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Rick Myatt

WAY BETTER THAN SPIDER MAN

John 17:26

If you’ve watch TV you no doubt have seen those commercials for the Capital One credit card that include the question, “What’s in your wallet?” I always think, “Well, not enough money, for one thing.” However, that’s not the big point I want to get to. There’s a better and much more important question that we need to answer. That question is “What’s in your heart?”

I once heard a classic true story that a mom told about her little 5 year old daughter, who really loved the Spider Man character. The Mom had taken her little girl to their pediatrician for a routine physical exam. The pediatrician wanted to calm her and connect with her, so at one point she told the little girl she was going to listen to her heart. She placed the stethoscope on the little girl’s chest, listened for a moment, then said, “Is that Spider Man I hear in there?” The girl answered, “No, Jesus is in my heart. Spider Man is on my underwear.”

What’s in your heart? The answer to that question impacts us in a number of ways, for just as we typically have more than just one thing in our wallets, so we have more than one in our hearts. You will sometimes hear someone say, “Her heart just wasn’t in it.” That means a person didn’t give her best effort at something because she didn’t care that much about it and she probably gave up on it.

My dad made some efforts to teach his sons about being outdoorsmen. He tried to teach us fishing and camping. But his heart wasn’t really in it. I think it was because as a young man he went on an extended camping trip in Europe courtesy of the US army. He felt he had enough of that to last a lifetime, so the result of that is both of his sons are of the Jim Gaffigan tribe. The only happy camper is the one leaving the campground to go home. We’re what you might all indoorsy.

What is in our hearts is much the same as saying our heart is in it. It has a huge impact on who we are and what we do. It is a big factor in our identity For some thoughts on the question of what is in our hearts today we are going to look at John 17:26.

JESUS PRAYED:

THAT THE FATHER’S LOVE WOULD BE IN THEM

We have seen before that Jesus said his task was to make the truth about God the Father known to people. That was a big and crucially important mission. It is common for human beings to come up with the idea of God. Belief in a Creator has been widespread in humans throughout history. It is not difficult to understand why. I don’t look at our 2015 Nissan Rogue, which has been a reliable vehicle and think, “It is astounding that this machine just popped into being. All these materials formed into parts and somehow melded together through random chance and bam, it made a vehicle.”

If I did think that, I’d be dumber than an instruction manual for a spoon. Everything about that car screams that someone designed it, created parts for it and purposely assembled it. How hard is it to see it is not the accidental result of random events, but that it was intentionally created? To borrow a phrase from Geico, “It’s so easy a caveman could do it.”

Similarly, you can look at the exquisite operation of the universe with its incredible fine tuning and draw some parallel conclusions. In his book, *A Brief History Of Time*, physicist Stephen Hawking wrote, “The remarkable fact is the values of the constants of physics seem to have been very finely adjusted to make possible the development of life.” Listen to his words. The physics seem to have been very finely adjusted. That requires someone to do the adjusting.

Consider also the incredible human body. Our brains have more connections between brain cells than there are stars in our galaxy. The blood inside your body circulates about 12,000 miles a day, pumped by your ever beating heart. Just over a year ago I stupidly smashed my thumb in a car door. It was absurdly painful, and it made my thumb a mess. That thing was a problem for a long time. Today you can’t even tell that thumb was ever damaged. My body has astounding systems for healing itself. Is that an accident? It does not seem likely. Much about our body suggests design. It is common for humans to have the sense that all we see around us and all we are had to come from somewhere. Many of us have the sense that there is a Great Designer, a Creator behind all of this.

But what is this Creator like? Throughout history and continuing to this day there have been myriad theories about the nature of that creator. But they don’t agree, leaving us to think that everyone is guessing and no one really knows. Jesus claimed he came to clear up the confusion. He came to confirm for us first, that the Creator is real, he does actually exist. Second, what he is like, what kind of being he is. Third, how we can connect with him and have a relationship with him. In Jesus we learn that God is very real and is active in our world, that he is powerful, almighty, but that he is also good, kind, joyful, merciful, generous, wise and gentle. We learn that we can have a relationship with him by faith, trusting in his grace, kindness and love through Jesus Christ. One of the most important revelations of all that Jesus brought us is that this awesome being actually loves us.

