

# BELPRES CHURCH

## **Follow Your Heart?**

Ezekiel 36:24-37 ; Jeremiah 31:31-34; 2 Corinthians 5:14-21

Speaker: Dr. Scott Dudley

*Disclaimer: This transcript was computer generated and may contain errors.*

---

Great to see you. Those of you in the room and those of you joining us online, thank you for being here on a Sunday. We appreciate that. Thanks for worshiping with us.

Scripture comes from 2 Corinthians 5. "For Christ's love compels us because we are convinced that one died for all and therefore all died. And he died for all that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and was raised again. So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation. The old is gone and the new is here."

So for this sermon, I think it would be helpful for you to have someone in mind as I preach it. So think of someone you know whose behavior or attitudes are unhealthy, unhelpful, maybe even sinful, but they are convinced they are doing the right thing. They're absolutely sure they're doing the right thing. It could be a family member, a friend, a neighbor, someone at school or work who you know that their attitudes or their behavior, unhealthy, sinful, not helpful, but they're convinced they're doing the right thing.

Okay, do you have that person in mind? Is that person sitting next to you? Go ahead and tell them right now. It'll be fun. Let me ask this question. Did you think of yourself? Did you think "I sometimes probably do things that are wrong, but I think that they're right?" Or were you thinking of someone else? Mm-hmm.

We're starting a new sermon series called You've Heard It Said, which is a phrase that Jesus uses when he's preaching to contrast God's ideas with his culture's ideas. So for instance, "You've heard it said 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.' But I tell you, forgive your enemies." Jesus runs counter to every culture, including our culture. And so

we're going to, for the next couple of weeks, contrast God's messages with Jesus' messages, because the message Jesus gives us is ultimately more life-giving, more hopeful, and it just plain works better.

I always think it's interesting. An argument I hear sometimes is, "Oh, Christians, they're just brainwashed by their churches." Really? Really? Let me get this straight. For a hundred or so waking hours a week, the culture blasts its messages at us through school or work, movies, TV, social media. The culture blasts its messages at us for a hundred hours a week, and then we preachers are supposed to undo all of that with just one hour a week. Two if you're Pentecostal.

To me, it seems like the culture is doing the brainwashing, not the church. So this fall we're focusing on knowing the Bible better. In fact, next week we'll be announcing a Bible reading plan that we can do between now and Christmas that will be for our whole church, for preschoolers all the way up to grandparents, so that we can read these things together to help us form more of a biblical lens, to see things through rather than just the lens of our culture.

And one of the things you've heard it said in our culture is "Follow your heart. Follow your heart. Your desires are a reliable guide for how you should behave. Self is the most important thing there is. We are our own authority and we can decide for ourselves what's best for us. Do what makes you happy." I saw this quote on Instagram: "No matter who you are, I hope you find the courage to prioritize yourself. Choosing yourself is a fulfilling decision that you can make every day."

It's kind of out there, isn't it? Right there on Instagram in the outside voice. Now, it's not all bad. That's not all bad. I mean, there's some good advice there. It is good to take care of ourselves and know what we want, and it's not all bad advice. And God doesn't want us to be miserable. He wants us to be whole and joyful. But taken too far, the whole "follow your heart" thing has some pretty nasty downstream consequences.

I've shared with you before that on countless times I have talked to people who are having an extramarital affair and they will look at me and in all seriousness say, "But how can it be wrong? It just seems so right, and God wants me to be happy and this makes me happy." And they are serious. And they're paying no attention to the hurt they're causing their spouse or their kids or their friends.

I think "follow your heart" is eroding our culture. Because for decades we have focused on autonomy, my way, my wants, freedom, maximize myself, live my best life without others interfering with me. But increasingly, autonomy doesn't look like freedom. It looks like chaos as all of these different groups are demanding that everything go their way. A

marriage, a family, a church, a nation where everyone is just following their hearts with no understanding of what we owe to each other is destined to collapse.

And ultimately, it makes us miserable as human beings. We're less happy, we're less fulfilled. God wants us to thrive. It's just that He says the way to a richer, deeper life isn't by following our hearts, it's by following Jesus. Which is why when Jesus talks about our hearts, he says things like "For out of the heart comes evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander." Wow, way to pull your punches, Jesus. Like, what do you really think?

