

The Heart's Self-Absorption

Jeremiah 17:9; II Timothy 3:1-5

John W. Ritenbaugh

Given 15-Apr-06; Tape #769

We are going to begin this sermon in Jeremiah 17: 9.

Jeremiah 17:9 The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?

This verse is among the best-known of all verses in the Bible by us. Though we surely know the words is it possible we do not grasp some of the depth of the practical everyday application of what Jeremiah is trying to convey here?

The Hebrew word translated "deceitful" is # 6121 in Strong's Concordance, and interestingly comes from exactly the same root as the name "Jacob," which gives a bit of insight into the mind-set and character of that same Bible character in his pre-conversion days, because God has a habit of naming things what they are.

The word is used only three times in all of the Old Testament, and it indicates a swelling, a humping up, and thus a knoll or a small hill. But when it is used in relation to human traits, a personality, it falls into the area of prideful vanity—something distasteful, useless, corrupting, and intensely self-serving. It is something that puffs a person up.

Again, according to Strong's, it indicates something fraudulent—an intentional perversion of truth intended to induce another to surrender, to give up something of value. If you can just think what Jacob did to Esau twice, you can get a pretty good idea of its practical meaning.

Today we might say that our heart is attempting to *con* us into something that is not, by any stretch of the imagination, good for us. Its inducements may indeed appear on the surface to be attractive, but further examination would reveal that its appeals to us are fraudulent. They are lies. In fact, its appeals are not only downright dangerous, it is incurably set in its ways.

The Hebrew word in Jeremiah 17:9 is translated "deceitful." The other two times that it appears in the Old Testament it is translated "corrupted" and "polluted." It is a word that should give us a clear indication what God thinks of our heart. It is something foul in every sense and should be considered as something belonging in the sewer or the septic tank.

You can probably recall the place in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus, in speaking to the people there who were ordinary people, said to them that they were evil. He hardly knew a single one of them, except some who might have already been His disciples, and He flat-out called them evil. He then went on to admit, "Yes, you can do good things, but that does not change My original evaluation."

The *King James* translators choose to use the word "deceitful" in the English translation, and just about every modern translation has followed its lead, and it is a good synonym. Now

"deceit" is a cognate; that is, it is related to "deceive," and "deceive" means to mislead, to cheat, to give a false appearance or impression, to lead astray, to impose a false idea, and finally, to obscure the truth. Thus "deceitful" indicates the heart to be full to the very brim of these horrible descriptors. This is a far cry from what we like to think of ourselves, but what we think of ourselves is a product of our heart which has deceived us into thinking we are an awful lot better than we actually are.

To finish off the descriptors in this verse is the term "desperately," which is # 605 in Strong's, and it indicates something so weak, feeble and frail, that it is at the point of death. Thus most modern translations, including the margin in my *King James Version*, have opted for the word "incurable." In another place God calls it "a heart of stone." Do you know what that indicates? It indicates something that truth has a very difficult time penetrating. It is an interesting illustration that He uses, because it is as though rigamortis has already set in even while it is still alive. In other words, nothing can be done about it. God has to give us a new one. It is set in a pattern of influence that cannot be changed for the better, and so this is why God promises that those He calls will be given a new heart which He describes interestingly as "a heart of flesh"—one that will yield to His way of life.

We can understand all of these descriptors. It is good knowledge to have, but they can only give us what amounts to book-learning on this very important topic. It is what its problems are in practical situations in everyday life that makes God so dead-set against it that He declares that it is incurable. It cannot be fixed. I will illustrate that this way:

What are the two great commandments of the law? First, we are to love God with all of our heart, our soul, and our mind. In other words, we are to love Him above all other things. We are to respond to God's wonderful generous love toward us with a love employing all of our faculties in order to attempt to match His love toward us. Jesus further stated the following in Luke 14: 26.

Luke 14:26 If any man come to me and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.

Do you understand the practical application of *it*? It means that we are to make whatever sacrifices are required of us, even to the giving of our life, in order to submit in obedience to any—even the least—of God's commands. That is one tall order for our deceitful heart, and if at any time we even put ourselves on equal footing with Him, we have actually put ourselves over Him, and committed idolatry.

The second of the two great commandments is that we are to love others as ourselves. This one is not quite as stringent as the first, but it is still a very high standard. Jesus said that on these two commandments everything else hangs. That is, that love and law are inextricably bound together and cannot be separated in our relationship with God, but right here lies the problem.

