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**An Undivided Heart**  
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*Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart to revere your name (Psalm 86:11).*

Jesus' disciples want to know why he talks in parables.

Over the years, commentators have cited lots of reasons. For one thing, they say, parables are powerful. They're more vivid than the ordinary prescriptions advice usually comes in. Parables are more colorful, too, so they're easier to remember. And parables are portable. They give us guides to live by, templates to make sense of our experience. "Oh, this is like *that*," we say when we recognize a pattern from some parable of Jesus.

That's all true, but it's not the explanation that Jesus gives. Jesus says he speaks in parables because people see, but they don't really perceive. They hear, but they don't really listen or understand. They don't "get it," as we might say.

And why should that be?

The Parable of the Sower implies that one reason people don't get the word of God is because they're distracted by other interests. They care about lots of other things more than they care about God. And that must mean people's hearts have grown dull, Jesus says, because what could be more important, after all, than hearing and responding to the word of God?

What's more important than the word that gives meaning and purpose and direction to our lives, the word that says we're not alone in this world, but we belong to the almighty Maker of heaven and earth? If we belong to God, that means our lives matter. There's no room for apathy or indifference, nothing to be taken for granted in this world. If we belong to God, we need to make something of ourselves – not in the way the world marks

success, but in ways that please God, because “We are his people and the sheep of his pasture,” as the psalmist says.

We are loved by God, but we’re also accountable to God for what we do with this great gift of life God has given us. That means we need to live as God would have us live. But how can we know what God wants if we will not listen, truly listen, to God’s word?

When we do listen, we learn how to love God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength – because in the end, nothing is more important than God, and because to love God is to find out what we were created to do. It’s our fundamental purpose in life. It’s why we are here.

If we love God with all that’s in us, we will automatically love other people too, because that’s what love does. Love is a kind of moral power plant. It generates more love. It creates the energy to care for other people and treat everyone else the way we ourselves want to be treated.

The poet Mary Oliver says, “What I loved at first was mostly myself.” That’s true for all of us, and it makes perfect sense. Each of us comes into this world as a little bundle of needs: for food and warmth and comfort and care. In the beginning life is all about us, and about receiving things from the people who care for us. Psychologists call that primary narcissism, and for babies there’s no other way to begin. Infancy is like booting up a new human being, almost like a new computer – setting up systems, sorting things out, and learning how to do some of those things yourself.

Some people never grow out of that childish self-centeredness. For them, primary narcissism turns into permanent narcissism. We see it most clearly in adults whose behavior is so obviously childish, where almost everything they do is about puffing themselves up and calling attention to themselves.

But overcoming self-centeredness is a perennial struggle for us all, isn't it? Growing up physically happens more-or-less automatically. Our bodies mature and age all by themselves, as many of us know all too well. But growing up morally and spiritually is different. That takes effort – a lifelong effort. We have to work at looking beyond our own interests and predispositions and prejudices, to see and do what is right and best for other people as well as for ourselves.

All of this is so hard to do that the psalmist prays, “Give me an undivided heart to revere your name.” People who really listen for God’s word and want to be faithful come to realize that the ability, or even the desire, to do God’s will has to be yet another gift from God. It’s as if a person needs to be born a second time – to be born spiritually into a better way of living, just as we had to be born physically at the outset. That’s the essence of what Jesus means when he says we need to be born again if we’re ever going to see the kingdom of God, let alone find our way into it.

The Parable of the Sower is, among other things, a short sketch of reasons why that might never happen for some people.

For some people, the word of God falls on hearts as hard as a well-worn path. They’re just not interested in God. They’re focused on other things, so there’s no way for the word of God to sink in and take root in their life.

For others, the gospel comes as good news at first, and they’re happy to hear it. But for them it’s mostly an instrumental thing, a means to some other end, like prosperity or social connections or even just health and happiness. If the word they think they heard from God fails to deliver what they want, they fall away, because whatever faith they had was really all about securing something else. The word never sank in enough to produce a genuine love for God himself.

