

On the Deceitfulness of the Human Heart

by John Wesley

John Wesley's sermon explores the inherent wickedness and deceitfulness of the human heart, urging reliance on God's guidance for true understanding and righteousness.

Scripture: Psalm 139:23-24, Proverbs 28:26, Jeremiah 17:9, Matthew 15:19, Romans 3:10-12, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 5:19-21, Ephesians 4:22-24, James 1:14-15, 1 John 1:8

Topics: "Deceitfulness of the Heart", "Human Nature and Sin"

Description

John Wesley addresses the deceitfulness and wickedness of the human heart, emphasizing that it is inherently corrupt and self-deceiving. He critiques the notion that humanity is fundamentally virtuous, arguing instead that the heart is 'desperately wicked' and 'deceitful above all things,' leading to a myriad of sins and moral failures. Wesley warns against trusting in one's own heart, as it is prone to deception, and calls for reliance on God's understanding and guidance to truly know oneself. He highlights the necessity of divine grace for transformation and the importance of self-examination in the pursuit of righteousness.

Transcript

"The heart of man is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: ~Who can know it?" Jer. 17:9.

1. The most eminent of the ancient Heathens have left us many testimonies of this. It was indeed their common opinion that there was a time when men in general were virtuous and happy; this they termed the "golden age." And the account of this was spread through almost all nations. But it was likewise generally believed that this happy age had expired long ago; and that men are now in the midst of the "iron age." At the commencement of this, says the poet, --

Irumpit venae peioris in aeuum

Omne nefas: fugere pudor, verumque, fidesque

In quorum subiere locum, fraudesque, dolique

Insidiaeque, et vis, et amor sceleratus habendi.

Immediately broke in,

With a full tide, all wickedness and sin:

Shame, truth, fidelity, swift fled away;

And cursed thirst of gold bore unresisted sway.

2. But how much more knowing than these old Pagans are the present generation of Christians! How many laboured panegyrics do we now read and hear on the Dignity of Human Nature. One eminent preacher, in one of his sermons, preached and printed a few years ago, does not scruple to affirm, First, that men in general (if not every individual) are very wise; Secondly, that men in general are very virtuous; and Thirdly, that they are very happy: And I do not know that anyone yet has been so hardy as to controvert the assertion.

3. Nearly related to them were the sentiments of an ingenious gentleman who, being asked, "My Lord, what do you think of the Bible?" answered, "I think it is the finest book I ever read in my life. Only that part of it which indicates the mediatorial scheme, I do not understand; for I do not conceive there is any need of a Mediator between God and man. If indeed," continued he, "I was a sinner, then I should need a Mediator; but I do not conceive I am. It is true, I often act wrong, for want of more understanding: And I frequently feel wrong tempers, particularly proneness to anger; but I cannot allow this to be a sin; for it depends on the motion of my blood and spirits, which I cannot help. Therefore it cannot be a sin; or, if it be, the blame must fall, not on me, but on him that made me." The very sentiments of pious Lord Kames, and modest Mr. Hume!

4. Some years ago, a charitable woman discovered that there was no sinner in the world but the devil. "For," said she, "he forces men to act as they do; therefore they are unaccountable: The blame lights on Satan." But these more enlightened gentlemen have discovered that "there is no sinner in the world but God! For he forces men to think, speak, and act as they do; therefore the blame lights on God alone. Satan, avaunt! It may be doubted whether he himself ever uttered so fond a blasphemy as this!

5. But, whatever unbaptized or baptized infidels may say concerning the innocence of mankind, He that made man, and that best knows what he has made, gives a very different account of him. He informs us that "the heart of man," of all mankind, of every man born into the world, "is desperately wicked;" and that it is "deceitful above all things:" So that we may well ask, "Who can know it?"