Keeping them is impossible for man, as he is now encumbered with this deceitful heart. Our heart will not permit us to do this because the heart is so self-centered and absolutely cannot

consistently obey *either* of these commandments; thus no character of any value to God's kingdom can be created in one with a deceitful heart. The heart is incurably self-centered, self-absorbed, and narcissistic in its concerns of the activities of life.

I am going to give a number of scriptures as to why this needs to be of special concern to us at this time in the current life of the church.

II Timothy 3:13 But evil men and seducers shall wax [or grow] worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived.

I want you to understand that human nature itself is not going to get any worse than it already is or already was in Paul's day as we approach Christ's return, but rather the expression of its evils will intensify and grow in numbers as we close in on Christ's return.

As the heart's evil acts increase, it provides more and greater inducements and opportunities for everybody to be involved in its sinful ways. Remember that Jesus said in Matthew 24, that just before He returns, it will become as in the days of Noah, and you know how bad it was then, where it says "every thought of man was evil continually." We are approaching that. So the combination of many factors in the times that we are living in will create the environment for the heart's evil propensities to intensify. In other words, as the numbers of sin increase, the moral quality of the culture begins to come down, and the inducement of everything that is evil that is going on tends to pull people to believe it is all right to do that. "Everybody is doing it!" It is the mob mentality that begins to draw others into it like a magnet. That is why Paul said it will "grow worse and worse." Again, please understand and do not forget that the heart was just as evil and deceitful in Paul's day as it is today, but the culture is somewhat different, and the number of sins is increasing. That is what he was really driving at.

Let us go back to verse one of this same chapter. This appears just before what Paul said there in verse 13.

II Timothy 3:1-5 This know also that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, high-minded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away.

The word "perilous" indicates something difficult, threatening, dangerous, and ominous. There are a number of things to consider so that these verses are best understood. The term "last days" does not specifically mean the times that we are living in at this moment, because Paul clearly felt *he* was living in the last days. He expected Christ's return was imminent while he was alive. Many verses prove that point. I Thessalonians 4 and II Thessalonians 2 were written before these books we are reading right now. He meant his instruction to Timothy to apply *immediately*. Just as soon as Timothy received them, they were already going on.

Now if he did not feel that way why would He tell Timothy, in verse 5, to withdraw from such people as he just described? If Paul did not intend for that to apply right at the moment, was Timothy going to live all the way to Christ's return? Not in the least. Paul meant it right then. You look at the list that is given there, and you see that Paul was talking about circumstances *in his day*. They already existed. They still exist right to this time, because every one of these nineteen qualities are expressions of our deceitful heart.

The Greek gives the sense of conditions or expressions of human nature that come and go, like waves of increasing expressions of these characteristics' resistance rather than something that is constantly occurring. You know the way it is. Those of you who are older know that when we were living in the late 40s and through the 50s that the culture in the United States was a great deal different. People were generally much more law-abiding, respectful of government, respectful of law, and concerned about things many would consider today to be really odd or weird. But once we passed through the 50s and began to get into the mid 60s, and the Hippie Movement was taking place, and the Baby Boomers were coming along and developing their own culture, things went down hill and into the sewer quite quickly.

What I am getting at here is that cultures come and cultures go. Any of you who have read the book *The Fourth Turning* know this is true. These men show that there are four general cycles history, in Britain and in the United States especially, goes through repeatedly. They come and go. That is exactly the sense of what Paul has written in II Timothy 3, and so we see then why Paul would write something like he did in verse 13. They are going to intensify, and then they will ebb. And then they will increase, and then they will ebb, and so forth, but they are always there regardless of when Christians live.

Let us connect this though with what Jesus said, because in Matthew 24 He said that when we are approaching His return things will become similar to, parallel to, the days of Noah so that we know. We are warned in our time that these things are going to hit their peak in terms of being prevalent all over the place. It is as though the moral standards and spiritual standards of a whole culture are sinking all at once.

Paul did not intend to say that everybody would express all of these characteristics all the time either; rather that all of these elements would be in each person, because he is describing the elements of *everybody's* deceitful heart, but the intensity of their expression would vary from person to person. Not everybody has exactly the same problems is what he is saying. Some people have problems with stealing. Other people have no problem with stealing, but fornication and adultery is their problem. Do you get the point? Everybody is not going to express all of these, but yet all of them are part of the deceitful heart, and they could be expressed by anybody.

