

YOU NEED REGULAR HEART EXAMINATIONS

I. Examine your heart

II. Examine the Lord's heart

"I believe that God created me and all that exists, and that he gave me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my mind and all my abilities." You likely recognize those words as Dr. Martin Luther's explanation of the First Article of the Apostles' Creed. They clearly and beautifully acknowledge that everything we have and everything we are comes to us from the hand of a good and gracious God. Doesn't it almost go without saying that we need to take care of the body the Lord has given us? Part of that care is to undergo regular examinations, even if a check-up holds as much allure as having a professional boxer punch you in the face as hard as he can.

If it's true that we ought to take care of the physical life the Lord has graciously given us, isn't it also true that we ought to take care of the spiritual life the Lord has granted? Regular examinations are not only good and helpful, they are absolutely, positively necessary. This morning, as we study a portion of the tenth chapter of Judges, the Lord offers this specific reminder for our spiritual lives: **"YOU NEED REGULAR HEART EXAMINATIONS."**

This book of Judges records the history of the people of Israel from after Joshua's death until the time of Samuel, who would end up anointing the first and second kings of Israel. If we use 1400BC for Joshua's death and about 1050 for Samuel's ministry, you have the general time frame for this book. You recall the Lord's direction to his people about their entrance into the land of Canaan under Joshua: "Take no prisoners." They were to destroy everyone, because otherwise the people of the land of Canaan would end up being a snare for them with their idolatrous ways. The people of Israel decided instead on a policy of tolerance, "to live and let live." So they spared the lives of the Canaanites. In a not-so-shocking development, the Canaanites became a snare to the people of Israel, just as the Lord had said.

We call it syncretism – adding to the worship of the one true God with the practices of the nations surrounding them. You heard the syncretism of the people of Israel in verse 6: *"Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord. They served the Baals and the Ashteroths, and the gods of Aram, the gods*

of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites and the gods of the Philistines." Let's just walk through the list. Baal, of course, was the primary god of the Canaanites. They believed that Baal, the son of the high god, provided rain and thus the produce of the fields. They worshipped him in his temple with sexual immorality. The Ashteroths were the female counterparts to Baal; they were mother-goddesses. But the people of Israel weren't content to add to their worship of the Lord by worshipping the gods of the people among whom they lived. They worshipped the gods of the nations around them. They worshipped the gods of Aram (or Syria) to the northeast. They worshipped the gods of Sidon (Phoenicia) to the northwest. They worshipped the gods of Moab to the southwest, the gods of the Ammonites to the east, and the gods of the Philistines to the west. They added to the worship of the Lord the worship of gods from every direction.

At least they were still worshipping the Lord, right? They may have looked at it that way; that's not at all the way the Lord viewed it. *"And because the Israelites forsook the Lord and no longer served him, he became angry with them."* By adding the worship of false gods, they had ceased with the worship with which the Lord was pleased.

The people of Israel didn't bother to examine their hearts. They assumed that worshipping other gods was just fine, because they still recognized the Lord as God. Let that assumption be a warning to you. Have you copied the Israelites? You probably haven't put up statues of Baal in your home, but there are plenty of gods all around you. The god of pleasure lives right across the street, assuring you that "everyone else gets drunk on occasion; everyone else has sexual relations outside of marriage; everyone else watches movies that ought not be viewed." The god of materialism lives next door. "Since others have it, you should have it, too. You should have a nicer house, better clothes, a faster computer, a cooler phone." The god of personal privilege lives kitty-corner. "You can do whatever you want to do; any god that stands in the way of that can hardly be a god worth worshipping." That's not even to mention the biggest god in your heart: the God called "me," that demands that everyone and everything serve you. Have you examined your heart to see the gods

that you worship? Or do you foolishly imagine that a little syncretism is not the end of the world?

Consider what happened to the people of Israel. We don't read, "The Lord really wished that they had adopted a different practice, but he accepted them as they were." No. The Lord became angry with the people of Israel. The Lord's anger showed itself in what we hear in verse 7: *"He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites, who that year shattered and crushed them."* Pay particular attention to the subject of that sentence. The Lord sold them into the hands of the Philistines. It didn't just happen; they weren't just unlucky. God was behind it. The Lord handed them over to their sin and let them experience the consequences.

