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Printed in the United States of America

978-1-5359-5116-6

Published by B&H Publishing Group
Nashville, Tennessee

Dewey Decimal Classification: 128
Subject Heading: PROBLEM SOLVING \ LIFE \
DECISION MAKING

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Cover design by FaceOut Studio, Derek Thornton.

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CHAPTER 1

Healthy Hearts

The leading cause of death in the United States is heart disease. In 2015, 633,842 American lives ended as a result of heart disease, almost a quarter of total deaths that year.¹ Dr. Steven Houser, president of the American Heart Association, believes “the future of cardiovascular research is to stop the disease before it starts.”² Perhaps this goal explains the increasingly common labeling of various foods as “heart healthy.” Salmon, almonds, blueberries, coffee, dark chocolate—all of these are now applauded as heart-healthy foods and recommended to include as part of your diet.

But is it too late to fix our massive problems with heart health as a country?

I’m eating healthier than I ever have, and let me tell you, it takes some discipline; I seem to like the taste of unhealthy foods! Some of this healthy stuff just doesn’t do the trick for me. It seems nowadays like every meal in

our house contains two ingredients: kale and cauliflower. What's the pizza crust made of, honey? Cauliflower. What are these pancakes made of? Cauliflower. What's in this sauce? Cauliflower. I finally decided to stop asking—I may enjoy the food more if I just don't know!

A Heart Problem

As serious as these heart-health issues are in our society, you and I come into the world with a heart problem that cannot be prevented. Ever since the first human beings, Adam and Eve, sinned, we have all come into this world with hard hearts. Instead of loving God and loving our neighbors, we love ourselves most of all. Instead of worshiping God and honoring him as Lord, we try to kick him off the throne and take it for ourselves. And because of this heart problem, we come into this world as God's enemies. It's not his fault—we're the ones who sin. And we make ourselves his enemies because of our sin.

What does this have to do with being a difference maker? You see, before you and I can be difference makers, a difference must be made in us. We need our unhealthy hearts to be replaced with healthy hearts.

Isaiah

The Old Testament book of Isaiah was written by the prophet Isaiah between the years 740 and 700 BC. Isaiah's ministry lasted through four kings: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. The book has one major theme: *trust God*. In the Old Testament, Isaiah is a difference maker in the highest degree.

Isaiah was writing to people with hard hearts. They had a heart problem. They trusted in anything and everything before they trusted in God. They trusted in their own kings and their military. Then when that failed, they tried to make alliances with other nations so they could trust in those kings and militaries. They trusted in their external religion to keep God off their backs. But all the while, Isaiah is speaking to their hearts, trying to help them understand that their greatest need is to trust God.

The book of Isaiah shows us this right from the outset:

Listen, heavens, and pay attention, earth,
for the LORD has spoken: "I have raised
children and brought them up, but they
have rebelled against me. The ox knows its
owner, and the donkey its master's feeding
trough, but Israel does not know; my peo-
ple do not understand. Oh sinful nation,
people weighed down with iniquity, brood

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of evildoers, depraved children! They have abandoned the LORD; they have despised the Holy One of Israel; they have turned their backs on him. (Isa. 1:2–4)

What's God saying to his people through Isaiah here? He's reminding them of his kindness and faithfulness to them. He gave them everything. He freed them from slavery in Egypt. He made them a nation. He brought them into the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey. He gave them prosperity. But what did they do? They rebelled against God. They chose not to know him or honor him as their Father. They disobeyed his law and worshiped false gods. They abandoned him, despised him, and turned their backs on him.

God's announcing some bad news for Israel through Isaiah. Elsewhere in the Bible, he announces bad news for all of us. Psalm 14:2–3 says:

The LORD looks down from heaven on the human race to see if there is one who is wise, one who seeks God. All have turned away; all alike have become corrupt. There is no one who does good, not even one.

Those are universal statements. No one does good. No one seeks God. All have turned away.

So the Bible tells us that before we can make a difference in the world, a difference has to be made in us. But how? What can be done? If we keep reading the words of Isaiah, we'll find out.

