

What Am I Searching For And How Do I Find It?

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on October 18, 1998. Scripture lessons: Jeremiah 31:27-34; Psalm 119:97-104; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

One of the things I long for the most is a heart that *enjoys* obeying God. Sometimes we *obey* God out of fear of the consequences of disobedience which might result in public embarrassment and shame. Sometimes we *disobey* God out of fear of the truth becoming known. For example, we want to be *honest* but, so often, we find myself misleading people and not telling the whole truth in order to protect ourselves. We want to be *forgiving* but the cancer of anger and bitterness sometimes eats away in our heart and we withhold forgiving words from loved ones and withdraw into our lonely hells of vindictiveness. Or we want to be *generous* with our money but we find ourselves making excuses to reduce our level of giving rather than to increase it - after all, I've got two sons in college now. And so on and on we go making excuses for not obeying God. I wish I had desires for only that which would draw me closer to God and enable me to love my neighbor. I long for a heart that *enjoys* obeying God's laws.

I find that I'm not alone in these longings. As I *listen* to people I've come to believe that there's a conflict in the hearts of most of us: we know what we ought to do, but we don't do it. We don't want to do it. And if we're force to do it, we often don't enjoy doing it. For example, we know what the speed limit is. We believe that it's good to have speed limits for the sake of safety. But we don't obey the speed limits. If we spot a policeman, we slam on our breaks and hope we don't get caught and inwardly complain in our impatience. In so many other areas of our lives we don't observe the limits that God has set for our own well-being; limits in, work, and play and sex. We *know* what's right but, so often, we don't *desire* to do it. Martin Marty recounts that the late comic actor W.C. Fields, when caught reading the Bible as he was convalescing in a hospital, replied that he was just looking for loopholes. Maybe we all do that. We look for loopholes when we don't like a command of God. We believe that we should love our neighbor in general, but some particular neighbors we don't want to love.

The prophet Jeremiah knew *exactly* what I'm talking about. He spoke of a day when God would write his laws on our hearts so that we not only *know* what is right, we *enjoy* doing what's right, and we're *able* to do what's right.

When Jeremiah wrote his prophecy of a new covenant he was an old and disillusioned man. But when Jeremiah was young he was hopeful. He believed that laws written on stone, the Ten Commandments given on Mount Sinai, were enough to reshape and reform his nation. He believed that if only the king would enforce God's laws righteousness would bloom like flowers in the desert. As a young man Jeremiah gave his whole hearted support to the radical reforms of King Josiah who came to the throne of Judah when he was a mere boy. Soon after Josiah became king, he began to enforce God's laws on his people. He purged his country of idols. He went through the whole land from north to south, destroying all idolatrous shrines and abolishing pagan worship. He carried his crusade even beyond the boundaries of Judah into Samaria. "Tear down the pagan idols! Arrest the heretical and pagan priests! Put them to the sword! Punish anybody who doesn't keep the Sabbath or observe the religious festivals." Thousands of people died at the hand of young king Josiah.

But paganism wasn't wiped out. The people outwardly conformed, but only out of sheer fear. As soon as Josiah died paganism returned with a vengeance. The gods of Babylon and Egypt and the Canaanite fertility gods were openly worshiped. Josiah's reforms only dealt with externals. His laws didn't change hearts. The experience showed Jeremiah the inability of laws written on stone to reach the heart of a people for God. So Jeremiah began to long for a covenant that would go to the heart. And in his old age the LORD spoke to him. "Jeremiah, what you're searching for, I will provide. I will make a new covenant. Not like the old covenant written on stones. Rather I will put my law within my people. I will write my law on their hearts."

How do we experience this grace of having God's laws written on our hearts? Our Gospel lesson points us in the right direction. Jesus told the story of a judge who feared neither God nor man, and old widow who sought justice from him. Although he had no concern for justice, he gave the old woman justice because she kept bugging him. "The only way I'm going to get this woman off my back is to give her justice." If an unjust judge responds to the persistent complaints of an old widow, how much more will the Father of Jesus respond to us when we ask him to write his law on our hearts? And if God doesn't immediately write his laws on our hearts then we keep on asking repeatedly, persistently. "Give me a heart to love you and my neighbor." Surely, God will answer that prayer eventually but even if he doesn't we keep on asking.

Every now and then we see hints that God has already begun to write his laws on our hearts. Sometimes we even find signs in ourselves. That time we responded to rejection with grace and love. The time we found strength to forgive when we thought it was beyond our ability. The time we responded to some financial need despite our desire to hang on to our money.

Every now and then we see hints that God has begun to write his laws on the hearts of others. I think of a story Kay read to me the other night from the best selling book, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. Dan Clark has a friend named Paul who received a car from his brother as a Christmas present. On Christmas Eve when Paul came out of his office, a street urchin was walking around the shiny new car, admiring it. "Is this your car, Mister?" he asked.

Paul nodded. "My brother gave it to me for Christmas." The boy was astounded. "You mean your brother gave it to you and it didn't cost you nothing? Boy, I wish..." He hesitated.

Of course Paul knew what he was going to wish for. He was going to wish he had a brother like that. But what the boy said jarred Paul all the way down to his heels.

"I wish," the boy went on, "that I could be a brother like that." ...

When God writes his law on our hearts we want to be a brother, a sister, like that. ... Like Christ our brother who died for us.

Last week I was having my devotions. I use a monthly devotional magazine entitled *The Word Among Us*. I came across these words that tied in directly with Jeremiah's promise of a new covenant. Through Jesus, in said, we are no longer slaves to an external law calling us to obedience. Instead, we can experience an inner transformation that stirs us to obey the Lord because of the love we have received, not because of the fear of punishment. Once we become his children through faith in Christ, God plants in our hearts a desire to love him and his people. The desire may seem weak at first, but it grows and takes deeper root every time we encounter the Lord in prayer. We still have the law of God expressed in the Ten Commandments, the Golden Rule, and the teachings of the church to guide and protect us. But the promise of the gospel is that these laws can be written on our hearts and become the natural way we think and act - signs of our inner transformation to Christ.

Can this actually happen to us? God's law within us? I can only tell you what I believe and what I long for. I pray daily for God to write his law on my heart.