As we come to understand this context, the threatening and danger implied to church members is not their bodily injury and death, but the danger of their becoming drawn into what everybody else is doing. It begins to become popular and easier to give in to human nature when everybody around you is doing it. As the standards sink, what used to be horrible becomes normal and acceptable even though, in God's eyes, it is all sin, and all earns death.

Now here comes a shocker. This provides fuel for us to understand that these characteristics are

right in the church; therefore, this begins to really become pertinent to you and me. It is not like we are standing up here looking at all these people on the outside. Brethren, where did we come from? We came from the same world, the same mess of stew out there as everybody else. This then gives us the opportunity to see that we are capable of expressing these. Again, we will not be expressing all of them, but the possibility is there for us to express some of them.

What we are going to do now is look at each of these defective qualities, at least in an overview, so that we can understand them a little bit better, and then maybe use them for continued self-examination as we go through the Days of Unleavened Bread and beyond. Nineteen characteristics are given in II Timothy 3: 1-4. The very first defective characteristic or quality mentioned for the perilous last days is that men shall be "lovers of their own selves." This is the heart's primary characteristic.

LOVERS OF THEIR OWN SELVES:

One of the problems with "being lovers of their own selves" is that the perception of the self-absorbed is narrow and limiting. Making judgments of those people tends to be harsh. Included within this is narcissism. Narcissism is an over-riding preoccupation with the self that warps one's sense of value so that everything in life is judged according to feelings. One of the outstanding bad characteristics of this is that it produces a strong drive to control and to seeking praise and flatteries.

You have read stories about "Sleeping With the Enemy." You have read stories of other people who maybe did not do quite the same thing, but boy! they had a strong drive in them to control. Those people are narcissistic. They want *everything*, to an extreme, according to their pleasure. Human nature is self-absorbed and narcissistic to such a degree that it is hard for us to imagine, and is indeed embarrassing.

It seems to be that the psychologists have arranged this in three stages. First, human nature is just naturally self-centered. That is the least dangerous of the three. Then they use the term "self-absorbed," which notches things up a bit. There the self-centeredness is taken a degree or two higher with more intensity, more demanding than just merely being self-centered. In many cases self-centeredness can be fairly easily controlled by comparison to self-absorption. But the worst stage of all is narcissism. There is such a preoccupation with the self that these people are mentally ill.

Regarding the statement in verse 2—"lovers of their own selves"—William Barklay says, "Love of self is the basic sin from which all others flow. The moment a man makes his own will the center of life, divine and human relationships are destroyed. Obedience to God and charity to men both become impossible. The essence of Christianity is not the enthronement, but the obliteration of self."

The *Interpreters Commentary* agrees by stating the following on the same verse: "Self-love is the fundamental sin and source of all others because it substitutes sinful man for God. The truly godly man puts God at the center of his life."

The *Expositors Bible Commentary* states something similar in Volume 8, Page 464: "Love in the

truest sense demands abandonment of self to God, and God alone is the adequate incentive for such abandonment."

I do not know whether you caught it, but all three of these statements imply that self-love is the source of idolatry. It is the generator that produces idolatry, because the heart then pushes man to consider himself more important than God, and it will seek *its* gratification rather than give God what pleases Him.

All the rest of these evil qualities are merely acts of the way the love of self is driving the person to express himself. God allows us to love ourselves, but if it is permitted to drift into extremes, it becomes the source of all forms of mental illness. Now God, on the other hand, gives us the spirit of a sound mind—a mind that is not sick, and we will get to that just a little bit later.

As we proceed through this listing, I want you all to notice the focus on self-gratification, covetousness, pride, impatience, and sheer foolishness, regardless of the circumstance in which they might occur. I also want you to notice that you will not see in this list murder, adultery, fornication, and things of that nature. Do you know why not? This actually reinforces the fact that this was written really to warn the church about itself, as well as warning the church about the world. Paul says in I Corinthians 6 that some of us *were* those things, but by the time he wrote this, it became very apparent that those big obvious expressions of human nature like murder, fornication, adultery, and so forth, were behind. The people were controlling those things. What is important is that we understand what was generating those kind of things. While those things may not be in the same class as murder, fornication, adultery, and whatever, they are still nonetheless sin.

COVETOUSNESS:

I do not know exactly what your Bible says, but the first expression is "the love of money" and what it will buy. I do not mean that these things are necessarily in order of importance. They were probably things that just came to Paul's mind.