For still others, Jesus says, the word of God takes root and begins to grow, but then other things get in the way and start to

crowd it out. People get busy. They have work to do and family to care for and pastimes to pursue. And for some, Jesus says, it's simply the lure of wealth. Wanting to accumulate and hang onto money and material things can crowd out the word of God and keep it from shaping a whole life. When that happens, Jesus says, the word "yields nothing."

Another way to look at all this is to say that so many people's hearts are divided. Those whose hearts are hardened like a path may not be divided; it's just that they're entirely devoted to something else, and God would only get in the way. And those whose hearts turn out to be good soil are not divided either, at least not in the end. They want, and so they receive, the gift of an undivided heart for God, and the word of God bears all kinds of wonderful fruit in them.

It's the people in the middle whose hearts are divided, and the word of God can never really grow in them. Those who treat God as a means to some other end are just practicing a kind of idolatry. That's what the Ten Commandments mean when they say, "You shall have no other gods before me." If any creature wants to use the Creator as a way of getting something else he values more, then it isn't really God that he loves after all.

And those who divide their deepest devotion between God and anything else are just practicing some sort of polytheism. They worship multiple gods, and you can tell which gods they worship most by whatever crowds out their faithfulness to the Almighty. God has lots of rivals for people's devotion: careers, parties or tribes of all kinds, and of course Mammon, or wealth – the rival that's so prominent, he even has his own name.

The world is full of examples of what happens when people's hearts are divided – when they have some interest in God, but they want something else just as much, or even more.

The whole sordid story of abuses by Roman Catholic priests that came out again last week is a terrible case in point. It isn't just a tragedy, as some have said; it's a kind of evil, and a direct result of divided hearts. The hearts involved wanted to relate to God at some level, but they were also willing to abuse that relationship with God, either to indulge some corrupt desire or to protect the church's reputation as an institution, instead of practicing the very confession and redemption that ought to lie at the heart of any church. It's true that only a minority of priests were involved in such awful behavior, but the church as a body forfeited its integrity and failed to be faithful, and that failure was the result of too many divided hearts.

We Protestants, of course, should take no pleasure and feel no superiority over this scandal in the Catholic Church, because the history of Protestantism is tainted with more than enough evil flowing from divided hearts as well. Most of the slavery practiced in this country, which has been called "America's original sin," was maintained by church-going Protestants who wanted to believe they were faithful to God, even as they wanted to benefit from other people's bondage. And long after slavery was abolished, the twisted psychological benefits of racism still live on among some whose outward piety is of the sort that Jesus calls hypocrisy.

Our current tribalism in various forms also breeds the hypocrisy of divided hearts, and we see it all around us, as people condemn behaviors in other people's tribes that they're willing to overlook or excuse in their own. The effect of all this is to normalize indecency and insincerity, and undermine the very institutions responsible for promoting the wellbeing of individuals and society as a whole – not to mention the love of God and faithfulness to God's will.

But it isn't enough to wring our hands in despair over what a mess things have become. That's not good enough for the people of God. Those in whom the word of God has truly taken root have to do God's will in this world. That means not taking the



easy way out, by paying lip service to the right while acquiescing in the wrong. It means taking responsibility for our own lives and for our life together in society and in the wider world. It means confessing our sins honestly – our individual sins and the sins of our parties and tribes and institutions – instead of hypocritically denouncing others while covering up or distracting attention from our own shortcomings.

And after confession must come action. It isn't that we don't know what to do. As the prophet Micah said so long ago, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" The book of Proverbs says that if we truly seek wisdom, God will give it to us, and then we will "understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path; for wisdom will come into your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul."

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven," Jesus says, "but only those who do the will of my Father in heaven." God's word tells us God's will, and if we would be faithful to God we need not only to hear it but to do it.

We're not very likely to do that on our own, because our hearts are so often distracted and divided. But God can change all that. God can give us the wisdom to know what's right and the will to do it. If we truly want to love and serve God, we can begin by praying with the psalmist: "Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart."



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