

The Deceitfulness of the Heart

David Black (1762-1806)

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"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked." Jeremiah 17:9.

True and faithful is the testimony of God. Men may amuse themselves and their fellow creatures with empty, high sounding descriptions of the dignity of human nature, and the all-sufficient powers of man; but every humble, every truly enlightened mind, will see and acknowledge the justness of the declaration in the text, that the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked.

This is a truth which, like many others in the word of God, can only be learned from experience. As long as we assent to it, merely because it is contained in the Scriptures, we are strangers to its nature, and cannot understand what it means: But, as in water face answereth to face, so doth the heart of man to man. Human nature in different ages and in different circumstances is still the same; and when, by means of the word, the secrets of our own hearts are made manifest, when we come to perceive the exact correspondence between the declarations of Scripture, and what passes within us, we are obliged to confess, that God is in it of a truth, since none but He who searcheth the hearts, and trieth the reins of the children of men, could know so perfectly the inward workings of our minds, and those numberless evils which are hidden from the view of all our fellow creatures.

I purpose at present to speak only of the deceitfulness of the heart, a subject sufficiently extensive, not merely for one, but for many discourses, and which, after all that can be said on it, must remain in a great measure unexhausted, for who can know it? The deceit that lodges in the heart is so complicated and so various, that it is impossible to trace it in all its windings. It is but comparatively a small part of it that any created mind can discover, and therefore, in the verse immediately following the text, God ascribes this knowledge to himself as his peculiar prerogative; I the Lord search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.

But, by the blessing of God, it may be useful to turn our attention to this deeply interesting subject, and point out some of the plainest and most decisive evidences of the deceitfulness of the human heart, which scripture, observation, and experience afford. It appears,

I. From men's general ignorance of their own character.

There is not any thing in the history of mankind more surprising, or at first view more unaccountable, than the self-partiality which prevails in the world. One would be apt to imagine, that it should not be so difficult to arrive at the knowledge of our real character, possessing, as we do, every possible advantage for attaining it. We have constant access to our own breasts, and are more deeply interested in the discovery, than in the acquisition of any other knowledge. But we see, in fact, that of all knowledge this is the rarest and most uncommon. Nor is it difficult to account for this fact, since the heart is deceitful above all things. Self-love casts a veil over the understanding, the judgment is warped by various circumstances, and hence it is, that many seem to be almost entire strangers to their own character. They think, and reason, and judge quite differently in any thing relating to themselves, from what they do in those cases in which they have no personal interest. Accordingly, we often hear people exposing follies for which they themselves are

remarkable, and talking with great severity against particular vices, of which, if all the world be not mistaken, they themselves are notoriously guilty. It is astounding to what a pitch this self-ignorance and self-partiality may be carried! How frequently do we see men, not only altogether blind to their own character, but insensible to every thing that can be said to convince them of their mistake. In vain do you tender to them instruction or reproof, for they turn away every thing from themselves, and never once imagine that they are the persons for whose benefit these counsels and admonitions are chiefly intended.

Of this we are every day furnished with frequent instances in common life. The sacred history affords us a remarkable example in the case of David on one particular occasion: I say on one particular occasion, for the description that we have been giving by no means applies to David's general character. Few were, in general, more accustomed to self-inquiry. But when Nathan the prophet was sent to him, in consequence of his grievous fall in the matter of Uriah, such was the insensibility, and self-ignorance which sin had produced, that he perceived not the application of the parable to himself, till the prophet declared, Thou art the man.

From this and similar instances, we are led to observe that, if we trace this self-ignorance to its source, we shall find that it is in general owing, not only to that partiality and fondness which we all have for ourselves, but to the prevalence of some particular passion or interest, which perverts the judgment in every case where that particular passion or interest is concerned. And hence it happens that some men can reason and judge fairly enough, even in cases in which they themselves are interested, provided it does not strike against their favourite passion or pursuit. Thus the covetous man will easily enough perceive the evil of intemperance, and perhaps condemn himself if he has been guilty of this sin in a particular instance. But he is altogether insensible to the dominion of his predominant passion, the love of money. It has become habitual to him. His mind is accustomed to it, so that in every case, where his interest is concerned, his judgment is warped, and in these instances he plainly discovers that he is totally unacquainted with his own character. The same observation applies to other particular vices.

Here then, is one striking evidence of the deceitfulness of the heart. It produces ignorance of ourselves; it keeps men strangers to their own character; and makes them fatally presume that they are in friendship with God, while they are enemies to him in their minds and by wicked works.

