

AN INSIDE JOB

Scriptures: Ezekiel 36:25-32; Ezekiel 36:16-24

In 1994 the Justice Department Bureau of Justice Statistics did a three year study of 272,000 prisoners released from prisons in 15 states. Within three years 67.5%, over two-thirds of those released prisoners, had been arrested again for another felony or misdemeanor. Similar to this, a 1997 study by Daley and Marlatt found that 65% to 70% of patients in an alcohol treatment program relapsed within one year. Similar rates applied to drug abuse patients.

I bring this up for a reason. According to Ezekiel 36 the people of Israel have been in a rehab program for sin. It's called the exile. Listen again to verses 17-19. God says to Ezekiel,

Mortal, when the house of Israel lived on their own soil, they defiled it with their ways and their deeds. . . . So I poured out my wrath upon them for the blood that they had shed upon the land, and for the idols with which they had defiled it. I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed through the countries; in accordance with their conduct and deeds I judged them.

Call it jail time or court-ordered treatment. Either way the exile was God's way of dealing with the people of Israel for their sin.

But now, God says, they are going to be released. Verse 24: "I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land." God is going to release the people of Israel from their imprisonment and restore them to the promised land.

But here is the question: What will prevent them from relapsing? They were kicked out of the promised land because they defiled it with their greed, lust, and violence. But once they are back, what will prevent them from doing it again, from going back to their old ways?

The answer is in our second scripture lesson: Ezekiel 36:25-28. God says,

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

Do those words sound familiar? They should. Every week for the last two months we have read very similar words from Ezekiel 11. They are our Words of Forgiveness:

I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God.

On Wednesday night at the Preview with the Preacher class, I asked the group, “How does this actually work? How does God create in us a new heart?”

The group had some very powerful, very practical answers to that question, and in the rest of the sermon I want to share three of them. How does God prevent us from relapsing? How does God actually shape in us a new heart and a new spirit?

The first answer suggested by the group is that God gives us a new heart by giving us a new community. In the fellowship of recovering sinners we receive the strength and support to begin a new life.

This, of course, is one of the key principles of AA. The way to keep from relapsing as an alcoholic is regular, frequent association with a group of recovering alcoholics. In the group you receive support from people who are sharing with you in the struggle. In the group you learn strategies for dealing with the cravings. In the group you have a caring community who holds you accountable. If you relapse, you have to face the group.

You may not have thought about it this way, but the same thing is true in the church. One person in the Preview with the Preacher class put it this way. He said, “Being around these people causes me to act differently. I don’t swear because, well... you just don’t do that here. There are expectations about how you live and how you treat people, and it changes the way I live and treat people.”

Maybe that is one of the reasons God brought the people of Israel together again in the promised land. One of the ways God gives us a new heart and a new spirit is by giving us a new community of people with whom to share our lives.

A second way that God gives us a new heart and a new spirit is by giving us a new perspective on other people. In verse 26 God says, “I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.” What does it mean to have a heart of stone? One of the people in our Preview with the Preacher class had a great answer. She said, “It’s like Pharaoh in the time of Moses. His heart was hardened.”

Exactly right. To have a heart of stone means to be hard-hearted, to have a heart that is closed to other people and to God. To have a heart of flesh means to be soft-hearted, to be compassionate, to have a heart that is open to other people and to God.

C. S. Lewis said that when he first became a Christian he did not like going to church, but he went because he thought he was supposed to. Here is what happened. This is from *God in the Dock*, by C. S. Lewis:

I disliked very much their hymns, which I considered to be fifth-rate poems set to sixth-rate music. But as I went on I saw the great merit of it. I came up against different people of quite different outlooks and different education, and then gradually my conceit began peeling off. I realized that the hymns (which were just sixth-rate music) were, nevertheless, being sung with devotion and benefit by an old saint in elastic-side boots in

the opposite pew, and then you realize that you aren't fit to clean those boots. It gets you out of your solitary conceit (*God in the Dock*, pp. 61-62).

One way God gives us a new heart is by giving us a new community of people to surround us. A second way is by giving us a new attitude toward other people, a softer heart that allows us to be more open, compassionate, and humble.

A third way that God gives us a new heart is by giving us a new perspective on ourselves. Did you notice what God said to the people of Israel in verse 31? God told them, "Then you shall remember your evil ways, and your dealings that were not good; and you shall loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominable deeds."

Sometimes guilt is a good thing. I know there are neurotic forms of guilt, where you feel guilty about everything—where you feel guilty for things that are not your responsibility or where you feel guilty because you haven't solved everyone's problems or met everyone's needs. That kind of guilt is not good. But there is a kind of guilt that is a good thing. It's the kind of remorse you feel when you realize that you have treated someone badly, that you have deceived people with lies, that you have devoted your life to things that are empty and meaningless and have hurt people who care about you in the process. Feeling guilt about such things is a sign that God is working in you. Guilt can be a sign of a new heart.

It is like when you lay on your arm at night and it goes to sleep. While you are laying on it, your arm does not hurt, because the nerve is pinched. When the nerve is pinched, you don't feel anything. It only hurts when you wake up and move. But hurt is a good sign. It means the feeling is returning to your arm. It is alive again.

The same can be true of guilt. Guilt, remorse, sadness—these can be signs that you are coming alive again, that there is a new heart—the heart of God—pumping inside your body and causing you to feel things that you did not feel before.

There is a reason that groups like Alcoholics Anonymous help many people not to relapse. 1) They bring people together into a community where sobriety is the norm, 2) They expect compassionate acceptance of other people in that community, and 3) They force you to face up to yourself and everything that you have done in the past.

The same principles can keep us from relapsing spiritually. The church, flawed as it is, can be a place where we experience new values, where we practice new ways of looking at other people, where we face ourselves with a new sense of honesty and hope. In this family of faith God can work in you a new heart and a new spirit, if you only let him.

- Ken Onstot
November 16, 2008