

INTRODUCTION

Today I’m starting a new teaching series entitled, “The Gospel According to Country Music.” Country music has always been popular in Texas, but now it’s the most popular genre in America. Country music also has some of the funniest song titles. Here are the actual titles of some country songs:

1. “My Wife Ran Off With My Best Friend, And I Sure Do Miss Him”
2. “I Still Miss You, Baby, But My Aim’s Gettin’ Better”
3. “If I Had Shot You When I Wanted To, I’d Be Out Of Jail By Now”
4. “I’d Rather Pass a Kidney Stone than Another Night With You”
5. “My John Deere Was Breaking Your Field, While Your Dear John Was Breaking My Heart”

and getting the prize for the longest title:

6. “I Went Back to My Fourth Wife for the Third Time and Gave Her a Second Chance to Make a First Class Fool Out of Me.”

In the 1940s radio station, KWKH in Shreveport, Louisiana, sponsored a country music jamboree every Saturday night called the Louisiana Hayride. With 50,000 watts, the Louisiana Hayride was broadcast into homes all over the Southwestern U.S. If you had been there on one evening, you might have heard a singer from Alabama wail out a mournful song that would become a #1 hit. His name was Hank Williams and his song was “Your Cheatin’ Heart.” He sang: Your cheating heart / will make you weep/ You’ll cry and cry / and try to sleep / But sleep won’t come / the whole night through / Your cheating heart / will tell on you. / When tears come down, / like falling rain / You’ll toss around and call my name / You’ll walk the floor / the way I do / Your cheating heart / will tell on you.

That song is written about a woman who cheated on her man—she made him miserable, and he predicts one day she’ll be miserable too. Why? Because there are negative consequences for every bad decision we make. And Hank Williams knew first-hand sin always leads to suffering.

Long before old Hank sang about a cheatin’ heart, Jesus Christ said basically the same thing. You can find His words in Mark 7. In the first of the chapter, Jesus’ disciples ate some food without performing the ceremonial ritual cleaning that the Jews meticulously observed. The Jewish religious leaders blew a gasket because they were obsessed with the outward acts of religion. Jesus criticized them because they substituted a bunch of frivolous rules for the simple commandments of God. In verse eight He said, “You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.” Like a lot of religious people today, they thought faith was something you did on the outside, but Jesus said it’s what’s inside that counts. Jesus told those religious windbags it wasn’t their hands that needed cleaning, it was their hearts, because their hearts were dirty. You can read His words for yourself in Mark 7:14-23:

Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a man can make him ‘unclean’ by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of man that makes him unclean. After he had left the crowd and entered the

house, his disciples asked him about this parable. “Are you so dull?” he asked. “Don’t you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him ‘unclean?’ For it doesn’t go into the heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body.’ (In saying this Jesus declared all foods “clean.”) He went on: “What comes out of a man is what makes him ‘unclean.’ For from within out of men’s hearts come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside a man and make a man ‘unclean.’”

Jesus was saying we all have a cheatin’ heart, and unless you do something about it, one day, it will tell on you. When the Bible speaks of the heart, it is referring not to the fist-sized muscular pump in your chest, but to the moral and intellectual control center of your life. In the Bible there are a little over 1,000 chapters, and the word “heart” appears almost 800 times. That means the Bible has something to say about the human heart in nearly every chapter! For instance, you need to understand three different conditions of the human heart:

1. A CHEATIN’ HEART–YOU’RE BORN WITH ONE!

Jesus said when you look deeply into the human heart what you find is not very pretty. In its natural state, it produces all kinds of wicked schemes. And every one of us is born with this kind of cheatin’ heart. We’re sinners by nature, and by choice. Nobody had to teach you how to lie; it is part of your DNA when you were born.

One reason Hank Williams could write a song about the misery of a cheatin’ heart was because he struggled with pain and sin for all 29 years of his short life. He grew up in a south Alabama town called Georgiana, about 45 minutes from my hometown. As a teenager, he moved to Montgomery, Alabama, my wife’s hometown, which became his home.