I. 1. To begin with this: "The heart of man is desperately wicked." In considering this, we have no need to refer to any particular sins; these are no more than the leaves, or, at most, the fruits, which spring from that evil tree;) but rather to the general root of all. See how this was first planted in heaven itself, by "Lucifer, son of the morning;" -- till then undoubtedly "one of the first, if not the first archangel:" "Thou saidst, I will sit upon the side of the north." See self-will, the first-born of Satan! "I will be like the Most High." See pride, the twin sister of self-will. Here was the true origin of evil. Hence came the inexhaustible flood of evils upon the lower world. When Satan had once transfused his own self-will and pride into the parents of mankind, together with a new species of sin, -- love of the world, the loving the creature above the Creator, -- all manner of wickedness soon rushed in; all ungodliness and unrighteousness; shooting out into crimes of every kind; soon covering the whole face of the earth with all manner of abominations. It would be an endless task to enumerate all the enormities that broke out. Now the fountains of the great deep were broken up. The earth soon became a field of blood: Revenge, cruelty, ambition, with all sorts of injustice, every species of public and private wrongs, were diffused through every part of the earth. Injustice, in ten thousand forms, hatred, envy, malice, blood-thirstiness, with every species of falsehood, rode triumphant; till the Creator, looking down from heaven, would be no more entreated for an incorrigible

race, but swept them off from the face of the earth. But how little were the following generations improved by the severe judgment! They that lived after the flood do not appear to have been a whit better than those that lived before it. In a short time, probably before Noah was removed from the earth, all unrighteousness prevailed as before.

2. But is there not a God in the world? Doubtless there is: And it is "He that hath made us, not we ourselves." He made us gratuitously, of his own mere mercy; for we could merit nothing of him before we had a being. It is of his mercy that he made us at all; that he made us sensible, rational creatures, and above all, creatures capable of God. It is this, and this alone, which puts the essential difference between men and brutes. But if he has made us, and given us all we have, if we owe all we are and have to him; then surely he has a right to all we are and have, -- to all our love and obedience. This has been acknowledged by almost all who believed themselves to be his creatures, in all ages and nations. But a few years ago a learned man frankly confessed: "I could never apprehend that God's having created us, gave him any title to the government of us; or, that his having created us, laid us under any obligation to yield him our obedience." I believe that Dr. Hutcheson was the first man that ever made any doubt of this; or that ever doubted, much less denied, that a creature was obliged to obey his Creator. If Satan ever entertained this thought, (but it is not probable he ever did,) it would be no wonder he should rebel against God, and raise war in heaven. And hence would enmity against God arise in the hearts of men also; together with all the branches of ungodliness which abound therein at this day. Hence would naturally arise the neglect of every duty which we owe to him as our Creator, and all the passions and hopes which are directly opposite to every such duty.

3. From the devil the spirit of independence, self-will, and pride, productive of all ungodliness and unrighteousness, quickly infused themselves into the hearts of our first parents in paradise. After they had eaten of the tree of knowledge, wickedness and misery of every kind rushed in with a full tide upon the earth, alienated us from God, and made way for all the rest. Atheism, (now fashionably termed dissipation,) and idolatry, love of the world, seeking happiness in this or that creature, covered the whole earth.

Upright both in heart and will,

We by our God were made;

But we turn'd from good to ill,

And o'er the creatures stray'd;

Multiplied our wandering thought,

Which first was fix'd on God alone;

In ten thousand objects sought

The bliss we lost in one.

4. It would be endless to enumerate all the species of wickedness, whether in thought, word, or action, that now overspread the earth, in every nation, and city, and family. They all centre in this, -- Atheism, or idolatry; pride, either thinking of themselves more highly than they ought to think, or glorying in something which they have received, as though they had not received it; independence and self-will, -- doing their

own will, not the will of Him that made them. Add to this, seeking happiness out of God, in gratifying the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eye, and the pride of life. Hence it is a melancholy truth that (unless when the Spirit of God has made the difference) all mankind now, as well as four thousand years ago, "have corrupted their ways before the Lord; and every imagination of the thought of man's heart is evil, only evil, and that continually." However therefore men may differ in their outward ways, (in which, undoubtedly, there are a thousand differences,) yet in the inward root, the enmity against God, Atheism, pride, self-will, and idolatry, it is true of all, that "the heart of man," of every natural man, "is desperately wicked."