The first expression after "the love of self" is "avariciousness"—the more modern term. This is the drive to accumulate. Synonyms might be covetous, rapacious, greedy. It is interesting that one of the cynical descriptions of this age is that when life on earth is all over, everything blows up, and the one with the most toys wins. If you want evidence, consider the horrific indebtedness of the average American and his national government.

At times indebtedness occurs through no personal fault, but mostly it is evidence of covetousness, avariciousness—the desire to have something and gratify one's desires before one actually has the money to pay for it. A significant effect of greed is that these people lose the sense of proportion as to what is truly important in life and end up trampling all over relationships in order to satisfy their desires, and if taken to an extreme, they will sell their soul for gold.

I was conversing with Ted Bowling before services, and we were talking about this very thing. He did not know I was going to be talking about this. I did tell him, but it brought up an

illustration to me of something that I really admire my father for. In 1949, when I was a senior in high school, my father walked into a Ford dealer and bought a brand-new Ford for cash. Now maybe for somebody who was wealthy or had a good-paying job, or whatever, that would be nothing, but my dad never made very much money.

Five years later he walked into a Plymouth dealer, traded in the Ford, and bought a brand-new deluxe model Plymouth, again for cash. My dad was old-fashioned! He never went into debt for anything except the house that we bought, and even there he put down a pretty good chunk of money—cash. He saved up for things, and he delayed gratification. That is the way to stay solvent.

BOASTING:

This characteristic is a natural outgrowth of one centering his thoughts on himself, because "a lover of self" knows no one better. The Greek word is normally translated into the word "boasting" and means "over-swollen." They are puffed up about themselves. In the book of Jude it is translated as "great swelling words" in talking about the False Prophet. Thus these people will work to turn every conversation to eventually focus on themselves, their experiences, their knowledge, and what they have accumulated in whatever area. But it does not stop there, because people of this nature are driven to talk about anything that has them as its focus.

Now do not misunderstand. God allows us to love ourselves. Self-concern is not unimportant, but it becomes a sin when allowed to so focus on the self that it is oblivious to the needs of others. In one commentary I looked into (I believe it was the *Interpreters*) the guy who wrote the article said, "These people do not even see the other person's need. It never even comes to mind."

PROUD:

These people will take every opportunity to show themselves above others. When expressed in this manner, it indicates a degree of arrogance. It is not merely "puffed up" in feeling about the self as better than others, but it carries this thought out with an aggressiveness moved to actually put the other person down. Do you know how it appears in application? It appears as sarcasm about somebody else's characteristics, whether it happens to be their looks, the way they dress, or the inflections in their voices, or whatever. Vanity drives human nature.

Many commentators feel that pride is the father of all other sin, and so the proud person is the kind of person that God, through James and the book of Proverbs, says He resists. It is said in such a way that He cannot stand them. This is really a bad sin. He cannot stand their self-centeredness. Where is the humility? So in terms of a relationship with God, the proud person resists subjecting himself to God and to other humans. And human nature attempts, in varying degrees of intensity, to control every situation in its favor. This is especially noticeable in relationships. The proud want to be served.

BLASPHEMY:

Blasphemy is a natural outgrowth of pride because those who are blasphemous cannot seriously consider that others may be their equal, or better. This specific word means that in their speech they are insulting to God and to fellowman. Most of us tend to think of this blasphemy in terms of taking God's name in vain. However, the term is not restricted to God. Included in this is the making of sarcastic remarks, which I mentioned before. They are put-downs of others' characteristics and conduct that one might find beneath them as something that should be made light of.

DISOBEDIENT TO PARENTS:

That one is pretty obvious. I will not go into that at all, because I may mention portions of this later on.

UNTHANKFUL (or Ingratitude):

I heard Mr. Armstrong say several times that he thought this was man's most common sin. Probably the Old Testament's outstanding example of ingratitude is expressed in Ezekiel 16 in the story of how God found Israel as an abandoned waif. He cleaned her up. He gave her wealth. He clothed her. He gave her food, and so forth. He gave her all the good things of life, and what did she do? Before the chapter was over, she turned on Him in ingratitude, and prostituted herself to anybody who came along.

What a hard heart we have in our failure to recognize that every blessing, every blessing of air we breathe, is a gift from God, because He manages His creation. That is what it says in Hebrews 1, that everything is held up by the word of His power.