Hank was born with a spinal condition called spina bifida and he suffered from back pain every day of his life. He started drinking at an early age and was an alcoholic by age 14. He later became addicted to prescription pain medicine as well. His father was seldom at home and left when Hank was only seven. His mother was a church pianist who taught him about God, but she was domineering and pressured him to be a child singing star. He struggled through a bad marriage with Audrey Mae. They divorced, and remarried and divorced again. In 1949 Audrey gave birth to their only son, Hank Williams Jr., but Hank Sr. had little to do with his son. The reason he could write mournful songs about betrayal, loneliness, and death because his life was a tragedy of pain and suffering. He knew the reality of a sinful heart that produces suffering.

There is a humanistic teaching circulating that says people are basically “good at heart” but because of their bad environment or their lack of education, their heart can become corrupted. But the Bible teaches just the opposite. The Bible teaches our hearts are ugly. The Bible says in Jeremiah 17:9 “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”

Cheating is pandemic in the 21st century American culture. Sociologist David Callahan has written a book entitled *The Cheating Culture*. Although he considers himself a liberal he echoes the message of many conservatives, that America has lost its moral compass. He writes that cheating and lying exist all the way from Wall Street to the classrooms to the Little League

baseball fields of America. He says the widespread acceptance of cheating is destroying the moral fabric of our nation.

Dr. Callahan has some amazing cheating statistics in his book: (1) Almost 80 percent of college students admit to cheating at least once. (2) 36 percent of undergraduates have admitted to plagiarizing written material. (3) 90 percent of students believe cheaters are seldom caught. (4) 17 percent of Americans think it is okay to cheat the IRS.

In my research, I found there are even websites that teach students how to cheat, and where to download research papers. And today, teachers receive special training on how to identify a bogus research paper. We do live in a cheating culture, because we have cheatin' hearts.

I heard a funny story about a high school football coach who got a note from an English teacher telling him his star quarterback couldn't play on Friday night because he cheated on a test. The coach was upset so he went to see the teacher. He said, "I know my quarterback isn't the smartest kid around, but how do you know he cheated?" The teacher said, "Well, he sat next to the smartest girl in the class." The coach said, "That doesn't prove he cheated." The teacher said, "Well, they both made exactly the same grade." The coach said, "That doesn't prove anything, it could be coincidence." The teacher said, "They have the exact same answers." The coach said, "It could be a coincidence, right?" The teacher said, "Not hardly. Look at their test papers. For question #5 the smart girl wrote, 'I don't know' and your quarterback wrote, 'I don't know, either.'"

Some guys can't even cheat well! But the reason so many people cheat is that Hank was right. We're all born with a cheatin' heart. But sadly, there is another heart condition that may be worse than a cheating heart. It's a

2. A CALLUSED HEART—GUARD AGAINST IT!

Not only are we *born* with a cheatin' heart, that heart can even become worse. Hank Williams also wrote a song entitled, "Cold Cold Heart." It's been performed by many singers, including most recently, Norah Jones. The words say: "I've tried so hard, my dear, to show that you're my every dream. / Yet you're afraid each thing I do is just some evil scheme. / A memory from your lonesome past keeps us so far apart / Why can't I free your doubtful mind / and melt your cold, cold heart?"

Sometimes a heart can be as cold and hard as ice. A tender heart can become hard and callused. Calluses are hard places on your skin that develop when pressure is applied. For instance, I have calluses on the ends of the fingers on my left hand because I've played the guitar for many years. When I first started playing, the ends of my fingers were tender and sensitive and it hurt to press the strings down on the neck of the guitar. But over time, the ends of my fingers got tough, so now I hardly have any feeling there at all. The same thing can happen to a person's heart.