Stop Doing Evil

The first thing Isaiah tells the Israelites is simple: stop sinning. Stop doing evil. Coming through loud and clear, Isaiah! Verse 16 says, “Wash yourselves. Cleanse yourselves. Remove your evil deeds from my sight. Stop doing evil.”

When it comes down to it, sin is always the problem. Either love hinders sin in your life or sin hinders love. For the Israelites Isaiah was talking to—and for all of us when we come into this world—sin is always hindering love.

God is serious about sin. That is crystal clear in the book of Isaiah, as well as in the rest of the Bible. God is also serious about love. Many of us want God to be serious about love and not serious about sin. Others of us have this misconception about God where we think he's serious about sin and not serious about love. But God is serious about both. Why? Because he's holy.

Isaiah 6:3 says that God is “holy, holy, holy.” This is a big deal. In our day, if we want to emphasize something in writing, we put it in italics or bold font or all caps. The

authors of the Bible didn't have those luxuries, so when they wanted to emphasize something, they repeated it. For Isaiah to say God is "holy, holy, holy" is to say he's holy to the max.

Interestingly, this is the only characteristic of God in the Bible that is repeated three times like this. You never read "God is love, love, love," or "God is gracious, gracious, gracious." Certainly God is love (1 John 4:8), and he is gracious, merciful, kind, and compassionate. But he is also wrathful against sin, perfectly just, and promises to punish every sin ever committed. Here's the key to understanding this: all of God's characteristics flow from his perfect holiness.

For God to be perfectly holy means that he is totally set apart and completely perfect. Theologian Millard Erickson puts it this way:

There are two basic aspects to God's holiness. The first is his uniqueness. He is totally set apart. . . . The other aspect of God's holiness is his absolute purity or goodness. This means that he is untouched and unstained by evil.³

In God's total otherness and his complete purity and perfection, he exercises all of his other characteristics: he acts with wrath and justice toward sin, he shows mercy

and compassion, he loves. And he does all of these perfectly, in his complete holiness.

Therefore, God is serious about sin. Which means we need to be serious about sin. Which means we need to stop sinning. The Puritan pastor and author John Owen said, “Be killing sin or it will be killing you.”²⁴ Sin always aims to kill us. It always wants to win. Unless we are seeking to kill sin, it will kill us.

Start Doing Good

There is a second change Isaiah tells his hearers they need to make: “Learn to do what is good. Pursue justice. Correct the oppressor. Defend the rights of the fatherless. Plead the widow’s cause” (Isa. 1:17). Isaiah tells the Israelites not only to stop doing evil, but to start doing good.

We hear this and think immediately, *Oh, I’ve got to go to church more. I’ve got to work really hard to be religious. I’ve got to make a bunch of sacrifices for God so I can please him and get him off my back.* But the Lord knew that response was coming. In fact, it seems like the Israelites were already doing this. Look what God says to them:

“What are all your sacrifices to me?”
asks the LORD. “I have had enough of
burnt offerings and rams and the fat of

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well-fed cattle; I have no desire for the blood of bulls, lambs, or mail goats. . . . Stop bringing useless offerings. Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons and Sabbaths, and the calling of solemn assemblies—I cannot stand iniquity with a festival. . . . When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will refuse to look at you; even if you offer countless prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood.” (Isa. 1:11, 13, 15)

God was not interested in their religious actions or their “worship” experiences as long as they were still living in detestable sin. They were playing worship to get God off their backs, but they didn’t really love him, and they certainly didn’t love their neighbors. The essence of a difference-making heart is a growing love for God and others.

But we often do the same thing. Checking the religious boxes of a quiet time, church attendance, or prayer before dinner and bed. Our tithe is in the offering plate, but our heart is dreaming of the next Amazon Prime delivery. Do we actually love God and our neighbors, or do we just check boxes, doing what we “should”?

If we really love God, it will be evident in the way we love our neighbors, and this is what Isaiah’s getting at here.

The actions of a loving, God-centered heart are to pursue justice, to correct the oppressor, to defend the rights of the orphans, and protect the widows. James 1:27 says, “Pure and undefiled religion before God the Father is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” God, in Isaiah 1, called for his people to keep themselves unstained from the world (stop doing evil) and to look after orphans and widows (start doing good). He’s calling for us to do the same.