5. But if this be the case, how is it that everyone is not conscious of it? For who should "know the things of a man, like the spirit of a man that is in him?" Why is it that so few know themselves? For this plain reason: Because the heart is not only "desperately wicked," but "deceitful above all things." So deceitful, that we may well ask, "Who can know it?" Who, indeed, save God that made it? By his assistance we may, in the Second place, consider this, -- the deceitfulness of man's heart.

II. 1. It is deceitful above all things;" that is, in the highest degree, above all that we can conceive. So deceitful, that the generality of men are continually deceiving both themselves and others. How strangely do they deceive themselves, not knowing either their own tempers or characters, imagining themselves to be abundantly better and wiser than they are! The ancient poet supposes there is no exception to this rule, -- "that no man is willing to know his own heart." *_Ut nemo in sese tentat descendere, nemo!_* None but those who are taught of God!

2. And if men thus deceive themselves, is it any wonder that they deceive others also, and that we so seldom find "an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no guile?" In looking over my books, some years ago, I found the following memorandum: "I am this day thirty years old; and till this day I know not that I have met with one person of that age, except in my father's house, who did not use guile, more or less."

3. This is one of the sorts of desperate wickedness which cleaves to the nature of every man, proceeding from those fruitful roots, -- self-will, pride, and independence on God. Hence springs every species of vice and wickedness; hence every sin against God, our neighbour, and ourselves. Against God, -- forgetfulness and contempt of God, of his name, his day, his word, his ordinances; Atheism on the one hand, and idolatry on the other; in particular, love of the world, the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the pride of life; the love of money, the love of power, the love of ease, the love of the "honour that cometh of men," the love of the creature more than the Creator, the being lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God: -- Against our neighbour, ingratitude, revenge, hatred, envy, malice, uncharitableness.

4. Hence there is in the heart of every child of man, an inexhaustible fund of ungodliness and unrighteousness, so deeply and strongly rooted in the soul, that nothing less than almighty grace can cure it. From hence naturally arises a plentiful harvest of all evil words and works; and to complete the whole, that complex of all evils, --

-- That foul monster, War, that we meet,

Lays deep the noblest work of the creation;

Which wears in vain its Maker's glorious image,

Unprivileged from thee!

In the train of this fell monster are murder, adultery, rape, violence, and cruelty of every kind. And all these abominations are not only found in Mahometan or Pagan countries, where their horrid practice may seem to be the natural result of equally horrid principles; but in those that are called Christian countries, yea, in the most knowing and civilized states and kingdoms. And let it not be said, "This is only the case in Roman Catholic countries." Nay, we that are called Reformed are not one whit behind them in all manner of wickedness. Indeed, no crime ever prevailed among the Turks or Tartars, which we here cannot parallel in every part of Christendom. Nay, no sin ever appeared in heathen or papal Rome, which is not found at this day in Germany, France, Holland, England, and every other Protestant as well as popish country. So that it might now be said, with as much truth and as few exceptions, of every court in Europe, as it was formerly in the court of Saul: "There is none righteous, no not one; they are altogether become abominable: There is none that understandeth, and seeketh after God."

5. But is there no exception as to the wickedness of man's heart? Yes, in those that are born of God. "He that is born of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not." God has "purified his heart by faith," so that his wickedness is departed from him. "Old things are passed away, and all things" in him "are become new." So that his heart is no longer desperately wicked, but "renewed in righteousness and true holiness." Only let it be remembered, that the heart, even of a believer, is not wholly purified when he is justified. Sin is then overcome, but it is not rooted out; it is conquered, but not destroyed. Experience shows him, First, that the roots of sin, self-will, pride, and idolatry, remain still in his heart. But as long as he continues to watch and pray, none of them can prevail against him. Experience teaches him, Secondly, that sin (generally pride or self-will) cleaves to his best actions: So that, even with regard to these, he finds an absolute necessity for the blood of atonement.