II. The deceitfulness of the heart appears from men's general disposition on all occasions to justify their own conduct.

This disposition our first parents discovered immediately upon their eating the fruit of the forbidden tree. When the Lord appeared to Adam and charged him with his guilt, he attempted to justify himself by saying, The woman whom thou gavest me to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat. And in like manner the woman replied, The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat. Something also of this disposition is common to all their sinful posterity. We are all extremely partial to ourselves, and apt to view our own conduct in a different light from that in which we are accustomed to regard the conduct of our fellow creatures. When we observe improper conduct in others, the impropriety strikes us at once. Sin appears to us in its true and genuine colours, and we are ready to judge and condemn, perhaps with too much severity. But in our own case, the action is seen through a deceitful medium. The judgment is perverted by self-love, and a thousand expedients are employed, if not to vindicate, at least to apologise for our conduct. If we cannot justify the action itself, we attempt to extenuate its guilt from the peculiar circumstances of the case. We were placed in such and such a particular situation, which we could not avoid; our temptations were strong: we did not go the lengths that many others would have gone in similar circumstances; and the general propriety of our conduct is more than sufficient to overbalance any little irregularities with which we may sometimes be chargeable. Thus, on all occasions, men endeavour to justify their own conduct. They even learn to call their favourite vices by softer names.

With them, intemperance is only the desire of good fellowship; lewdness is gallantry, or the love of pleasure; pride, a just sense of our own dignity; and covetousness, or the love of money, a prudent regard to our worldly interest. Strange infatuation! to think that by changing the names of vices, it is possible to change their nature; and that what is base and detestable in others, should be pardonable only in ourselves!

But it may be farther observed on this part of the subject, that besides these single determinate acts of wickedness, of which we have now been speaking, there are numberless cases in which the wickedness cannot be exactly defined, but consists in a certain general temper and course of action, or in the habitual neglect of some duty, whose bounds are not precisely fixed. This is the peculiar province of self-deceit, and here, most of all, men are apt to justify their conduct, however plainly and palpably wrong. Whoever considers human life will see, that a great part, perhaps the greatest part of the intercourse amongst mankind cannot be reduced to fixed, determined rules: yet in these cases there is a right and a wrong, and conduct that is sinful and immoral, and a conduct, on the other hand, that is virtuous and praise-worthy, though it may be difficult, nay, perhaps impossible to ascertain the precise limits of each.

To give an example: There is not a word in our language that expresses more detestable wickedness than oppression. Yet the nature of this vice cannot be so exactly stated, nor the bounds of it so determinately marked, as that we shall be able to say, in all instances, where rigid right and justice end, and oppression begins. In like manner, it is impossible to determine how much of every man's income ought to be devoted to pious and charitable purposes: the boundaries cannot be exactly marked; yet we are at no loss in the case of others to perceive the difference betwixt a liberal and generous man, and one of a hard-hearted and penurious disposition. In these cases, there is great latitude left for every man to determine in his own favour, and consequently to deceive himself; and it is chiefly in such instances as these, that men are ready to justify their conduct, however criminal. Because they are not chargeable with single determinate acts of wickedness, because you cannot precisely point out to them, in so many words, wherein they have done amiss, they falsely conclude, that their conduct is unexceptionable; though, perhaps, their general temper and behaviour may be uniformly wrong, inconsistent with the spirit of the gospel, and contrary to the plainest dictates of morality. I proceed to observe,

III. That the deceitfulness of the heart appears from the difficulty with which men are brought to acknowledge their faults, even when conscious that they have done wrong.

This necessarily follows from that disposition in human nature, to which I have already adverted, namely, the disposition on all occasions to justify our own conduct. Hence men in general are so backward to acknowledge their faults, and so displeased with those who are so faithful and friendly as to point them out. How few can bear to be told their faults! This is the sure and ready way to make most men your enemies, even though you administer the reproof in the gentlest, and most prudent manner. Instead of reflecting on their own conduct, which might convince them of the justice of what is laid to their charge, many, in these cases, set themselves immediately to discover the faults in their faithful reprovers, or in those, who, they suspect, may have informed them; and turning away their attention entirely from themselves, are only concerned to find equal, if not greater blemishes in others. Thus deceitful is the heart of man. We wish always to entertain a favourable opinion of ourselves and of our own conduct, and are displeased with those who endeavour in any instance to change this opinion, though it be done with the best, and most friendly intention.

But how unreasonable and preposterous is this degree of self-love! Were we alive to our true interests, we would wish to become better acquainted with our follies and our faults, and would esteem our faithful reprovers our best friends. Instead of feeling any resentment against them, we would turn all our resentment against ourselves; and endeavour, in the strength of divine grace, to

correct those evils which, were we not so blinded by self-love, we might easily discover. But through the deceitfulness of the heart, men are generally disposed to justify their own conduct, and ready to throw the blame of what is amiss on any thing sooner than on themselves.

IV. The deceitfulness of the heart appears from the disposition which men discover to rest in notions and forms of religion, while they are destitute of its power.

In the purest ages of the church, there have been persons of this character, men who, from selfish or worldly motives have assumed a profession of religion, without understanding its nature, or feeling its power; having a name to live, but being spiritually dead. It is not easy for persons whose minds are in any degree informed, to divest themselves entirely of religious impressions. The fears that naturally accompany guilt, will at times obtrude themselves on the most giddy and thoughtless. But the pure, the spiritual, the humbling doctrines and precepts of the gospel are by no means agreeable to the natural mind; and therefore it is not wonderful that persons who have some apprehension of the truth of religion, but no acquaintance with its power, should eagerly grasp at something which may give them hope beyond the grave, while at the same time it leaves them in the quiet possession of their beloved lusts.