We would have no real way of knowing God loves us apart from Jesus. Some people might say that we can look around at the beauty in creation and conclude God is loving just from that. And truly there are some spectaculars, lovely sights on this earth. However, I grew up in Bakersfield. The Creator also made that. Have you ever been to Barstow? Yeah, the Creator made that too. More to the point, there’s a lot in life that doesn’t speak of God’s love. As you know, Laurie and I lost a child to a birth defect. That didn’t feel like love. Earthquakes, tornadoes, tsunamis, hurricanes and diseases like cancer, Huntingtons’s Disease and ALS don’t feel like love. Just look at how nature operates. It doesn’t shout love. One time we found a moth on a wall inside our house. I wanted to kill it, but Laurie wanted to save it. She managed to get it cupped inside her hands then she took it outside, opened her hands and set it free. It was beautiful. It began to fly away, then a bird came swooping in and nailed it. It was that bird’s lunch. Welcome to nature. How loving. We are not going to know that God is love unless Jesus revealed that truth to us and then demonstrated it in a powerful way. John got this message so clearly that in a letter he wrote he said God is love. He is the definition of love, the epitome of it. Everything he does is infused with and driven by love.

Jesus said he made the Father known to people in order that “the love you have for me may be in them.” Jesus wanted us to not just intellectually be aware of the fact that God is full of love, but to have that love become real to us, to have it invade our hearts and lives and be active in us.

In what sense does the Father-Son relationship exist in God? God didn’t have a Son in exactly the same way that human fathers have sons. This description is something of an analogy. The way the persons of the Trinity relate to each other is a mystery. We cannot completely comprehend it fully. But God used the Father and Son relationship to help us at least grasp something of how they relate to each other. God the Father loves God the Son in a way that is similar to how a human father loves his son.

When my son was young I knew a lot of his friends. They were often at our house. I loved all those boys. But only one was my son. I would sacrifice for him in ways I would not for others. I remember sleepless nights when he was sick as a child and I stayed with him to comfort him and watch him. I remember playing paintball with him because that’s what he wanted to do, even though it wasn’t an interest of mine. I definitely recall getting shot with paintballs. I recall a long bus ride out to Calexico when he was a sophomore in high school for a playoff football game on a cold wintry night even though he would get in the game for only a couple of plays. I remember sitting in the bleachers for his last high school football game in freezing, driving wind and rain that was miserable, but we did that because we love him. I remember driving up to San Luis Obispo in a truck to help him move into a house for a year in college, moving his stuff in all day, then driving back home pretty much all night.

Of course, I feel exactly the same about my daughter, and now about all of our grandchildren. But the point I want to make here is that I love my son as much as it is possible to love another person. Nothing will ever change that. The strength of that love is only a pale analogy for how the Father loves the Son, how he delights in him and is proud of him and would do anything for him.

How much more powerful is God’s love for his Son than my love for my son? It is hard for me to fathom the possibility that there could be any greater love, because I feel like there is no limit to how I love my kids and now grandkids. However, consider how much greater God is than I am. I’ll give you an illustration. How much weight do you suppose I could bench press? I haven’t tried to go for my personal maximum because I have no interest in hurting myself that way. However, I would estimate that figure is no more than 200 pounds. How much weight do you think God could bench press? Well the question is absurd, because God is omnipotent, meaning he has all power. He could lift an infinite amount of weight. So the difference between us is the difference between 200 pounds and infinite pounds, which is a difference of infinity. Draw the analogy. Instead of thinking about capacity to lift a weight, let’s consider the parallel of the capacity to love. That same difference exists, meaning God’s love is infinitely greater, deeper, more powerful than my love. And Jesus prayed that this love the Father had for him would now be in us.

Toby has a new truck. Last year he bought a Ford F150 Lightning, which is all electric. The part about this that amazes me is that as long as the battery in that truck is charged, it can actually power their house in case of a power outage. That battery is a power pack, and it can run the truck if he wants to drive somewhere, or it can run the lights, refrigerator and TV in their house if they need it to.

I mention this because I think of the love the Father has for the Son as being like that power pack. It is a source of great power that does a number of things in us. It has the power to set us free. Do you remember going out on a first date? It’s been so long for me that I can hardly recall it, but I do remember one thing clearly. That was the nervousness of the whole thing. You wanted to make a good impression because you didn’t want this to be a one and done kind of thing. That meant you had to look your best, be your most charming, not look like a stumbling, bumbling fool. You were on trial, and you wanted not just to pass the test, but to nail it.