God freed Israel from Egypt. They came out with a high hand exalting in their liberty, but even before they got to Mount Sinai, Israel had forgotten and wanted to go back to their bondage in Egypt. That is hard to reconcile, even to intelligence.

One of the outstanding examples of ingratitude in the New Testament occurred when Jesus healed the ten lepers, but only one of them turned and came back and thanked Him. Here this horrible disease disfigured them and made them look hardly human any longer, because fingers fell off, toes fell off, maybe whole hands fell off, a nose fell off, or maybe pieces of ear or whatever fell off. Whatever this disease was, it just left them completely disfigured, and Jesus made them whole in the blink of an eye. But that is the way the way the heart is. It is no where near as appreciative as it needs to be.

Ingratitude indicates the failure of one to recognize indebtedness to God and other people who have made possible what one has. It too is an expression of one's pride—so proud and arrogant that they think they did it all themselves and that they owe others nothing.

WITHOUT NATURAL AFFECTION:

This term "without natural affection" is rather interesting, but it is pretty much a synonym of our English word "indecent; shameless." This phrase indicates someone who has no respect for common norm and traditions within a culture. It includes people who cannot speak the King's English, but they know every foul swear word in several languages, and that is used indiscriminately.

When I worked in the steel-mill I could hear people swearing in just about five or six different languages: Polish, Croatian, Czechoslovakian, and Russian, or whatever, as well as English. They knew them all, but that is the way the human heart is. It is indecent. But it spreads out from that because it includes the way one dresses in public by exposing too much of one's body. It includes pornography and the sexual abuses even to one's own children. What a sin that is becoming today. These are people who marry their own sister.

These are people who smoke in non-smoking areas in a public restaurant, or become a streaker at some public gathering. These are people who flaunt commonly-accepted rules and family traditions. Even normal family love is dissipated in them. The family means almost nothing to those without natural affection. They will even cast aside normal pleasures to involve themselves in perversions because they cannot get enough enjoyment from what is within the bounds of decency.

TRUCEBREAKERS:

A better fit is the English word "implacable" in today's use of the term. It indicates a person who is not easily calmed down, the result being that he is relentless, unforgiving, inflexible, and irreconcilable—insisting that he is right and that there is no other way of looking at things. The fruit of this is divorce and the breaking of other kinds of covenants.

FALSE ACCUSERS:

This is interesting, because the Greek word is "*diablos*"—Devil. These people are slanderers—people who deliberately set out to destroy the reputation of others. Slandering is most commonly done through gossiping. The emphasis in the word is on the deliberateness of the operation, not in the quality of the information. The cure for that is to think before you speak.

INCONTINENT:

We know what incontinence is applied to. It might be old people. Little babies are incontinent. They do not care where they go. But incontinence indicates somebody who is without self-control, which is a lot more serious. They are irascible (prone to outbursts; easily angered). They are people who cannot restrain themselves. James says that the religion of a person who cannot bridle his tongue or control his temper is an empty pretense. So these are people who let their temper run wild. These people are addicted to an evil trait that injures both themselves and others.

Now this you have got to get. The emphasis in this word is on addiction. This sin reaches out to include things such as over-eating, alcoholism, and other forms of drugs, and even reaches out to include such things as nymphomania. In that case a person's sexual drive is beyond control. There is no love in it. It is just like he is a dog or a cat, and insatiable. Incontinence has serious consequences.

FIERCE: (or as the King James says, "Despisers of those that are good")

These are people who have lost the distinction regarding things of quality. In other words, any old thing will do rather than striving to seek the best in friends, in quality of life, in quality of conduct, in language, in entertainment, and in education. These people consistently downgrade everything and always sink to the bottom. They do not upgrade themselves. They do not upgrade their companionships. They seek out fools rather than the wise. They are despisers of those things that are good.

TRAITORS:

Traitors are those who are treacherous. They cannot be trusted to keep their word, or a friendship for that matter.

HEADY:

Heady indicates people who are reckless in word and action. It indicates people who are driven by passion, by impulse, and the thrill of the moment. They are not known for considering the consequences of their actions. They just do it, whatever it is.

HIGH-MINDED:

High-minded means swell-headed; supremely self-confidence filled with conceit, filled with their own self-importance. They very much lack humility, and fail to even consider their faults and actual qualifications. They just push themselves in.

LOVERS OF PLEASURES MORE THAN LOVERS OF GOD:

Verse 4 brings us back to where we started, because this is basically a rephrasing of "lovers of self," but it is a little bit more specific.