The Lord still does that. He hands people over to their gods. Read Romans 1 sometime and you will be struck by what is often called the Lord's permissive providence. He permits people to destroy themselves. The person who believes that all steeples point to heaven and that everyone will ultimately be saved the Lord may hand over to that delusion. The individual who thinks that he can continue in unrepented sin and remain a child of God the Lord may hand over to that lie. Examine your heart – look carefully to see if you have chosen to believe lies instead of the truth.

What happens when the Lord hands people over to their false gods? They may for a while enjoy their sin. But in the end there will be a consequence. For some, that consequence will be here in this world. For others, it will be an eternity of suffering in hell. For the people of Israel, it meant oppression and difficulty. *"For eighteen years they (the Philistines and Ammonites) oppressed all the Israelites on the east side of the Jordan in Gilead, the land of the Amorites. The Ammonites also crossed the Jordan to fight against Judah, Benjamin and the house of Ephraim; and Israel was in great distress."*

When the people of Israel realized their horrible situation, they decided that they should go to the Lord for help. After all, they were his people. How could he say no to his own children? What else did he have to do but come to their rescue, anyway? So they cried out to the Lord in verse 10: *"We have sinned against you, forsaking our God and serving the Baals."* They had learned the exact words to say; they knew the formula to follow. Perhaps these were the words printed on page 15 in the front part of their Israelite hymnal; they had recited the words before and could probably say them from memory when woken in the middle of the night.

Though the words were appropriate, they were not real. That's clear from what the Lord says in response, *"When the Egyptians, the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Philistines, the Sidonians, the Amalekites and the Maonites oppressed you and you cried to me for help, did I not save you from their hands? But you have forsaken me and served other gods, so I will no longer save you. Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you are in trouble!"* The people of Israel had said the right words, but their hearts were far from the Lord. So he challenged them to cry out to the gods they still worshipped.

This is reason to examine your heart. You may be able to recite by heart the confession of sins in the hymnal: "I confess that I am by nature sinful and that I have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed." But words do not win the Lord over. He sees the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

The Lord's powerful preaching of the law accomplished its purpose. He led the Israelites to recognize their sinfulness and how they were still clinging to the gods of the nations around them. They confessed from the heart. *"We have sinned. Do with us whatever you think best, but please rescue us now."* That confession was accompanied by action. *"Then they got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the Lord."* If there is no intent to put aside the sin that is being confessed, it's just so many words. But when the intent is there, then the heart has joined the mouth in confessing.

Have you confessed your sin to the Lord the way the people of Israel did? If you confess that you have sinned but intend to continue in it, you're mocking the Lord and you're asking for punishment. This is not just to talk about what we perceive as significant sins, serious violations of God's law. If you intend to continue in a sin, even if that's just holding a grudge against someone or being unkind to a person who is always on your nerves, then you have not confessed it. Then you invite upon yourself God's anger and eternal punishment. He will not be mocked by those who mouth words of repentance but whose hearts are hard. You may fool everyone else, but you will not fool God.

One of the most tragic stories that we hear during the season of Lent is the account of Judas. Here's a man who had every advantage. He spent three years with Jesus, not only witnessing the miracles Jesus performed and the perfect life Jesus led, he also heard the Savior's preaching. He heard Jesus say, *"I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."* He heard the parable we heard this morning about the Father's joy over one sinner who repents. Yet, when

push came to shove, Judas simply couldn't believe that what Jesus had said applied to him. Judas had carefully examined his heart and had seen the matter very clearly: Not only had he done something horrible in betraying Jesus, he was horrible. Convinced that there was no way that God could love or forgive him, he took his life. Here's the problem: Judas had only examined his heart. He stopped there. Do you know what he ought to have done? He ought to have examined the Lord's heart, too.

