

**SERMON: 29 September 2019 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

**“It’s who you are, not what you say and do, that counts.”**

**(1 Samuel 16:1-13 and Luke 6:45)**

That is an interesting translation of what Jesus says in Luke 6. It helps us to understand that despite what we say and do, the most important thing is who we are. It reminds us that all people are made in God’s image. That is the core essence of every single person who has ever lived. That is who they are. That is who we are. Made in God’s image. Made to reflect God’s nature, which is love.

We’re made to live in love, to speak in love and to act in love. But we know that we don’t always do that.

[SLIDE] The usual translation of this verse of Jesus - “for the mouth speaks what the heart is full of”.

The implication then, is to fill the heart with good things. I think Jesus teaches us that because of who we truly are, made in God’s image, we are made to be filled with love. Which is why he speaks of God as love and how important it is to live in God and God live in us.

Our words matter. Our actions matter. Our words and our actions have the power to forgive wrong, heal wounds, encourage faith, give life, offer hope, show love and so many other good things.

But, until we become perfect, in other words, until we become full to the brim with love, until then, our words and our actions can be destructive.

You only needed to listen to some of the things our politicians were saying to each other this week to realise that it seems that no one is immune from falling into the trap of lashing out with the tongue and saying the wrong thing.

So is it possible to avoid the pitfalls? Is it possible to learn to use words and actions which build people up

Rather than tear them down?

Jesus showed us that it is. And the Bible is there to really help us, along with the presence of Jesus with us as the Holy Spirit, our Helper.

It is possible to learn to live in love and let love find its home in us.

And the heart is known as the place where love can dwell, and the more the heart is exposed to love and filled with love then the more the mouth speaks love and the hand acts in love.

The Bible has a lot to say about the human heart. Take, for example, Proverbs 4:23:

Above all else, guard your heart,  
for everything you do flows from it. (NIV)

Guard your heart above all else,  
for it determines the course of your life. (NLT)

The great hero of the faith, King David of Israel, the shepherd boy who, with God's help, overcame Goliath the giant, learned, through his many mistakes, that what mattered most was what was in his heart.

And we have his own prayer recorded for all time in Psalm 51.

Psalm 51:7-13:

Purify me from my sins, and I will be clean;  
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.

Oh, give me back my joy again;  
you have broken me—  
now let me rejoice.

Don't keep looking at my sins.

Remove the stain of my guilt.

Create in me a clean heart, O God.

Renew a loyal spirit within me.

Do not banish me from your presence,  
and don't take your Holy Spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and make me willing to obey you.  
Then I will teach your ways to rebels,  
and they will return to you.

Its really worth meditating on this Psalm. Look at the progression in it. It begins with David recognising he's done wrong, probably after Nathan the prophet pointed that out right enough. But he goes on to now up to his faults as he knows his heart is not clean but he knows that God can make it clean. And only when that has happened, will he be in any sort of position to share the good news of God. Only then might other people pay attention to him because his words and actions will match up and will flow from a heart which has been washed in God's amazing grace and filled with God's unfailing love.

If your heart is anything like mine, and I think it might be, then we are going to need to practise this kind of David prayer on a regular basis. Every day? Every moment of every day?

We need to have the courage to take the time and make the space to talk openly and honestly with God about our shortcomings, like David did, and to trust that what Jesus is telling us, is bringing the change into our lives that we so desperately need in order to begin , and carry on, living as creatures made in God's image of love.

As Jesus says to his followers, us included, remain in me as I remain in you; remain in my love (John 15) because its as we remain in love that we know ourselves loved and then we can recognise that same love in others, and really begin, and continue, to love God and our neighbour as we love ourselves.

Samuel tells Jesse, David's father, that "The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

A bit like the banana, it's what's inside that counts. It was the heart of David that Samuel recognised in choosing him to be the next king of Israel. It wasn't David's height or strength or wealth or status. It was his open heart ready to be filled with the Spirit of the Lord.

Samuel took a horn of oil and poured it over David and then the Spirit of the Lord was with David from that moment on. In exactly the same way, Jesus has shown us what it looks like to live with the anointing love of God; and has sent the same holy oil of the Spirit to be poured over us, and to fill our hearts with love.

It's what inside that counts. It's who you are that matters.

Why don't we take a moment to open our hearts to God and receive that oil of God's Spirit once more, or perhaps even for the first time in our lives? It won't do you any harm. It can only do you good. Let's pray.

God of love,  
Purify me from my sins,  
Remove the stain of my guilt  
and I will be clean;  
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.  
Give me back my joy again; and let me rejoice.  
Create in me a clean heart, O God.  
Renew a loyal spirit within me and make me willing to obey you.  
That I may teach your ways to those far from you,  
and they will return to you.  
In Jesus' name.  
Amen.