"Pleasures" does not directly refer to always seeking entertainment, though it touches on that concept. It is evident from the word though that entertainment plays a large part in what occupies peoples' time. Pleasures refer to whatever concerns the self. It could be a person's business. That is interesting to think about because men have a weakness of loving their work more than anything else. Is it not interesting that in the book of Ephesians God has to

command men to love their wives? If there were not something interfering in the man's mind with loving his wife, God would never have to say that, but He knows that men can get easily jerked off to the side with their work.

On the way to services today we saw a man out in his yard raking leaves, taking advantage of the 80-some degree temperature. As we were approaching, he pulled out his cell phone, stuck it up to his ear and used his shoulder to hold the phone. But he kept right on raking. He looked weird doing this. He finally figured out he really could not do that, but what was in the man's mind was that he was going to continue doing what he was doing regardless of that telephone call.

Men have a propensity to love work. It makes them feel as though they are accomplishing something. So God says to a man, "*Hey! Love your wife. She is more important than that job.*" That is included within this "lovers of pleasures." "Pleasure" indicates that which the person holds important in his mind. It could be something like playing golf. It could be studying into some subject. It can be anything that has caught the person's interest. Thus the hard part to control is that this person's time is given to his interest rather than to God. The time is not rightly divided in a way that will please God. You might notice I used the term "rather than." It is interesting that right in the margin of my Bible it says "rather than."

In the *New Testament Commentary* by Hendrickson and Kistemaker, they *strongly* insist that the verse should be understood "lovers of pleasures *rather* than God," not "*more* than God" as the *King James Version* translators originally show it. Now why? Again, Hendrickson and Kistemaker say it is because Paul is actually not saying denying in the sense that it is something in process, but that they do not love God at all! God has been pushed out completely.

David backs this up in Psalm 10: 4 when he says of the unconverted, "God is not in their thoughts." He means, "*AT ALL!*" God is not in their thoughts for conforming to His purpose. They might think of God once in a while, but not for conforming to His purpose, and so these lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God are unlike Jesus who always did what pleases God.

It is interesting the Kistemaker and Hendrickson stated in that commentary that these people had infiltrated the church. I think all of you understand that as the first century church went along and aged, they were invaded by Gnostics, and those people were attending right along with the truly converted Christians, but they had their own ideas about God that were not scripturally correct, but they were there.

I spent a little bit of time on this last one. I might not have done as good a job of expounding on it as I would have liked, but this one we need to be especially concerned about because of the time we are living in. I want you to turn to Revelation 3: 14-18

Revelation 3:14 And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write: These things says the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God.

The "faithful and true witness" is a prelude to the testimony that He is now going to give to these Laodiceans about their status before Him.

Revelation 3:15-18 I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot: I would that you were cold or hot. So then because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth. Because you say, I am rich and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and know not that you are wretched and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: I counsel you to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that you may be rich: and white raiment, that you may be clothed, and that the shame of your nakedness does not appear; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see.

What we have here is a vivid description of a people who are in the church in terms of actually having been begotten by God's Spirit, but who are in the process of losing their way. They have not lost it completely yet, but they are still in the church. They are still converted, or Christ would not be saying what He is to those people. Their conduct and attitude is not something that they have no power over, because they are converted, or Christ would not have ordered them to repent.

Consider this: Christ does not give people impossible tasks to accomplish. In fact, in I Corinthians 10:13 He promises to always provide a way of escape. The stark reality is that what they are doing in their life is giving testimony of their lack of interest in Christ. Mark that well. What is happening is that the deceitful heart is regaining the upper hand it had before conversion, and it is influencing these people back to a life of self-absorption.

Now notice again what the description says. Christ now represents all of the elements of God's purpose being worked out in their lives, but the description is showing the deceitful heart is working, and these people are rejecting Christ by saying by their conduct—by the way they are living—that they no longer need what He has to offer because they already, in their own self-estimation, have enough. "I am rich, and increased with goods." They consider themselves spiritually rich, and so they have turned life's attentions away from Christ and back to what the deceitful heart feels more comfortable with.

The truly tragic thing here is that they are in the church. Every relationship is a two-way street. Every relationship requires sacrifice, but the carnal heart has convinced these Laodiceans that Christ has no more to offer them and is turning their time and attention back to its own self-centered interest. They are lovers of pleasure; not necessarily entertainment. Pleasure simply refers to one's own interests rather than lovers of God.

