager and able to do what God desired. Sadly, Adam and Eve lost that image when they fell into sin. No longer was the crown of God's creation perfect and holy. Now, and ever since, those born of sinful fathers and mothers are also sinful and corrupt. While inherited sin changed human beings' ability to do what God commands, it didn't change God. God still demands perfect obedience from all people. Jesus himself tells us, "*Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*" (Matthew 5:48). St. Peter wrote to the early Christians, "*It is written, 'Be holy, as I am holy'*" (1 Peter 1:16). God tells us that the punishment for sin is death, both temporal and eternal.

Though we deserve God's wrath for sin, he promised us a Savior from sin. However, that promise of the Savior who would take away the sin of the world did not change God's

demand for perfect obedience. God's will that we be holy never changed—neither after the fall into sin nor after the promise of a Savior. What changed with the fall into sin is that humankind became incapable of living up to that demand. Humankind became entirely dependent on the promised Savior.

Fallen human reason considers this patently unfair. If we can no longer be perfect, if it truly is impossible, then God needs to lower his expectations. It's what we do when we can't attain something—we adjust the goal. As we make plans for our lives, we set attainable goals based on what we realistically can achieve given our abilities. If a goal is unattainable or too lofty, we lower our expectations because disappointment hurts productivity in whatever we're striving to accomplish. Because that's the way we operate, it seems reasonable to project that same approach onto God.

Think of the different forms this line of thought takes in the way we view our sins and God's expectations of us. Haven't you ever thought about heaven and said, "I think I'll get there. I've been pretty good"? As if because we can't be perfect and because God loves us, he is obligated to accept pretty good as good enough. Another example of this flawed, sinful thinking is when we put our own standards of what is reasonable on God and try to balance out the sins we commit with the good things we do: "If God is reasonable, he'll recognize that I do enough good to cancel out my sins." While that may seem reasonable to us, it's a trap of the devil. It leads us to rely at least in part on ourselves for salvation. And when we rely on ourselves for salvation, the understanding of forgiveness of sins through Jesus gets pushed to the side.

"Since you desire truth on the inside," King David writes of the Lord. The truth we know from Scripture is that the Lord God Almighty still demands that we obey all of his law perfectly. The truth we know by God's revelation is that sin separates us from God, that *"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"* (Romans 3:23). The truth is that this sin was there from birth, as Jesus said, *"Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh"* (John 3:6). The truth is that our sin means that we deserve punishment in hell, that *"just as sin entered the world through one man and death through sin, so also death spread to all people because all sinned"* (Romans 5:12). The truth about our insides is that spiritually by nature we have bad hearts. As a result, we cannot deliver the perfect obedience God demands.

Though we may be skilled in rationalizing sin and projecting our lowered expectations onto God, nothing changes the almighty God's demand of perfect obedience. We have sinful hearts. If we are going to avoid the wrath and punishment we deserve, we need a changed heart. In this verse, King David, who had come to grips with the facts we've just stated and knew that he could not change his own nature, pleads with the Lord to change him. In mercy, our heavenly Father teaches us where to look for the holiness we need.

II. God teaches us where to look for that holiness.

"In my hidden heart you teach me wisdom." The Lord taught David the truth about himself: that he was sinful by his very nature and that this sinfulness put him at odds with the Almighty. By so doing, the Lord taught David the wisdom of repentance. David learned what wisdom is in God's terms: *"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom"* (Psalm 111:10). We often think of this fear as mere respect because we're uncomfortable with being afraid of our merciful God. But perhaps we should look at what God says and take him at his word. This wisdom is much deeper than respect. It's fear.

Wisdom understands the complete difference between our sinfulness and God's perfection. Wisdom knows the totality of the wrath of God that we deserve. Wisdom comes before the Lord in fear of that wrath and in helplessness regarding our own strength and pleads for mercy in repentance.

The wisdom of repentance for the forgiveness of sins is contrary to worldly wisdom. Godly wisdom is found in Christ, where we who understand our sinfulness find forgiveness. We find wisdom in Jesus who died in our place as the innocent, perfect, and holy sacrifice. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, *"The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God"* (1 Corinthians 1:18). Paul says Christ is *"the power of God and the wisdom of God"* (1 Corinthians 1:24).

Worldly wisdom scoffs at Christ like the people who ridiculed, mocked, and spit on him in his passion. Those who care only for the wisdom of the world think we're foolish for worshiping a man who died on a cross, who was weak and defeated in earthly terms. The worldly wise see Jesus as nothing more than a moral compass, a man who taught some nice things but got himself killed because he angered some powerful people.

Godly wisdom, however, centers on Christ. Jesus reveals the mercy of God by giving us his perfection, fulfilling God's demand of us. He did this to set us free from the guilt and punishment of sin. He completed his work of redemption with his innocent death on the cross in our place. By rising from the dead, he demonstrated powerfully that he had satisfied his Father's justice. In Jesus, where the world sees weakness, we see the power of God. In Jesus, where the world sees foolishness, we see the wisdom of God. In Jesus, we see the holiness we need. Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Jesus isn't merely a moral compass. He's our Savior. Because God has credited Jesus' holiness to us, we need no longer fear punishment for our sin. Instead, we heed God's call to repentance continually as we live our lives of faith. We respond to what Jesus has done for us by striving to serve the Lord and others in love. We give Jesus all glory as we come to him to seek the forgiveness he freely gives and to praise him for what he's done for us.

Like my friend's cardiologist who had a bad heart in spite of his best efforts to be healthy, we're born with bad hearts spiritually. There's nothing we can do to make ourselves

spiritually healthy. There's nothing we can do to lower God's expectation that we obey him perfectly. But by his grace, Jesus has made us perfect in God's sight. Jesus has given us healthy, perfect hearts of faith. With healthy hearts of faith, we worship him. Though we will never live sinless lives this side of eternity, we rejoice in God's declaration that through faith in Jesus we are righteous before God. Because the Lord has given us the holiness he demands, we heed his call to live in repentance and worship him for all eternity. Amen.