

Just as I Am?

A Lenten sermon about purity, based on Psalm 51:10: “Create in me a pure heart, O God”

Our theme this Lent is “Holy Passion: Mine and Thine.” We’ve looked at some of our passions, our feelings, through God’s Law and seen how much we sinners need the holy passion of Jesus, the Gospel. **When you stop and reflect on your emotions, you learn a lot about your relationship with God and your need for a Savior.** You learn how important is this age-old prayer, “Create in me a pure heart, O God.”

Because I often visit Washington, D.C., I sometimes take clothes to the laundry there. One day after picking up some clothes at the laundry, I slung them over my back and stepped onto the sidewalk of Pennsylvania Avenue. I admit I was paying absolutely no attention to what I was doing and stepped right in front of a man. The man came alongside and politely asked if I always walked that way. I apologized immediately. I did the right thing. The man said, “Don’t worry about it” and went on. It was a very polite exchange, the way little things like this should be handled. But... As I walked the next block or two I was mad as mad can be at that man. Here’s the point, and it’s not about anger. I talked about that last week. The point is this: **Although I did the right thing by apologizing, my heart wasn’t right.**

That’s an important distinction. Have you ever had a spat with someone in your family, made peace by saying, “Aw, let it go,” but it kept festering in your heart? Have you ever engaged in pleasantries with a co-worker, but walked away from the conversation thinking, “That so-and-so?” Have you ever come to church only because you felt you should, ever put an offering in the plate only because you should, ever nodded at the sermon or bowed your head in prayer because that’s what you should do, but the truth is your heart wasn’t in it? Know what I’m talking about? In his famous devotional classic *My Utmost for His Highest* Oswald Chambers wrote this: *The characteristic of a disciple is not that he does good things, but that he is good in motive because he has been made good by the supernatural grace of God. **The only thing that exceeds right-doing is right-being.*** “The only thing that exceeds right-doing is right being.”

Thank God for our emotions! When we look into our emotions, when we reflect upon our feelings, we realize that we often do the right thing as far as other people can see, but our heart, our being, isn’t pure as God wants it to be pure. “Be holy,” God says, “because I am holy” (1 Peter 1:16). **When you recognize that difference between right-doing and right-being, you’re demonstrating spiritual maturity.** Many of us have had this experience in marriage. A couple has their disagreements and sooner or later the husband realizes, or the wife realizes the problem isn’t just what I’m doing; the problem is me. That really is a great step forward in maturity, in marriage and in our spiritual life with God.

Yes, you're the problem; I'm the problem. So we pray, "Create in me a pure heart, O God." But **how can our being be changed?** The obvious answer is be done with yourself. Stop clinging to any notion of your own self. Put that sick dog to sleep. Drown the rat. "Baptism signifies that the old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil lusts." That's the way Martin Luther put it in his Small Catechism. But he added something more. "And a new man daily come forth and arise who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever." When you were baptized God put to death your old being and mine. Out of the water came a new being, someone whose being has been made holy. When you were baptized, God created in you a new and pure heart.

He gave you the heart of Christ. "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). If our emotions reveal that we're not pure within, the passion of Jesus Christ creates a pure heart within us. **It's called a holy passion.** It's holy not only because it is unique, the Son of God enduring the anger of the Father against our sins. That in itself is unique, holy. But the passion of Jesus Christ that we remember this Lent is also holy because it makes you and me holy. **It's a "holy-ing" passion, making you holy.** Too much popular religion in America swims around the surface. A little right-doing here and a little-right doing there and people think they're right with God. Nonsense. Ultimately the problem isn't what you do but who you are. "Every good tree bears good fruit" (Matthew 7:17). Your fruit may look good to others but when God tastes it, the tree is revealed as bad. Through Baptism God killed our old being and made us holy by making us part of His Son.

There's a great passage in the book of **Zechariah**. *Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord... (Joshua represents all God's people) ...and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him. On Judgment Day can Satan accuse you? Of course he can. Your being hasn't always been right. But listen: The Lord said to Satan, "The Lord rebuke you, Satan! The Lord, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?" Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. The angel said to those who were standing before him, "Take off his filthy clothes." Then he said to Joshua, "See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you."* (Zechariah 3:1-4).

Lent is not so much about giving up something here or there. Lent is not so much about resolutions about right-doing, though we should always be doing that. Lent is most about putting our being to death through repentance so that the pure heart created within us can flourish. **We love to sing, "Just as I am, without one plea," but don't take that hymn too far.** Yes, it's certainly true that we come to God asking His forgiveness for the sake of Jesus. "No merit of my own I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling." "Just as I am without one plea but that Thy blood was shed for me." God forgives you just as you are. But Lent is

our reminder that **God loves us too much to leave us just as we are.** His Spirit keeps reaching down into the depth of our being to conform us more and more to the image of His Son Jesus Christ. The only thing that exceeds right-doing is right-being. God loves you so much that He's not going to leave you just as you are. **He's going to keep purifying you, holy-ing you. He's going to keep answering your prayer, "Create in me a pure heart, O God."** Lent reminds you to keep praying it. Amen.