I just mentioned that every relationship requires sacrifice for it to be successful, and we are involved in a relationship.

II Timothy 1:7-8 For God has not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind. Be not you therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner: but be you partaker of the afflictions of the gospel according to the power of God.

I do not know whether you have ever thought of all of these characteristics, these qualities that appear in II Timothy 3: 1-5, that they are evidence of insanity. I am looking at this from God's point of view. If we look at it from God's point of view in considering the illustrations and so forth that I gave at the very beginning of this sermon, and how *God* looks at our heart, you can begin to see elements of why God would say that His Spirit is the Spirit of a *sound* mind. There is a difference between being *sound* and being *unsound*, and He is implying pretty clearly there that before we were converted we were *unsound*. There is some degree of mental illness in a heart able to do good things, but at the same time having the propensity within it to do all nineteen of those things, and worse. All of those characteristics are evidence to some degree of mental illness.

These characteristics are the very mental and conduct instabilities we come out with, and are those that we are to overcome during our Christian life. We all have elements of them as part of our character, and they must be challenged and put out.

I discovered a very interesting thing as I was preparing this sermon. It was interesting to me anyway. It is that a number of newer translations of the Bible replace the word "sound" with a different word. First, understand that the *King James* is not wrong. It is an okay translation. There is nothing wrong with it, but some modern translations have changed that reading to "self-discipline." "God has given us a mind of self-discipline." To me that was really interesting, and I feel that "self-discipline" more directly expresses what Paul was instructing. Again, even my Bible has a marginal note that says, "A sound mind is a disciplined mind."

The word "discipline" has several applications of usage in the English language, and I am going to give you what *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* says regarding this word: "1. Discipline means a punishment; 2. It means instruction; 3. It means a subject that is taught; 4. Discipline is training that corrects, molds, or corrects the mental faculties or moral character; 5. Discipline is control gained by enforcing obedience and order."

Now either of those last two fits what we are looking at here in II Timothy 1: 7, but I feel that the fifth one—"Discipline is control gained by forcing obedience and order"—fits. What verse 7 then means is that the godly person has his spirit under control and he does not permit human nature to express itself in a way that is not godly. He puts a cork on it, and holds it until it is overcome and it is no longer part of his character, is no longer part of his nature.

Paul is not implying that the person disciplines himself without any deviation whatever. Paul is just giving a generality. We see right here one of the things that Timothy had to overcome. He was a timid person by nature, and fearful, and that is what Paul mentioned there. "*Do not be ashamed.*" "*Do not be afraid.*" "*Do not fear.*" "*Go on.*"

On page 18 of his book *The Road Less Traveled*, the author M. Scott Peck suggested four broad areas of human behavior that he feels are absolutely essential to produce stable well-rounded productive people who can overcome life's problems and produce good relationships. Our problem in our relationship with God is keeping human nature corked. Now God has given us the tool to do it: His Spirit. And He says, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

M. Scott Peck strongly urges everybody who reads his book to inculcate these four disciplines, or whatever, in themselves and in their children as a means of achieving good mental and

spiritual health. He calls these disciplines "the basic set of tools needed to solve life's problems." We all have problems that need to be solved.

Besides calling them "disciplines," he also calls them "tools" and "techniques of suffering." That last one is a good one. Do you know why he calls it that? Everybody, when facing problems, suffers, and we need a technique to handle that suffering. There is going to be suffering in some way and of some measure connected to solving problems. I think that you will agree that life is filled with problems which create pressures that are interspersed with short periods of peace. We call these problems "stress," and each of these trials produces some degree of anxiety, of mental anguish, or we might even use the term "suffering" for a period of time. When these things begin, that is when we have a tendency to let human nature run in the wrong direction. Unfortunately many people, as we would say, gradually crack under the stress and become to some degree mentally ill. Do you know why they crack? The simple answer is because they fail to solve the problem to the degree that they can, and they become so self-concerned about their failures that they become mentally ill, and react badly. It is the extreme self-centeredness that is the real problem. Those who handle these stresses best are those who are the most mature.

Peck calls these disciplines "tools of suffering" because they are the means by which we can experience the pain of problems in such a way as to work through them and solve them successfully. Both Evelyn and I were struck that these are some of the very qualities that God is working to instill in us in order to bring us to maturity. We also agree that we should be working on our children to instill these qualities in them. Here they are:

Tool number 1: We need to learn the delaying of gratification.

