

Heart for the World

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, everyone. Please grab your Bibles and turn to page 63 and 64 in the New Testament sections.

That's toward the back. The numbering flips over at the New Testament point. So it's page, we're primarily going to be looking at page 64. So please have that open. Today is the first Sunday in Advent.

That's why we have the candles up here up front. Four candles for the four weeks of Advent. And right in the middle is a white candle which signifies Christmas.

And those of us in the church but also the entire society now is beginning to look down the weeks to Christmas. And that means a lot of things.

But one of the things that that means is that a lot of us are going to be reunited with family that we haven't seen for a while. And whenever you get families together, quite often you begin to see similar traits and characteristics.

[1 : 08] Sometimes physical, sometimes not physical characteristics and traits that make our hearts rejoice. And sometimes they're things that are a challenge in one way or the other. My brothers and my parents were here a little over a month ago.

And some of you met them. And you will have noticed that I do not look anything like my brothers. Physically, we are very, very different. However, we still have common traits and common characteristics that kind of mark us out as being related to each other.

One of those common characteristics becomes evident if you ever see us on the dance floor. Which will be very uncommon.

I don't have words to describe just how badly we dance. It is, it's extraordinary. It surprises me sometimes. And I'm convinced that what happened was my family were part of a, for generations, were part of a denomination that forbid dancing.

And so I'm convinced that it was selectively bred out of us. It's not our fault. There's nothing we can do about it. It just isn't going to happen. And I thought that becoming an Anglican would be safe.

[2 : 26] We don't typically dance in the aisles or anything like that. And, but then I went to Africa. And in Africa, you can't get away from it.

And my secret was unveiled in front of everybody. And it was very humbling. But in all seriousness, most families do have these common traits that kind of mark out a particular family, give the family a certain degree of identity.

And in this morning's passage, Jesus talks about his family. He talks a little bit about his physical family, but his emphasis is on his spiritual family.

And just like any family, the family of Jesus is marked by a shared trait. There's a kind of distinctive DNA that distinguishes the family of Jesus from all other families of the world.

And according to Jesus, in this passage this morning, those who are in his family have a similar ear and they have a similar heart.

[3 : 35] And the question for us this morning is to look at our lives and ask the question, to what extent do we resemble what Jesus describes?

A little bit of context first. Those of you who have been with us as we've walked through the Gospel of Luke will have noticed that we've made a great amount of progress.

A lot of things are different about Jesus than was the case when we met him when he was born in a manger. You remember the way Luke describes his birth.

He was born in the shadow of Caesar in a stable to a teenage mother. And he didn't have a lot of status. And he didn't have a lot of wealth.

And there wasn't a lot of reason to think or expect a great amount of success from this little kid born in Bethlehem. But by the time we get to chapter 8 of the Gospel of Luke, the whole situation has changed.

[4 : 35] He's healed some people. He's preached some profound sermons. He's raised the dead. And now everybody wants to be on Jesus' team. Verse 4 and verse 19 says that by this point a huge crowd had gathered around him.

And you would think, wouldn't you, that that would be an unmitigated good thing. You would think that that would be precisely what Jesus would want. A lot of people gathering around him to hear what he's saying and to follow his growing movement.

I could even imagine, you know, having his disciples kind of go out and see what the approval ratings are or something like that. You know, your preaching gets kind of middle of the road because you offend people sometimes.

But everybody loves the healing. But that's not what Jesus gets at all. Jesus doesn't seem to be all that impressed by the crowds or by his popularity.

And part of the reason is that Jesus has not come to call a crowd. He's come to form a people and to form a family. Look at verse 19.

[5 : 47] Jesus has a way of taking people off guard.

And he uses this opportunity to take people really off guard here. Like I said, Jesus was becoming an increasingly respected and popular teacher.

And with his popularity, his status was growing. And you would think the expectation would have been that as Jesus' status increased, the status and the honor due to his physical family would increase with him.

And so people would have expected a kind of red carpet for Jesus' mother and Jesus' brothers. But Jesus doesn't play that same game.