Rest in the Finished Work of Christ

You might be feeling exhausted right now. You might not know where to start. You might be thinking to yourself: *I thought a relationship with God was about grace, but now I've got to do all this stuff?*

This is the beautiful part about Isaiah. Keep reading:

“Come, let us settle this,” says the LORD.

“Though your sins are scarlet, they will be white as snow; though they are crimson red, they will be like wool.” (Isa. 1:18)

This is the good news. This is a prediction of the cross. Seven hundred years before Jesus walked the face of the earth, God promised his people that he would remove their sins from them, and they would become pure.

How does this happen? Only by an exchange. Jesus came to trade places with us. He came and lived the life we failed to live and died the death we deserved to die so that we could be in a right relationship with God. Here's the sixty-four-dollar life-changing phrase from seminary: *substitutionary atonement*. Jesus stepped into our place to pay the ultimate price for our sin. He made the difference between eternal life and death by going to the cross for us. Wow!

You see, we can't stop doing evil and start doing good on our own. Something has to happen to us first. Our heart problem has to be fixed. Just a few books of the Bible later, God promises to do just that: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezek. 36:26). We need healthy physical hearts, so eat dark chocolate and blueberries and watch your cholesterol. But oh, how much more do we need healthy hearts spiritually! How much more do we need God to replace our hearts of stone and give us hearts of flesh.

John Owen, the seventeenth-century pastor quoted earlier, understood that to have the power to kill sin required one to have a relationship with Jesus. "Be sure to get an interest in Christ;" he said, "if you intend to mortify sin without it, it will never be done."⁵ What did he mean by "interest"? He didn't mean interest like you might be

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interested in a good book or a show on Netflix. He meant interest in the economic sense, like an investment. When you're earning interest on something, it means you are connected to it in such a way that it is profiting you. When you get an interest in Christ, you are bound up with him, united to him by faith, and he grants you the power, through his Holy Spirit, to walk away from sin. An athlete in two-a-days is not growing stronger and flabbier at the same time. Closer to God is further from sin.

And he also enables you to do good. When God gives us a new heart, he gives us new affections. New desires. There was another Puritan named Thomas Chalmers who preached a sermon called "The Expulsive Power of a New Affection." Chalmers explains that when we are given healthy hearts, we have new affections—new loves and desires. Our old affections were self-centered and sinful; our new affections are centered in God and his glory. Now, we no longer want to keep sinning; we want to start doing good. We want to please God and bring glory to his name. Our new affections expel—kick out—our old affections. Psalm 37:4 says, "Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart" (ESV), because now your desires are lining up with his.

This only happens because of the cross. Isaiah talked about exchanging our scarlet sins for white righteousness. The apostle Paul, in 2 Corinthians, said it this way: "He

made the one who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (5:21). This is the gospel summarized in one sentence. The good news is what you might call a “double exchange.” We exchange our sin for Christ’s perfect righteousness, and he exchanges his righteousness for our sin. On the cross, he took on himself the punishment for our sin, and he gave us his righteousness, so that we can no longer be enemies of God, but sons and daughters of God. This is the difference that has to be made in us before we can be difference makers in the world.

But first, you have to trust God. Remember before when I said the whole message of Isaiah was about trusting God? That’s really, in a sense, the message of the whole Bible. It’s the message of the gospel. If you’ve trusted God, then you have a new heart. The gospel difference has already been made in you and you’re ready to become a difference maker in the world. But if you haven’t yet trusted God, you’re still in your sin. You’re still under his holy judgment. You’re still his enemy.

The good news is that you don’t have to stay that way. Jesus has made a way for you to become a son or a daughter of God. John 1:12 says, “But to all who did receive him, he gave them the right to be children of God, to those who believe in his name.” Do you believe in Jesus? Do you believe that his death and resurrection were for

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you? To forgive your sins? To make you right with God? Receive this good news. Accept it. Let Jesus make a difference in your life. If you rest in his finished work, you'll be given a healthy heart, and you'll be ready to become a difference maker.