Tool number 2: We need to learn the acceptance of responsibility.

Tool number 3: Dedication to truth. (I personally feel this is the most important one, considering our deceitful heart. If we are not dedicated to truth, nothing is going to work. I can guarantee that.)

Tool number 4: Balance (I prefer the term "Wisdom." This last one is the longest one coming because it takes life's experience to have wisdom.)

As important as child-training is, these qualities have a far more important direct connection to God's purpose. Brethren, He has called us to be problem-solvers.

John 14:1-3 Let not your heart be troubled: You believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions [offices, rooms, abodes]: If it were not so I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there you may be also.

In conjunction with many other verses it is revealed that we are going to be established in positions, offices, rooms, places of responsibility in a world totally devastated by horrific nuclear warfare and populated by people spiritually, mentally and emotionally scarred from experiencing

those horrors. I am talking about that period of time after we are born into the Kingdom of God, and God says, "Okay. Go out there and straighten up this mess!"

We are going to be faced with problems like you never saw before, and God wants people working out there who know what they are doing and are disciplined enough, and responsible enough to carry it out. He wants them to be so dedicated to seeing the truth established that nothing will deter them. They will handle that responsibility with balance and wisdom, and not be an oppressive ogre just throwing his weight around, but will deal with people with kindness and with honor and a deliberate love to lift them up out of the muck and mire of what the world has become.

I want you to go now to Luke 8:14. Jesus is giving the parable of the Sower and the Seed, and He says:

Luke 8:14 And that which fell among thorns are they which when they have heard go forth, and are choked with care and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection.

It is the word "perfection" that I am looking at right now.

Hebrews 6:1 Therefore, leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection.

Ephesians 4:11-14 And he [Christ] gave some apostles; and some prophets; and some evangelists; and some pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ: [Why?] That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive.

All three of these words rendered perfection, perfect, or perfecting, with one exception, are related to the same root verb *teleioo*. *Teleioo* is synonymous with our English words "to complete," "to finish," "to accomplish," "to consummate," "to perfect," or in these contexts, "to bring or come to maturity."

God is perfecting us. Why? So we can be born into His family and work in the family business.

That one exception is in Ephesians 4:12, where the word "perfecting" is appropriate, but it should really be translated "equipping." God is equipping us to handle the responsibilities that are coming. So what is our involvement in this Christian life? It is the bringing of us to maturity where we have been completely subjected to human nature to where we can control it by the power of God's Spirit and truth to where it is no longer driving us around by the nose. Instead, we are, by our own will, submitting ourselves to God and His truth, revealing to Him that we

are being perfected, that we are becoming mature.

Ephesians 2:8-10 For by grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works which God has before ordained that we should walk in them.

Ephesians 2: 8 says that we are saved by grace through faith, but then he goes on to say that we are being saved for the purpose of working works that God has ordained. God has already set it up for us. We know at least the outline of what He is doing, but He is preparing us to do those works He has ordained us to do. Right now the work He has given us to do is to yield to Him so that we can become mature and grow up from being a child to being a real true adult.

Did not Paul say in the "Love" chapter there was a time when he was a child, and when he was a child he spoke as a child, he thought as a child; but when he became a man he put away childish things? That is what faces us. We are to aim for the character and the mind of God. We have the tool in His Spirit. We have the truth to apply ourselves, but human nature is present, and God has left it there so we can struggle against it and overcome it and get the benefit of all the experiences of learning how to work.

Do you know what the failure to delay gratification does? It produces procrastination. That is its product. Yet we keep putting off the hard things and always do the easy things. The failure to delay gratification produces procrastination. It is always fun to do the easy stuff. We get a reward right away. Do you know how the person who will not delay gratification reacts? I will give a simple illustration. This is the person who, when he gets his dessert, eats the icing first. He wants to be gratified first. That is a little thing, but it shows the inclination of the mind. I am going to try to put together a sermon on those four qualities, but it is going to be hard I think. It will be quite a challenge.

All I want us to understand out of this is that those qualities in II Timothy 3:1-5 are active within us to some degree. They are not just lying there latent. They want to spring out and control. We must come to the place where we can control them, but know this, that the labor and the sacrifices that need to be made to keep those things under control are for our good. God allowed them to remain within us so that they could be met and challenged, and from this: good fruit will be produced.