And he sees this as a teaching opportunity. And instead of rolling out the red carpet for his mother and his brothers, he turns to the crowd. And he says, I will tell you who my mother and my brothers are.

[7 : 05] My mother and my brothers are anybody. Who hears the word of God and obeys it. And it's not that he was dishonoring his physical family, his literal mother and his brothers.

That has nothing to do with it. His attention is zeroed in upon the crowd. And he reaches out to them with an offer and with a warning. Jesus' offer is this.

His offer is that anyone can gain the status of being part of his family. Jesus says, my family is open. My family includes everyone who hears my father's word and obeys it and does it.

And that's a remarkable offer that he holds out to this crowd. It's an offer that speaks into the very heart of God's plan that God unveils through the long story of Scripture.

You know that from the very beginning, God has had a plan, an unalterable intention to create and redeem to himself a unique people.

[8 : 22] To create and redeem to himself a family for himself. You remember in Genesis chapter 1 and 2, God creates Adam and Eve. He creates a family.

Genesis chapter 12, God comes to Abraham and he calls him as a family and promises him a family.

At the end of Scripture, in the book of Revelation, when Revelation paints the picture of the end of time, it's a picture of a wedding. The lamb is being married to a bride.

Jesus is being married to the church. The entire biblical story from beginning to end is the story of God inviting people into his family.

And throughout that story, the definitive characteristic of that family, the definitive mark, the distinctive DNA, is that God's family has a particular kind of ear.

[9 : 27] They have ears that are attentive to the Father's voice. When they hear the Father's voice, they respond and their heart is given in obedience. You remember what Jesus said, I am the good shepherd and my sheep know my voice.

And in this text, Jesus is reaching out to the crowd with this glorious offer. Extraordinary. But he's also pointing to a warning.

And the warning, quite starkly, is that only those who hear and obey my Father's word belongs to my family. You see, when Jesus looks out at the crowd, he sees a great danger.

It's the danger of self-delusion. He knows that there are at least two groups. There are those who have heard his teachings, have seen the miracles, and they are all in. They have given their heart to Christ. And he knows that there is another group, though. He knows that there is another group that have heard what he said, and they show a casual, superficial interest in him.

[10:46] They like to hang around him. They like to be associated with him. They like to think of themselves as on his team. But in reality, their ears have not heard. Their hearts have not obeyed.

And the fact of the matter is, they're not part of God's family at all. In chapter 5, Jesus says that he is the physician who comes to heal sin's sick souls.

And like a skillful doctor, in this passage, he looks out at the crowd, particularly at that second group, and he diagnoses their heart.

He diagnoses their heart with a story. The story of the sower. It's a pretty simple story.

It's very straightforward. A farmer goes out into his field. He throws seed out on the ground. A lot of the seed never develops, never germinates at all.

[11:46] Some of the seed grows up a little. Some of the seed grows to full maturity. And Jesus uses this story to diagnose our hearts and to unveil the reality of what is going on within the human soul.

Look at verse 11. We'll look at each of these soil types. This is when Jesus is explaining the parable to his disciples. He says, Now the parable is this, verse 11, The seed is the word of God.

The ones along the path are those who have heard. Then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts so that they cannot believe and be saved. Jesus talks about four different types of soil and each soil corresponds to a different type of heart, a different heart that responds differently to God's word.

And this is the most unresponsive type of heart. Jesus says it's like a farmer that throws seed out and immediately the crows and the sparrows start coming and they just eat up the seeds immediately.

And Jesus says that that happens every time the word of God is proclaimed. That Satan comes, the devil comes to steal away God's word from our hearts.

[13:08] and that is the greatest tragedy imaginable for the human soul. You know, all of us as humans, we each have a family.

For some of us, our families are the area of greatest joy in our lives. For others of us, our families are the source of our greatest sorrow. But for all of us, either positively or negatively, to be human means to be born into a family of some variety.

And in each of our case, our family identity is very important. It's very formative to us. But God created us not only for a physical family, but God created us to be united with himself, to find our ultimate home in him.

That is central to why he created us. We are designed for it. It is the most valuable, most important reality that we can possibly enter into. And therefore, it's because it's so important that when the invitation goes out, when the word of God goes out, to invite people into that family, Satan is right there.