Or as the prophet Jeremiah puts it, "The heart is deceitful above all things." You've heard it said, "Follow your heart." But Jesus says, "Follow me and I will give you a new heart." Because the one I have has been corrupted by sin. Now, that word "sin" has a lot of baggage. It was originally an archery term that meant "to miss the bullseye." So sin is missing the mark of God's intended best. And we think of sin as something people do, adultery or slander or theft. That's part of it, but biblically, sin isn't just something I do. It's a condition I have that leads me to do certain things. But more than that, it's a condition in my heart that affects how I view myself, how I view other people, how I view the world. It shapes how I use power, money, and sex in ways that are not God's intended best.

And often I will actually think that I'm doing the right thing. I'm just following my heart, and I'll think "I'm doing the right thing. It can't be wrong if it feels so right." Well, of course it can be. Back to my question, who do you know whose behavior is destructive, but they're convinced they're on the right path? Because our hearts can get us off track. We're like dogs. Like "squirrel", you know? I think that's how we are with God. "Oh God, you're so great. You're so great. You're so... Ooh, a Mercedes." Our hearts can just take us off track. Or Lexus or whatever it is. Our hearts can take us off track.

We can't follow our hearts, but we can follow Jesus. Jesus says, "Follow me and I will cleanse you from all your impurities. I will give you a new heart and a new spirit. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh, and I'll put my spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws." Jesus gives us a new heart that moves us to follow God's commands, not out of duty, not out of obligation, but because we begin to want what he wants.

And the way we know what he wants is the Bible. That's our reference point for what God wants is scripture. And notice the passage uses the word "spirit" twice, because this is a supernatural thing. We can't do it on our own. It's only the Holy Spirit working in us that gives us that new heart that wants to do the things God wants us to do in scripture.

And that's the promise of the verse I read at the beginning of the sermon. If anyone is in Christ, they are new creation... Except for me and Frank. Frank's not a new creation either. If you're named Frank, I'm talking about a different Frank. Obviously that's not

what it says, but I think that's somehow how we unconsciously read it. "Yeah, I'm not a new creation. And that person over there, that person is never going to change." Or maybe you're looking around the room today going, "I don't know. I don't see any new creations, just a bunch of old creations to me." Maybe that's how you feel, but the text says if anyone is in Christ, anyone, not if important people are in Christ, not if good people are in Christ, if anyone is what? In Christ, they are a new creation. In Christ. This is not something we can do on our own.

Jesus does it through the power of his Holy Spirit. Now, this takes time. It doesn't happen instantly. From God's perspective, God says to you and me, "You are already a new creation." But it takes time for us to live into who God says we already are. We all have these old hearts that are being transformed over time into new hearts. We still sin. But if we know Jesus, he will be shaping our hearts toward that new heart.

In some areas of my life, I look back and I see from when I was 19 and became a Christian to now enormous progress, because Jesus has given me a new heart over time. In other areas in my life, I still have a ways to go. But over time, the Holy Spirit changes our hearts bit by bit to be more like God's heart.

The Bible says, "Take delight in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart." And I think we often hear that and we go, "Oh, sweet. If I follow God, he's going to give me what I want." I don't think that's what that says. In the original Hebrew, the word for "take delight in the Lord" has the connotation of being moldable like clay. So what it's saying is, if we have moldable hearts toward God, he will shape our hearts to want the same things that he wants, and what we ourselves want deep down, though we may not know it.

I have learned over the years that God knows what I want even better than I know what I want, and he'll lead me into things I may not think I want to do only to realize I actually do want to do them. For instance, I think of various points in my life where I've done prison ministry. And I didn't want to do that, but when I did it, it was such a rich spiritual experience that I realized actually I do want that. I want that more than being comfortable. I didn't want to be a pastor, so I thought, but God knew what I wanted better than I knew what I wanted and led me to be a pastor, and I'm grateful. If we follow Jesus, his Holy Spirit is transforming our old hearts into new hearts.

So then what's our part in that? The Holy Spirit does it, but how do we cooperate with that? Well, three things. First, admit we have a broken heart. The reason I need a new heart is because my old one has been broken by sin, and it shapes how I view everything. And if I follow it, sometimes it'll lead me away from God's intended best, and I'll be convinced I'm doing the right thing.

We follow our hearts around our ambitions so much that maybe we start to emotionally manipulate people or bully or intimidate them to get what we want. But we don't call it that. We say "I'm pursuing my passions." We lash out in anger in ways that hurt other people. But we don't call it that. We say, "I feel things strongly." Oh, far out. Feel this. We make excuses for ourselves if we follow our heart, but if we stay in step with Jesus, he will shape our heart.