How free did you feel in that situation? Not free at all. You were sort of on pins and needles. You were self conscious and probably awkward. That is a bit of an analogy for all of life. We have the sense that we need to make a good impression. We need to be at our best, our most winsome, and we worry about being the stumbling, bumbling idiots that we sometimes feel we are. We have to hide that and appear to be something more than we really are. Much of the time we don’t even know who it is we need to impress, we just know it is important somehow.

Laurie and I took care of our two grandsons, Wesley and Hunter for a couple of days this week so their mom and dad could have a break. At one point I was given the task of getting Wesley’s PJ’s on him. I was a little rusty at it and it didn’t go all the smoothly. Wesley said to me, “You’re not very good at this, Bapaw. You need to go somewhere and practice.” Well great. Everybody’s a critic. Yet another thing that I’m not good at. We go through life trying to be good at everything, and it is far from restful. It is stressful and exhausting and in the end can be defeating.

That is not a free way to live. It is awkward and uncomfortable. The love of the Father being in our lives sets us free from that. It means we are loved and valued just as we are. We don’t have to prove something. We are not on trial. We don’t have to perform. One of the great joys of being married is that in this relationship I am loved just for who I am. A couple of weeks ago Laurie and I both got colds. One morning we got up and had breakfast together. The biggest and most persistent side effects of the immune therapy treatments I had last year were fatigue, and then issues it caused with my digestive tract. I got over the worst of the stomach issues after a couple of months, but it has left me with an odd effect, which is every time I eat anything it causes me to burp. It happens every time I swallow anything. So that morning I had my usual episode, then shortly after that at one point Laurie said to me, “You are just so cute.” Moments later I went to the bathroom, and when I did I saw myself in the mirror. The word that came to mind when I saw that reflection was not cute. I hadn’t shaved in a couple of days. My hair was dirty and sticking out at odd angles. My face had this sort of sick pallor about it. I was wearing the same sweats I’d had on for a couple of days. How could she call this cute? It was not cute. I looked like a burping homeless man. I decided Laurie is either a consummate liar, or God has done some sort of miracle where he blinds her to what she’s actually seeing. Whatever the case, her love makes me feel loved, secure, and free. And so it is in our relationship with God. When his love is in us, we are set free to simply be ourselves and be at rest.

Remember I said God’s love in us is like a power pack. It is there with the pulsating, unstoppable power of love. Not only does it enable us to experience God’s freeing love, but it enables us to love him back. One significant way that God wants us to love him is by loving other people. The more we experience and are aware of God’s love for us in us, the more we will be able to love God and to express that love by loving other people, who may not be all that lovable.

THAT HE HIMSELF WOULD BE IN THEM

The last thing Jesus said in this verse is a real stunner. He prayed, “That I myself might be in them.” He wanted to somehow come to live inside his followers! How could Jesus actually take up residence inside other people? What does that even mean? We have no parallels in life that can help us envision this, so it often becomes one of those things we say, but don’t really believe is actually true.

We can understand someone being in our heart. Our grandchildren are always in our hearts, for instance. When we say something or someone is in our hearts we mean we really care about and think about that person or thing. But Jesus didn’t pray that we would just care about him. He prayed that he himself would be in us somehow. In 2 Corinthians 13:5 Paul wrote, “Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you?” Not, you care about him in your hearts, but he is actually in you. In Ephesians 3:17 Paul prayed that Christ, “May dwell in your hearts through faith.” He prayed that Christ somehow might live in us. In John 14:17 he had said speaking of himself that he “lives with you and will be in you.”

Well that’s bizarre. How can one person actually live inside another? How does that happen? I don’t know. There is no human analogy for it. But that should not stop us from accepting the idea. There are lots of things we have to accept without fully understanding them. For instance, physicists tell us the universe is full of something good called dark matter. What is it? They don’t know. Calling it dark matter is a bit like when the nice things people of Israel were in the wilderness and they needed food God sent some stuff they could just pick up off the ground and eat. They called it manna, which meant, “what is it?” Dark matter is like saying what is it? We don’t know. But we still believe it.