He's right there to steal away that invitation. He is there to steal and to kill and to destroy us. And the best way to do that is to become a thief and to steal God's word out of our hearts.

[14:32] To steal God's word from our hearts is Satan's highest objective and it is our greatest tragedy. The next two soils are similar.

They're similar to each other. The seed goes out, the birds don't get it, it begins to grow, but then it dies. Verse 13, And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy, but they have no root.

And they believe for a while and in time of testing, fall away. And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear. But as they go on their way, they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life and their fruit does not mature.

Now this soil is different than the first kind. These, catch the subtlety here, these are actually religious people, at least to some extent.

They're people who have heard God's word. Satan hasn't stolen it out of their hearts immediately. They hear God's invitation to enter the family of Jesus.

[15:46] Jesus. And immediately, they recognize it as good news and they respond. And they respond not in a cavalier, casual way. They respond with joy and passion and purpose and focus.

They're the ones that are around Jesus in the crowds. And they go to Bible studies and they go to multiple services and they talk about religion and God and they read all the right books and sometimes they're elevated into leadership rather quickly within the church.

But then it all comes tumbling down. The moment trials and temptations and stress come their way, the moment that discipleship becomes difficult, the moment that they see other options around them that are easier or more appealing or somehow more pleasant to them, their heart begins to leave Jesus.

They may continue to be religious, they may not continue to be religious, but they keep discipleship at arm's length. Do you remember King Saul in the Old Testament?

He was a lot like this. You can read about him in 1 Samuel, the book of 1 Samuel. And when you first meet Saul in the narrative, he seems timid, maybe even humble to some extent.

[17:10] He gets anointed King of Israel and it looks like he has a heart after God. He prays, he prophesies in the power of the Holy Spirit. But when the stresses of political life start to heat up, when the distractions of professional life starts to heat up, and obeying God becomes a kind of impediment to him pursuing his own desires, his own ambitions, his own dreams, his own priorities, then he just kind of subtly sets God to the side, sets him out of the center of his life.

He never claims to fully leave the God of Israel, but he does, ultimately. And at the end of his life, he proves that he never really belonged to God's family anyway.

And his life ends in an eternal tragedy. Now back to Jesus. Remember what we said earlier. Jesus is looking out at the crowds.

He's looking out at this massive multitude of people. And he is bringing them a warning. And it is this group, these two soils, right in the middle of the parable, that are at the center of his sights.

They look good on the outside, but inwardly, secretly, their hearts have not yet surrendered to Jesus. And there is no long-term fruit to be seen. And so Jesus looks at them and he says in verse 17 a great warning.

[18:41] For nothing is hidden that will not be manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be made known and come to light. Take care then how you hear.

For to the one who has, more will be given. And from the one who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away. Take care how you hear.

Take care, take heed how you respond to God's word, Jesus says, because nothing is hidden from God. God is never fooled.

And it is a sobering word to us. But it is one that we have got to wrestle with. That there will be a day when our hearts are laid bare before God.

There will be a day when our secrets are made public. And on that day we will either be found within God's family or we will be found outside God's family.

[19:46] And so Jesus says, take heed how you hear. And it is the last soil that tells us just how to hear. Look at verse 15.

As for that and the good soil, there are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast with an honest and good heart and bear fruit with patience. Do you notice how Jesus describes them?

He is very straightforward and very simple. He describes the soil, it is not flashy, it is not dramatic, it is just honest and straightforward. They hear God's word, they hold fast to it with sincerity, and over the long haul, you see this beautiful image of a saint arising.

Not a stained glass saint, but the true saints, the people of God. Over the ups and downs of their life, through the joys and sorrows of discipleship, their trust in Christ and in His word holds firm.

And more and more, by God's mercy and grace, they come to resemble the Lord in whom they have put their trust. It's not that they're perfect by any stretch, nor that they earn membership in God's family.

[21:05] It's that they demonstrate their membership in God's family by the long term fruit that God, by His grace, draws out of them and gives them.

