

CONDITIONS OF THE HEART

The prophet Jeremiah said, *“You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart”* (Jeremiah 29:13). This “all your heart” aspect counteracts our tendency toward complacency. It’s easy to put off thinking about weighty spiritual matters, to passively accept traditional religious practices, or to simply submit to the teachings of spiritual authorities who want to impress their beliefs upon us. Yielding to these approaches might have been a natural response when we were young, but there comes a point when we must mature in matters of faith and make certain we have embraced the right set of beliefs.

From our first impressions of some people, we might judge them to be happy. Smiles, makeup, and stylish clothing can create an appearance of inner peace. Internally, though, many are in bondage. We were created in the image of God, but when we look at other people, we tend to focus on the outside, which is soiled by sin. We see the rebellion or failure, the bizarre lifestyle or proud attitude, and we often overlook the real value that’s on the inside; where God sees each one of us as a gem of incalculable worth.

Do you judge a book by its cover; or do you read into it to see the value of its contents? Today’s scripture reading tells us about how God looks at people. God didn’t care how good looking David was, because it was David’s pure heart God wanted. When God sees us through His eyes, He sees into our souls and He knows what we really hold dear to our hearts. God doesn’t judge us as the world does, because He knows it’s what is inside that really matters.

The medical profession has an abundance of acronyms for medical conditions, but two of the most commonly diagnosed conditions are COPD and CHF. COPD stands for chronic

obstructive pulmonary disease, and CHF stands for congestive heart failure. As it happens, those are the two causes of death listed on my mom's death certificate. My mom was a Type II diabetic who smoked for 65 years, was 100 pounds overweight, and never exercised a day in her life. This combination of factors was the ultimate cause of her death, but her medical conditions were not what defined her as a person. I knew her as a God fearing and loving woman, who had given her heart to Jesus as a young child. Sadly, that heart became diseased through neglect. Her body was the temple of the Holy Spirit, but the Spirit could no longer sustain her under such conditions; so God called her home.

When doctors perform a physical exam, they look at the skin, hair, nails, and eyes to check for signs of disease or trauma. But that is just the beginning of the process of determining your health and vitality. Our skin and bones are the covering and framework for our delicate internal organs and brain. However, if we don't properly nourish and maintain what is inside our bodies, we put ourselves at risk for disease and death. A person can look perfectly healthy on the outside, while cancer is eating them up on the inside. The same principle applies to another body we call the Church.

Churches have to depend on us, "the Church body," to function in a healthy manner. If we are not strong in our commitment and faithful in giving of our time, talents, and treasures, the church will be slowly eroded away from neglect. Our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit, and they can only function properly if we treat our bodies with the same reverence that we would show toward our Holy God. Likewise, the Church must have all its parts operating at full capacity with our God-given gifts and talents. Anything less, brings erosion and death.

Our physical frame is a creation of remarkable beauty and intricacy. And while certain parts seem more attractive than others, all are useful. God has not called the individual Christian to go it alone in an effort to influence and reach others for Christ. He has equipped the entire local church as a team where corporately we all play different roles, using our individual spiritual gifts to fulfill the Great Commission... *"the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love."* (Ephesians 4:16) We are the Body of Christ, gifted for service to Him, but the Great Commission can't be fulfilled from within these walls!

The body's interdependent nature is a beautiful metaphor for a Christ-centered church. We are the Body of Christ, and we were bought at a price. If one part suffers, we all suffer. Our church has many gifted and willing servants of the Lord, but we have been struggling to maintain the health and vitality of this body. Do you think our church has a heart condition, like COPD or CHF? Actually, I hope we do, because I believe that God's definition of COPD is Christ Only Purpose Driven and CHF stands for Christ Heart Forever. What do you think about that possibility?

God gave one or more spiritual gifts to every single believer to aid in the work for His kingdom. We each need this special "wiring" to carry out our unique role in His plan. He knits that spiritual gift into our personality and inborn talents to create a useful and effective servant. And just to be clear, there is no such thing as a non-gifted believer.

Believers are the Lord's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for the purpose of good works (Eph. 2:10). Spiritual gifts are not our own abilities. The Holy Spirit manifests them through us. Remember, it is the sap running from the vine into the branches that produces fruit (John 15:5). In the same way, the Spirit lives and works through God's followers to bring about acts of service. The Lord's power is behind it all. Think of that when you are tempted to shy away from God-given opportunities.

Most believers are not in a position to influence a lot of people. When we act or speak, only those closest to us notice, but a chain reaction ripples outward to affect an entire community. Paul's metaphor of body parts working together harmoniously is a helpful description of how one small action can have a widespread impact. Consider the way tensing your big toe keeps your foot stable and thereby steadies your whole body. In the same way, a gentle rebuke, a listening ear, or a loving deed benefits the church by strengthening one brother or sister, who then supports another...The Holy Spirit equips us to obey the Lord in whatever He calls us to do. Don't waste your life sitting in a pew! Get busy using that spiritual gift. The mission fields of this world are ripe for harvest, but the workers are few.

As we move into the next phase of the Vital Church Initiative process, we will reorganize our ministries and reevaluate how we do the work of the church. Working together, as the body of Christ, we can "do all things through Christ, who strengthens us." (Phil. 4:13) A healthy church body has to be nurtured and strengthened through the Word of God and fellowship with others. We were created to function as one body, just as the individual parts of our bodies function together to create a healthy human being. Hanging back instead of seeking a place to

serve is a form of thievery. In other words, you're robbing the Lord's church—His people—of your unique contribution. Your role might be small or go unnoticed, but it is vital to Jesus Christ and to the smooth functioning of His body on earth.

God sees us through the eyes of love, as He looks deep into our heart to judge the condition of our soul. What is the condition of your heart? Do others see God's love shining through you because you are using your gifts and talents to serve Him? Rev. 2:3-4 says, *"You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love."* Have you *"lost that lovin' feeling"* in your faith life? Are you struggling with doubt and pain, because you feel heartsick or unloved? Our first love must always be our love of God, because he first loved us. Putting God first in our lives will guarantee a life well lived, and a heart tuned to hear the Father's voice. Remember, God doesn't expect perfection. He will guide the willing heart—and cover missteps with His grace.

Hear now the words of Psalm 42:1–2: *"As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God."* Are you panting after and thirsting for the living God? Do you seek him with all your heart? Is it possible that you have God's version of COPD or CHF? Are you using your gifts to show others the condition of your heart?

Unison Prayer:

Search me Lord, and know my heart. Test me and know my thoughts. Point out anything that is not pleasing to you, and restore to me the joy of your salvation. Create in me a clean

heart, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Open my mouth, that I may sing your praise. You are my God and my heart belongs to you alone. Amen

Closing Song "Lord, I Want to be a Christian" #402