Or consider slime mold. That is actually a rudimentary one called creature. But this bizarre one called creature can join with others of its kind and make this sort of oozing mass. This is where it gets really weird. Researchers have detected signs of decision making and intelligence in that mass. It has shown the ability to solve a maze, for instance. Without a single brain cell it seems to have some semblance of intelligence. How can this be? No one knows. But we accept it. So though we don’t understand how Jesus could be in us, we accept it.

Does this mean he’s going to possess us. One of the more curious stories out of the life of Jesus is found in Luke 8. Jesus and his disciples had a close encounter of the oddest kind with a man Luke described as demon possessed. This dude wasn’t just mentally ill. His behavior was bizarre and at times not explainable. This man’s behavior wasn’t just odd. It was freakish and scary. Luke, a doctor, said a being took control of him and turned him into a nightmare. So when Jesus spoke of him being in us, was he saying we would be possessed, not by some evil spirit being, but by him? He would actually take control of our lives, our minds, and we would kind of become like puppets under his control?

No, it’s not like that. It means that Jesus somehow will reside inside us and begin influencing and changing us. He won’t take over our will or make us do bizarre things, but he will exert his influence on the kind of people we are. Our best example is that group of early believers. Jesus came to live in them. They didn’t become puppets with the great puppet master pulling the strings. They still exhibited their own personalities and they still made choices. But more and more they began to live like Jesus did. They began to resemble his character.

One example of this is in Acts 4. Peter and John had been arrested because they had healed a man and were preaching about Jesus to people. In verse 7 the authorities asked them, “By what power or what name did you do this?” Remember that these were the people Peter was petrified of the night Jesus was arrested. He was so terrified at what they might do to him that he lied about even knowing Jesus. Now he’s on trial before those same people. In verse 10 he boldly answered, “It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead.”

Well where did that come from? It sure wasn’t like Peter’s response a few weeks earlier. Verse 13 says, “When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and took note that these men had been with Jesus.” Peter and John began to live like Jesus did. They displayed the same courage that he had shown. They weren’t perfect. Later on Peter would have a little problem with fear again. Having Jesus in his heart did not instantaneously make him perfect. But it did make him different than he used to be.

You might think you don’t feel like someone is living inside you. I don’t feel like it. But the issue isn’t whether we feel like it, but whether it is true or not. Did you know that you have countless viruses living in you? You know when you have some viruses. You can feel them because your immune system recognizes them as dangerous and attacks them, and it’s response makes you feel sick. But there are many others that you don’t feel, you are not aware of, but they are there whether you feel them or not. That can be true of Jesus to some extent. However, he will make a difference in us.

What would you expect to see if Jesus actually lived inside you and was influencing you, changing you to be more like him? There will be a desire to do the Father’s will. In John 4 on the way back to Galilee from Jerusalem Jesus took his men through Samaria where they stopped by a town called Sychar. Jesus stayed at a well while his guys went in search of food. At the well Jesus struck up a conversation with a local woman that ended with her putting her faith in Jesus. When the disciples got back and offered Jesus something to eat he said according to verse 32, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about.” They were confused by this, wondering who had given him food. Then he said in verse 34, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.”

The thing that sustained Jesus was doing the will of the Father. It energized him more than eating. It was what he lived for. In John 14:31 Jesus said, “I love the Father and do exactly what my Father has commanded me.” What most characterized Jesus above all else is he loves the Father and chooses to do his will above all else. In Philippians 2:8 Paul said of him that he was “obedient to death, even death on a cross.”

If Jesus is in us, we will begin to manifest that same desire to do God’s will. We won’t be perfect at it. What I find is that while I don’t always execute my actual desire, down at the core of my being I really do want to do God’s will. I want it more than anything else, so that on those occasions when I think I have failed to do it I am chagrined. I am disappointed in myself, but thankful for God’s grace and unconditional love. That allows me to get my focus back on doing the will of the Father.

That desire to do God’s will isn’t present in everyone. I’ve mown lots of people who give doing God’s will little to no thought. They have a conscience and have some sense that they want to do what they deem to be right, but they don’t give a lot of thought to what God’s will is and especially they don’t choose to do it if it conflicts with what they think will make them happy.

If a person could care less about doing God’s will, that would be cause for concern. My point here is to encourage you that if you, like me, really do want to do the will of the Father, that is a sign that Jesus is in you. If he were not, you would be following the way of the world, which is to pursue your own desires and care only about whether you get what you think will make you happy.