This book of Judges reveals the Lord's heart as beautifully as any book in Scripture. While much of the book is depressing and disappointing, it also highlights the grace and mercy of God. The same story occurs over and over again. Here's the story: The people of Israel forget the Lord and what he has done for them. They worship other gods and push the Lord to the side. The Lord hands them over to their enemies. At some point, the people recognize their sin and plead to the Lord for forgiveness. Rather than say, "You made your bed, now sleep in it," the Lord showed mercy by raising up a judge. When you hear "judge," don't think "black robe" or "sitting on a bench" or "dispensing justice." Think "deliverer." Think "rescuer." Through that judge the Lord would deliver the people from the oppression of their enemies. The people would then enjoy a period of peace and rest in the land. But when the judge died, *"the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers, following other gods and serving and worshipping them."*

By the time we pick up the account in Judges 10, the story has repeated four times. Four times. And it will happen a couple more times before the book is finished. Four times the nation came before the Lord, confessing their sin and throwing themselves on the Lord's mercy, promising not to worship the gods of the nations any longer. And every time they went back to that sin. Each time they abandoned their promise and abandoned their God.

Think of it this way. Someone that you know and love betrays you. Later, when he finds himself down on his luck, he comes to you, acknowledging his sin and pleading for your forgiveness. You welcome him back with open arms, thankful that the relationship has been restored. You give him your trust, confident that it won't happen again. But your confidence notwithstanding it happens again. This time, he does something even worse, making you look like a fool and hurting you in a way like you've never been hurt before. When he finds himself down on his luck, he returns to you, pleading for your forgiveness and looking for your protection. What do you do? Since you're not stupid, you think long and hard about

what to do. You decide to forgive him and move forward with the relationship, certain that your repeated forgiveness will be greatly appreciated and will lead him to turn over a new leaf. To your amazement, he does it again, worse even than the first two times. When he comes back, down on his luck, and seeks your forgiveness, what do you do? You're not going to fall for it again. Maybe you'll forgive him in your heart, but the relationship almost definitely won't be the same.

Do you see the Lord's grace in his dealing with the people of Israel? They did the same thing again and again and each time he welcomed them back with open arms, acting as if they had never betrayed him, never abandoned him, never worshipped other gods. He chose to look past their sins and treat them in a way that they didn't in any way deserve – he forgave them.

What makes it even more amazing is that the Lord knew exactly what the people of Israel would do. He knew that their repentance would be short-lived and soon they would return to their sinful, idolatrous ways. Yet still he forgave them. Yet still he protected them and showered them with blessings.

When the people of Israel repented, the Lord *"could bear Israel's misery no longer."* The Lord decided that he would not allow their enemies to oppress Israel any longer. In the chapter that follows, the Lord raised up Jephthah to deliver Israel from oppression. In mercy, the Lord acted. He let himself be moved by their need and decided to come to their rescue.

When you have examined your heart and see yourself for the sinner you are, then examine the Lord's heart. Consider what the Lord has done for you. He knew the sin that you would commit against him. He knew the idols you would harbor in your heart and the rebellion you would commit against him. Yet still he sent a deliverer. The deliverer. He sent his Son to live in your place and die on your behalf. He knew that you would respond to his gracious action of sending his Son by sinning against him. Yet still he came to you at the baptismal font to wash away your sin, cover you with righteousness, and adopt you into his family. He knew that you would regularly bring his name into disrepute by your actions and your words, yet still he came to you through the body and blood of Christ in the Sacrament to forgive you your sins. The Lord's love for you is obviously not based on who you are or how you conduct yourself. It is based exclusively on his declaration of you in his Son, that you are righteous in his sight and his dear child.

The Lord is not going to change his mind about you, even if you should happen to change your mind about you. Perhaps the time will come when you commit again that sin you've tried and tried to put aside and you will conclude, "That's it. I cannot forgive myself and I don't expect God to forgive me, either." God is greater than your heart. You are not the judge. Don't stop with an examination of your heart. Examine God's heart. That heart overflows with forgiveness and mercy.

Keep examining the heart of the Lord as he has revealed himself to you in his Word and Sacraments. You will find without fail that he is the God who loves you, has forgiven every last one of your sins in

the perfect sacrifice of Christ, and who is committed to holding on to you all the way to the end.

Maybe you're one of those wise people who makes a point of going to the doctor for an examination every year. That's good, right, and proper. Let that serve as a reminder of your need for regular heart examinations. But that can't be just once a year. Each day, examine your heart to see where you have allowed other people or things to become your god. When you see the horrible condition of your heart, then examine the heart of your God. That heart is filled with love for you, filled to overflowing with a commitment to your salvation. Examine the heart of the Lord – and your heart will be filled with the peace that goes beyond all understanding.