If King Saul was an example of the other soils, King David is an example of this one. David was anything but perfect. He was a great sinner. You could read at Psalm 51 and you can hear the prayers of a man who is wracked with guilt.

He misused his political power. He killed innocent people. He committed adultery. But he was a man by God's mercy who had an ear to hear God's word.

He was a man by God's mercy with a heart that when he heard God's word, his heart turned and confessed and repented. And over the long term, after years of walking with God, he proved to be a man after God's own heart.

A member of his family. Let's draw this together. Jesus came, He says, to call a family to Himself. And that family is marked by a particular DNA.

[22 : 20] The family of Jesus have ears that hear God's word, hearts that hold fast to it over the long haul and bear fruit over the course of their lives. And the question for us is simply, how do we look like that?

Do we share that DNA and to what extent? And if we hold up our hearts and then compare our hearts with the soils that Jesus describes, if we're honest, for many of us, even those who have walked with Jesus a long time, you will find our hearts ambiguous.

You'll find our hearts something of a mixture. You'll find some of our heart has soil filled with weeds. Some of it is rocky. Some of it is so hard that the word of God has not even penetrated at all.

And the key is not for us to look and gaze at our own heart for too long. We need to look and investigate honestly, soberly, but then we turn our eyes to Jesus.

And we come before Him and like it says in the exhortation to morning prayer at the beginning of the service, we do not disassemble nor cloak them before Christ, but we unveil the secrets of our hearts before Him in confession, bringing them to Him, to His throne of mercy, because He is the one who comes and breaks up the stony soil of our hearts.

[23 : 53] He is the one who comes and takes out the weeds. He is the one who takes hearts that will not take in the Word of God and breaks them and puts them, transforms them into soil that is fertile.

And He will take us and He is faithful to take us and to produce in us that fruit which we can never produce on our own. And we will be demonstrated to be the children of God.

Let's pray. Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness and put upon us the armor of light.

Now, do this, O God, now, in the time of this mortal life in which Your Son, Jesus Christ, came to visit us in such great humility. And in the last day when He shall come again in His glorious majesty to judge both the quick and the dead, grant that we may rise to the life immortal through Him who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit now and forever.

Amen. We continue in prayer. Amen. Come, thou long-expected Jesus.

[25 : 36] thank You, God, our Father, that in Your great wisdom and loving kindness You sent Your Son, Jesus, to be the light of this dark world.

Would the soil of our hearts be continually prepared and made right to receive Him in honor. Would You guard our hearts from the evil one and as we hear Your Word and turn to You in repentance and faith, would the life of Jesus be deeply rooted in those hearts that we would bear much fruit for Your kingdom and for His glory.

Lord, in Your mercy. Amen. Lord Jesus, at times we are all burdened by cares which threaten to choke Your life within us.

Now to Your feet we bring these cares, whether they be relational stresses, financial worries or sicknesses or other things. Thank You for Your daily care for us, Your children.

We pray now for those among us who are suffering in various ways. We pray for Ann, Paul, Sheila, Lee, Rowena, Mark, Ben and Nancy and others known only to You.

[27 : 14] We pray for Mehran who is looking for a favorable decision from the immigration panel. We do remember him, Lord, and pray for Your will to be done in his life.

We pray for the young man, Matthew, who will appear before the courts tomorrow in a serious case, and we just pray that he would turn to You in all his troubles.

We do pray, Lord, for our troops in Afghanistan and especially Christopher on deployment there.

We pray for them for safety and for peace of mind.

Lord, in Your mercy. Finally, Lord, Holy Spirit, we pray for the church spread around the world.

Would You bless our brethren in Malawi and guard the light of the word among them. And at this time, most especially, Lord, we pray for the persecuted church remembering the ongoing strife and deep suffering among Christians in Orissa, India.

[28 : 24] And now, just this weekend, Lord, we remember that the brethren in Nigeria have been violently attacked by terrorists.

Would You comfort all these, our dear brethren, and bind up their sorrows. Give them the light of Your joy in the presence of their enemies, that those that hate You and hate them and live in the darkness of the world would also see the light of the Lord Jesus and receive it. Come, Thou long-expected Jesus. Amen.