And there are two ways that pastors like me have mishandled the doctrine of sin. The first is to try to make everyone feel miserable and guilty. "Oh, you're terrible sinners. You should feel ashamed." That's wrong. But the second way to mishandle sin is to minimize it. "Oh, no big deal." Right? And in our US American culture, we say, "Oh, but Jesus loves and accepts everybody, right?"

Yes, Jesus loves and accepts everybody. And because he loves us, Jesus calls sinners to repentance, which is not a popular message, but he made us, and he knows best how we will thrive. And Jesus wouldn't be loving if he didn't call us to repentance, because then we mess up our lives and miss God's best. And repentance doesn't look back to feel shame over what we've done. It looks to what God can do in our future and says, "Wow."

You can't fix something unless you admit that it's broken, so admit we have a broken heart. Step two, worship. And worship isn't just church, although that's super important. That's a big part of worship. So church matters, it's super important, but it's also, worship is bigger than that. It's any place, anytime, whenever, wherever we focus on God, not to get something from God, not out of habit, but focus on God himself and all of his goodness.

And we've made worship the exact opposite of that in our culture. Worship has become about me. Did the music or the message make me feel good? What did I get out of worship? And that's the follow your heart logic of our culture seeping into the church. It's about me and how I feel. But here's the thing, worship isn't about our feelings. It's about our focus. Worship is not about our feelings, it's about our focus.

Now, feelings matter. In fact, some of us could probably use a few more feelings in worship. One feeling might be helpful in worship. The issue, though, is what are our feelings focused on? And if we're thinking, "Oh, I love this music," or "I liked that sermon," or "I didn't," or whatever, we're still focused on ourselves. Worship is when we focus on God, not to get something from him, but because he is true, good and beautiful.

And we were designed, every human being was designed to worship and everybody worships something. Worship is what we give our time, our focus and our energy to. Show me your calendar and your credit card statements, and I will show you what you worship. Some of you experienced worship this summer at the Taylor Swift concert. Lots

of worship was going on there. And as I shared with you a few months ago, our oldest daughter, whose permission I have to tell any story I want about her, she went to four different Taylor Swift concerts in three different cities. Four concerts in three different cities.

You would think that would be enough, right? Oh, you would be wrong. No, no, no. Now she's going to Argentina to see Taylor Swift in concert there. Okay? That's just a lot of Taylor Swift. An intervention may be necessary. And this summer, she was home for a few weeks and she had the chutzpah to come to me with her best "I'm going to wrap daddy around my little finger voice" and say, very sweetly, "Dad, my car needs new tires, and I don't have money for them." Hoping that I would say, "Oh, don't worry sweetheart, we'll take care of that for you."

Because that's what I always say to her, which is why she came to me, not my wife, because that would've been a different conversation. I am a soft touch. I ain't that soft. I said, "If you hadn't spent all that money on concerts, including one in Argentina, you'd have enough money for the tires. So save your aching feet, dear. That road is closed." And then a few weeks later, out of sheer desperation, she tried my wife and that went nowhere.

Now, there's nothing wrong with going to a concert or two or five I guess, but we have to be careful, because there's some worship happening there. Worship is what we give our time, our money, our energy, our focus toward. And here's the thing, we will become what we worship. We become what we worship. And if I focus too much on Taylor Swift, I'll absorb her worldview, begin to see things the way she sees them, value what she values. Our hearts will be shaped by what we worship. And for the record, I think she is a brilliant songwriter and I like her music, but I don't want her or anything else to shape my heart but Jesus. Plus, I mean some of her lyrics, like that whole "Darling, I'm a nightmare dressed as a daydream" thing? Not sure I want to go there, right?

So whether it's money or reputation or Seahawks or success, we become what we worship. So focus on God here at church, but also throughout your week. In that meeting at soccer practice, focus on Jesus, because he is there, and say, "Jesus, guide my words today. Guide my actions today." For new hearts, admit our broken hearts, worship Jesus, and then finally, look at the cross.

The passage we read today says, "For Christ's love compels us because we are convinced that one died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and was raised again." God's love compels us. When we experience his love, it compels us to be different people, to want what God wants and live for him. And a good way to experience that love is to really think about and focus on the cross.

Other gods and other religions, all they do is demand things from us. But Jesus, who is God in the flesh, died on a cross to pay the price for our sins. Who else loves you like that? A God who turns ashes into beauty, sorrow into joy, who no matter how many times we reject him, continues to pursue us and pursue us and pursue us. Who loves you like that?