In Matthew 11:29 Jesus said, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” Jesus was gentle with people. Remember the incident when there was a woman allegedly caught in the act of adultery and a howling mob, led by the most “righteous” religious leaders were demanding that she be stoned to death. Jesus responded with those brilliant and powerful words, “Let the guy who is without sin pick up the first stone.” That stopped the mob dead in its tracks. Jesus turned to the woman and said, “Does no one condemn you?” When she said no one did, he said, “Neither do I.” The woman never protested her innocence, because she was guilty. Jesus did not condone her actions. But he was gentle with her. He protected her. If Jesus is in our lives we will manifest that same gentleness and kindness, especially to broken people. Others will find rest for their souls in our presence

Jesus’ comment about humility might seem a bit curious. If someone says their best asset is humility, don’t you doubt that it is true? But Jesus meant something other than he was modest and not boastful. He certainly was not arrogant and boastful, but he was using humility to mean he put others before himself. He served them rather than himself. His entire life was an exercise in giving up himself to serve other people, and that is the truest form of humility.

I see that right now in the interactions between our grandsons Wesley and Hunter. Hunter is about 22 months old. Like all kids at that age he knows only what he wants. Whatever big brother Wesley is doing or playing with, Hunter wants, so he tries to play with it too. If Wesley is playing with a wooden Brio train set, Hunter wants to play with it too. Only he I’ll invariably mess up whatever Wesley has set up. This upsets Wesley and his natural reaction is to shove Hunter away. It is frustrating for him because it happens repeatedly all day long. The spirit of Jesus is to give up self to serve. This is to a natural instinct, but it is a beautiful thing. It is what we will begin to see in ourselves when Jesus is in us.

There are other qualities, of course, especially love. Paul would write love would be above all else. These are traits we should expect to see in increasing measure in ourselves if we have the Spirit of Jesus.

APPLICATION

LIVE BY FAITH

I am always concerned when I talk about this that some genuine believers will get down on themselves and think that surely Jesus cannot be living in them or they’d be much better, stronger Christians. Living by faith means counting on what God says regardless of what you feel or what circumstances may suggest. Living by faith is Abraham believing God’s promise that he would give him a son when years were passing with no evidence of that promise being fulfilled. For us that means trusting that Jesus is in us whether we feel like it or not.

One of the most important truths that we need to trust in faith is that God’s love is in us. The late Brennan Manning said we need to define ourselves radically as one beloved by God. If we aren’t totally grounded in God’s love we will go looking for love in other places, but will never find what we are looking for.

LIVE IN CHRIST’S PRESENCE

Listen to him. Follow him in all aspects of life. And as Colossians 3:15 says, let the peace of Christ rule in your heart. Letting his peace rule means allowing him to direct our lives where he wants us to go and rejoicing in his presence with us. Our car is now 9 years old and has more than 100,000 miles on it. I was thinking about how long before we’ll have to think about another one. I don’t look forward to that. Our last car I remember when we were getting near the end of its lifespan we hit a spot where it needed some major repairs. I struggled with that decision. Should we spend the money to repair it and keep it going, or bite the bullet and buy a newer car? I didn’t want to have to buy another one, but what would be wisest to do? We prayed and asked God to give us wisdom, and finally decided to repair it because the cost of a new car would be far greater than continuing to fix our car. And we liked the car. So we did that. Only a few weeks later the car had another major problem that would involve significant costs to fix. Our mechanic at the time, the guy who made money off fixing our car, said to us, “I can’t tell you what to do, but if you want to know my advice, I wouldn’t put another dime into that car.” Wow. We blew it. We made the wrong call.

We were trusting God to give us wisdom. And he did. Oh, it wasn’t that God made sure we made the most financially rewarding choice. It was simply that it didn’t really matter one way or the other. I look back on that decision and realize now that it affected nothing in our lives. It just didn’t matter one way or another. I found out that I had stressed over something about which God essentially would say, “Trust me. Don’t fret. This is not that important. Leave it to me and focus on doing my will.” We did, and our lives have gone just fine. So walk in Jesus’ presence each and every day and be at rest.

REJOICE AND GIVE THANKS

Jesus is in you. He will never abandon you. He is at work changing you; This is a magnificent gift, so be thankful and rejoice in it.