6. But how artfully does this conceal itself, not only from others, but even from ourselves! Who can discover it in all the disguises it assumes, or trace it through all its latent mazes? And if it be so difficult to know the heart of a good man, who can know the heart of a wicked one, which is far more deceitful? No unregenerate man, however sensible, ever so experienced, ever so wise in his generation. And yet these are they who pique themselves upon "knowing the world," and imagine they see through all men. Vain men! One may boldly say they "know nothing yet as they ought to know." Even that politician in the late reign neither knew the heart of himself or of other men, whose favourite saying was: "Do not tell me of your virtue, or religion: I tell you, every man has his price." Yes, Sir R[obert]; every man like you; everyone that sells himself to the devil.

7. Did that right honourable wretch, compared to whom Sir R[obert] was a saint, know the heart of man, -- he that so earnestly advised his own son, "never to speak the truth, to lie or dissemble as often as he speaks, to wear a mask continually?" that earnestly counselled him, "not to debauch single women," (because some inconveniences might follow,) "but always married women?" Would one imagine this grovelling animal ever had a wife or a married daughter of his own? O rare Lord C[hesterfield]! Did ever man so well deserve, though he was a Peer of the realm, to die by the side of Newgate? Or did ever book so well deserve to be burned by the common hangman, as his Letters? Did Mr. David Hume, lower, if possible, than either of the former, know the heart of man? No more than a worm or a beetle does. After "playing so idly with the darts of death," do you now find it a laughing matter? What think you now of Charon? Has he ferried you over Styx? At length he has taught you to know a little of your own heart! At length you know it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God!

8. One of the ablest champions of infidelity (perhaps the most elegant, and the most decent writer that ever produced a system of religion without being in the least obliged to the Bible for it) breaks out in the

fullness of his heart: "Who would not wish that there was full proof of the Christian revelation, since it is undoubtedly the most benevolent system that ever appeared in the world!" Might he not add a reason of another kind, -- Because without this man must be altogether a mystery to himself? Even with the help of Revelation, he knows exceeding little; but without it, he would know abundantly less, and nothing with any certainty. Without the light which is given us by the oracles of God, how could we reconcile his greatness with his meanness? While we acknowledged, with Sir John Davies, --

I know my soul has power to know all things,

Yet is she blind, and ignorant of all:

I know I'm one of nature's little kings;

Yet to the least and vilest things in thrall.

9. Who then knoweth the hearts of all men? Surely none but He that made them. Who knoweth his own heart? Who can tell the depth of its enmity against God? Who knoweth how deeply it is sunk into the nature of Satan?

III. 1. From the preceding considerations, may we not learn, First, "He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool?" For who that is wise would trust one whom he knows to be "desperately wicked?" especially, whom he hath known, by a thousand experiments, to be "deceitful above all things"? What can we expect, if we still trust a known liar and deceiver, but to be deceived and cheated to the end?

2. We may hence, in the Second place, infer the truth of that other reflection of Solomon: "Seest thou a man that is wise in his own eyes? there is more hope of a fool than of him." For at what a distance from wisdom must that man be who never suspected his want of it? And will not his thinking so well of himself prevent his receiving instruction from others? Will he not be apt to be displeased at admonition, and to construe reproof into reproach? Will he not therefore be less ready to receive instruction than even one that has little natural understanding? Surely no fool is so incapable of amendment as one that imagines himself to be wise. He that supposes himself not to need a physician, will hardly profit by his advice.

3. May we not learn hence, Thirdly, the wisdom of that caution, "Let him who thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall?" Or, to render the text more properly,) "Let him that assuredly standeth take heed lest he fall." How firmly soever he may stand, he has still a deceitful heart. In how many instances has he been deceived already! And so he may again. Suppose he be not deceived now, does it follow that he never will? Does he not stand upon slippery ground? And is he not surrounded with snares? Into which he may fall and rise no more?

4. Is it not wisdom for him that is now standing, continually to cry to God, "Search me, O Lord, and prove me; try out my reins and my heart! Look well, if there be any way of wickedness in me, and lead me in the way everlasting?" Thou alone, O God, "knowest the hearts of all the children of men:" O show thou me what spirit I am of, and let me not deceive my own soul! Let me not "think of myself more highly than I ought to think." But let me always "think soberly, according as thou hast given me the measure of faith!"

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