

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

On July 8, 1741 at a church in Connecticut, Jonathon Edwards preached a sermon with the title, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” As you might imagine, based upon the title alone, the entire thrust of the sermon was the condemning Law and not the good news of Jesus Christ. At one place in his sermon, Edwards actually pictures God holding us over the fires of hell in the same way that we would hold an insect in our fingers over a blazing fire. Even though there are a few shreds of Gospel toward the very end of the sermon, what the hearers certainly took home with them from church that day was the overwhelming thought that God’s heart is full of anger...anger towards sinners...anger towards me.

In reaction to this type of preaching, there are those today who preach no Law whatsoever, or Law which has bark, but no bite because all of its teeth have been pulled. Neither type of preaching is what our Lord commands. In Luke 24 He says to “preach repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” The Law must be preached sternly, but not as the main thrust of the sermon, for the Law does not give life and salvation. It must give way to the main focus of the Gospel—the good news that in Jesus Christ we have a merciful God. And that is our focus here at Christ Lutheran Church in Augusta, Missouri.

We begin with the Law because Jesus does. In our text He says: “Nothing outside a man can make him unclean by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him unclean...For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man unclean.” (Mark 7:14-15, 21-23)

I imagine that the past few days all of us have avoided eating fresh spinach from the store. It is true that bacteria like E-coli can infect us from the foods that we eat, but they cannot make us unclean sinners in the eyes of God—because our hearts are already evil. The food that we eat passes through, but the sin which we inherited from our parents does not leave. It sits within our hearts and rots away at our body and soul.

You and I have become quite good at comparing ourselves to others. We take note of murderers, terrorists, rapists, thieves...and even as we condemn their deeds, we are secure in the fact that we do not take part in such wickedness. But while our hands may be different from the hands of the very wicked, our hearts are one and the same. We may not commit the same wicked deeds as others do, but our hearts are just as evil as theirs.

You are a thief, not necessarily because you steal with your hands, but because theft and greed lies within your heart. We are murderers even if our hands have never taken a life, because within our hearts there is murder. You and I are adulterers because even if we have kept our bodies pure, adultery and sexual immorality live within our hearts. We should never be shocked at all the evil we see around us, for that very same evil is within us—within our hearts.

And we are condemned for it. Even a child within the womb who has never slandered his neighbor, never spoken a lie or committed sexual sin, even that unborn child is a condemned sinner because all of this wickedness lives within his heart, and he is guilty before God. Thank God, therefore, for the gift of Baptism in which we bring our babies to Jesus and He forgives their sinful hearts.

The cure for a sinful heart is not to be found within us, but in Jesus Christ. If you had heart disease; if your heart was about to suffer a massive attack, you would need help. That help must come from outside of you. We are unable to put the scalpel to our own heart—we must ask the surgeon for help. The tragedy of sermons like the one Edwards preached, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” is that the hearers would be afraid to approach God for help. If God is full of anger against me because I am a sinner, how can I ask Him to help me? And poor sinners are directed not to the mercy of God in Jesus Christ, but to their own efforts. “I must first begin to live right before God will love me.” “I must change my heart so that God will help me.”

But friend, we cannot change who we are. Rather, God comes to your aid even while you are His enemy. God doesn't help those who help themselves—He helps those who are unable to help themselves. The heart surgeon does not demand that you assist him with your surgery—he puts you to sleep and does everything for you.

And this is what God does for you. He changes who you are by bringing you to Jesus Christ. Your heart is healed in Him. In Christ your heart is cleansed of all sin because His heart was pierced on a cross for you. You are not “sinners in the hands of an angry God,” because Jesus became “the Sinner” in your place. God poured out His anger at His Son on the cross—not part of His anger—all of it. God does not, therefore, threaten you with the fires of hell because, by His sufferings and death, Jesus closed the jaws of hell for you. Hell's mouth is not waiting to devour you because Jesus was devoured by hell in your place. He already suffered your punishment, and He rose victorious for you. And therefore, the waters of your Baptism into Christ have doused hell's fires for you. With those fires put out, you can live without fear. Jesus has saved you.

It is certainly true, as our text declares, that out of our hearts come every kind of evil and wickedness. But take comfort, for out of the heart of God comes mercy for you. Our hearts are full of sin, but God's heart, for Jesus' sake, declares your sins forgiven. And God's heart is greater than your heart. If your heart condemns you, run to the cross and see there the heart of God. In mercy He gave His Son to die for your sinful heart. If your heart makes you afraid, run to your Baptism and see that your heart is completely cleansed. You are forgiven for all of your wickedness.

You, friends, are not “sinners in the hands of an angry God.” You are sinners, yes, as am I, but you are sinners in the hands of a merciful God. Edwards had it wrong. God does not hold you over the fires of hell. Rather, in Baptism He holds you over the cleansing waters, and He places the cross of His Son upon you, and He washes you, and He pardons you and gives you life in Jesus Christ. And that is good news for your troubled heart, my friend. And that is what you can take home with you today. Not terror of God, but peace, and comfort, and joy, for in Jesus Christ, God is merciful to you. Amen.