Focus on him and we will become more like him and begin to love what he loves, think what he thinks, want what he wants. And I've seen this in my life. I've seen this in huge dramatic ways. Like for instance, the times I have gone into prisons to lead Bible studies or visit prisoners. There I have met criminals who have done terrible things but are now full of love because Jesus has transformed their heart dramatic ways.

But I've also seen it in more daily ordinary ways. A friend of mine got in an argument with his wife because he felt that she had cut him off during a conversation. It's the kind of argument that not just spouses have, but friends and family members and people at school and all of that, coworkers, all of that. And he had all kinds of reasons. And so he argued with her.

He started arguing with her, and he had all kinds of reasons why he was doing the right thing. She'd cut him off. It was a fairness issue. It was a respect issue. She'd done that in front of their kids and he felt like that sent a bad message to the kids. In his heart, he felt it was really important to make this point, because anger is a hard thing to let go of. Well, shockingly, she wasn't convinced. So they went to bed angry.

And as he lay there, he started to pray and he said, "Jesus, why am I so mad?" And Jesus brought to mind a memory when he was a kid trying to talk to his dad, and his dad cut him off, as his dad often did. So my friend prayed, "Jesus, where were you in that moment, back when I was a kid?" And he saw Jesus sitting on the bed in that room where his father had cut him off when he was a little kid. And my friend thought, "Okay, Jesus, what's the lie I was believing then?" And he thought, "The lie is that I'm not worth listening to, and therefore I am worthless." And in his mind, he heard Jesus say, "That is a lie. I listen to you. You are worth listening to. You are worth everything to me." And then when he experienced that love from Jesus, he began to see his wife different.

He thought, "Well, maybe she wasn't trying to cut me off. Maybe she was just interjecting something, but because I was believing this lie that I'm not worth listening to, I responded in anger." And he felt loved and valued by Jesus. And his heart shifted toward his wife. His heart changed, and he wasn't mad at her anymore. In fact, he was filled with a lot of love for her. So he woke her up to tell her and apologize. Jesus should have said "Wait till morning." But he was super eager, right?

Now, maybe she also has some work to do around listening better, but he focused on his heart, which at first told him to fight for his rights and for fairness and for respect and for their kids and principles like that. But when he brought it to Jesus, Jesus gave him a new heart. And from then on, he and his wife never had another fight again. Praise Jesus. Yeah, not so much.

Of course, they had other arguments, but he started a discipline of when they had an argument of bringing his heart to Jesus and having a similar kind of conversation. And over time, he has become less reactive and angry, and they do fight less. It doesn't happen all at once. It's a thousand little moments where we surrender our hearts to Jesus that all add up to a new heart.

It's what God promises us through the prophet Jeremiah: "I have loved you with an everlasting love. And the days are coming when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel. I will put my law in their minds and I will write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forget their wickedness and remember their sins no more."

So this week, don't follow your heart. Bring your heart to Jesus and watch him make it new. Surrender your heart to Jesus and he will transform it. Because if anyone, and by definition, anyone means you... If anyone is in Christ, they are becoming a new creation. No matter your past, no matter your present, no matter what you've done or haven't done, no matter what you think or what other people think of you, no matter the sin, stain, spot or blemish on your life, if you follow Jesus, you are becoming a new creation.

End of sentence. No dash, semicolon or parenthesis, no footnotes, endnotes, caveats, or fine print, Jesus can make us new. So Jesus, we surrender our hearts to you. We surrender all the ways that they have been impacted by sin, and look forward to all the ways you will continue to make our hearts new. Lord, we know that only you can do it. We know that we can't do it on our own. So Jesus, we bring you our hearts, we surrender them and say, "Make us new," and we will give you all the glory. In your name, Jesus. Amen.

---

### **Discussion Questions:**

---

*Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.*

**Opening Question:** Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?



**Scripture Reflection Questions:** Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do you feel when you read this scripture (excited, angry, worried, etc....)? Why do you think that is? (Explain in your group and then take that response to Jesus in prayer this week.)
- As you read this scripture, where does it challenge your current cultural context?

**Sermon Reflection Questions:** Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- From these three scripture passages, what are the characteristics of our old ("stony") heart? What are the characteristics of the new heart that God gives us?
- Can you recall a situation where the Holy Spirit revealed your sin and then gently, compassionately changed your heart, re-connecting you to Jesus? Did it happen quickly or slowly over time?

**Closing Question and Application:** Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

**Closing group prayer:** Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.