Hence it is that so many are hearers of the word only, and not doers also, deceiving their own selves. Hence it is that so many shew great zeal about small and unimportant matters in religion, who are shamefully deficient in some of its plainest and most essential duties; that so many are punctual in their observance of religious institutions, who are unjust and uncharitable in their conduct towards their fellow creatures; that so many can talk fluently and correctly on religious subjects, who are visibly under the dominion of evil tempers or evil habits; that so many are scrupulously exact in what regards the externals of religion, who are at no pains to cultivate its genuine spirit, or to perform its most substantial duties. Like the Pharisees of old, who paid tithes of anise, mint, and cummin, they neglect the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith. Hypocrisy in all its forms and appearances flows from the deceitfulness of the heart; for in general men deceive themselves, before they attempt to deceive others. Few are so bold as to lay down a plan of imposing on the world, without endeavouring, in the first instance at least, to impose on their own minds. Nor is it difficult, when the mind is strongly biased by the love of any particular sin, or the pursuit of any particular interest, to persuade ourselves that our conduct is, at least, excusable, if not innocent. A dishonest mind is satisfied with the meanest shifts and evasions; and persons who wish to be deceived into a good opinion of their conduct, are seldom at a loss to accomplish their purpose.

Balaam was a remarkable instance of this. He was a man of extensive knowledge and superior gifts. He was not a stranger to the impressions of religion, for in his calm reflecting moments, he desired to die the death of the righteous, nor could any consideration prevail with him to oppose the divine commandment, by cursing those whom God had blessed. But he loved the wages of unrighteousness. Covetousness was his ruling passion, and led him, by the advice which he gave to Balak, to contradict the whole spirit and design of the very prohibition, for the letter of which he professed so sacred a regard. It would be easy to multiply particulars on this subject, But I only add, in the

Fifth and last place, That the deceitfulness of the heart appears in the highest degree, when men overlook the real motives of their conduct, and mistake the workings of their own corruptions for the fruits of the Spirit of God.

That there is such deceitfulness in the world, none can doubt, who consider the dreadful enormities that have been committed under the sacred name of religion. In many cases, it must be acknowledged, these enormities have been committed by persons who were conscious of the motives from which they acted, and who employed religion merely as an engine to attain the objects

of their avarice or ambition. But in other cases it is no less certain, that men have concealed from themselves the motive of their conduct, and even mistaken the workings of their corruptions for the fruits of the Spirit of God.

Of this we have several examples in scripture. A striking instance of it occurs in the conduct of Jehu, who, when shedding the blood of Jezreel to serve the purposes of his own ambition, said exultingly to Jehonadab, Come, see my zeal for the Lord! It is not improbable, that at the time he imagined himself to be influenced by zeal for God, though there cannot be a doubt, that in what he did he was actuated chiefly by the love of power. Our blessed Lord forewarns his disciples, that the time should come, when whosoever killed them, would think that he did God service; in like manner as the prophet Isaiah had declared concerning the persecuted people of God in his time, Hear the word of the Lord, ye that tremble at his word. Your brethren that hated you, that cast you out for my name's sake, said, Let the Lord be glorified.

We are greatly shocked when we read of the dreadful persecutions which in different ages have been carried on against the faithful servants of Christ, by the blood-thirsty votaries of Rome; yet these men pretended zeal for the glory of God: Nor is it improbable, but that many of them might so far deceive themselves, as to imagine, that they were doing God service, while shedding the blood of his saints. This is indeed the highest instance of the extreme deceitfulness and desperate wickedness of the human heart, and the most awful proof of being given up of God to a reprobate mind. But, in a lesser degree, men frequently practice this kind of deceit upon themselves, ascribing to the word and to the Spirit of God what is evidently the effect of their own ignorance, wickedness and depravity.

On the whole, since the ways in which men deceive themselves are so various, can we be too jealous over our own hearts? He that trusteth to his own heart, says the wise man, is a fool; and the reason is obvious, because the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. Let us therefore, Brethren, accustom ourselves to self-examination. Instead of indulging a censorious disposition, and looking abroad to discover the faults of our neighbours, let us descend into our own breasts, and observe the plagues of our own hearts. Let us attend, not merely to our outward actions, but to the principles and motives from which these actions proceed. Let us consider our conduct, not in the light in which self-love and self-partiality would present it to our minds, but in the light in which any impartial spectator would view it, in the light in which God's word teaches us to consider it, and in the light in which it will be judged of at last, when God shall bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and make manifest the counsels of all hearts.

We are all more or less liable to self-deceit; and they who think they have the least of it, are in general most of all under its dominion. Let us therefore distrust our own judgment, and, sensible of our own ignorance and liableness to mistake, let us pray to God for his divine teaching; saying, with Elihu in the book of job, That which I see not, teach thou me; and with the Psalmist, Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts, and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.