The Bible warns against the danger of a hard heart in Psalm 95:8, "Today, if you will hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." The main danger of a callused heart is that it keeps you from being touched by the conviction of the Holy Spirit. As Jeremiah wrote, the heart is deceitful

above all things—you can be fooled by your own heart. I’ve heard people say, “You can fool everybody else, but you can’t fool yourself.” That’s wrong. The Bible makes it clear that self-deception is possible. We read these words in I John: “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” (I John 1:8)

When I was in high school, I worked at a sawmill a couple of summers. I worked on the green chain, which is where the freshly cut lumber (green) came out. My job was to grab the green lumber and to stack it up according to size. The lumber was rough and splintery, so I had to wear thick canvas gloves to protect my hands. But I recall there were some men who had been working there for years who didn’t even wear gloves. Their hands had become so callused from handling the lumber, when you shook hands with them it was like shaking hands with a lobster!

You get a callused heart the same way they got callused hands—by handling something over and over. I’ve found there are some people who have heard the gospel message over and over, and because they have “handled it” so many times, their hearts become almost immune to the conviction of the Holy Spirit in their lives. These may be people who don’t know the Lord, and have hardened their heart to the gospel. They’ve deceived themselves into believing they don’t need Jesus, or the church, or the Bible. They think they’re okay with the “Man Upstairs.” They can hear a message on salvation, and it rolls off their heart like water off a duck’s back—they have a callused heart.

It’s even possible for a Christian to develop a hard heart. These are generally good people who’ve been in the church for most of their lives, and heard hundreds of sermons and thousands of songs, but they are seldom moved any more. Leonard Ravenhill once wrote an article for *Decision Magazine* entitled “Who Weeps Anymore?” In it he said it is sad that Christians have become so hardened they never weep over the things that really matter any more. He wrote that a mother can cry when her daughter gets married in the church, but she never weeps because that same daughter has never been saved. He wrote that a Christian can weep when their pet poodle gets run over in the street, but they have never wept because that neighbor across that street doesn’t know Jesus. He wrote that we can cry crocodile tears when fictitious characters in a fictional movie die, but we never weep because thousands of real people are really dying and going to a Christ-less grave.

Do you have a hardened heart? The opposite of a hardened heart is to have a tender heart. Ephesians 4:32 says, “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another.” So, we are born with a cheatin’ heart, and we need to guard against developing a callused heart. But the good news about the human heart is that we can receive:

3. A CLEAN HEART—ONLY JESUS CAN DO IT!

Since we’re born with a sinful, polluted heart, we need to have a clean heart in order to relate to a Holy God. The problem is we can’t clean up our own hearts; we need someone to do it for us. In Isaiah 1:18 God offers this invitation, “Come now, let us reason together,” says the Lord. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Though they be red as crimson, they shall be like wool.” If you’re interested in getting your heart cleaned, there are two important things you need to know.

(1) Jesus died to give you a new heart

Scientists have tried to manufacture an artificial heart, and in 1986 Dr. Robert Jarvick implanted the first artificial heart in Barney Clark. He lived for 112 days. The longest a person has lived on an artificial heart is 620 days, so scientists admit they haven't been able to match God's design yet. Each year over 2,000 people receive heart transplants, and there is a great success rate for heart transplant patients. So, as smart as we are, man hasn't been able to make a heart as efficient as the one God put in you.

I heard a funny story about a wealthy man who needed a heart transplant. The doctor said, "I've got three hearts for you to choose from. First, I can give you a heart from a 35-year-old man who was fairly overweight and exercised very little. It's a pretty good heart, so you have it for \$100,000." The man said, "Do you have anything better?" The doctor said, "Well, we have a heart from a 22-year-old Olympic decathlete. It'll cost you \$500,000." The man said, "That sounds pretty good, but this is my life. It's the best you have?" The doctor said, "We do have one more heart, but it's very expensive. It comes from a 65-year-old man who smoked and drank to excess. His cholesterol count was over 300. It'll cost you a million dollars, though." The man said, "Why is it so expensive?" The doctor said, "It's the heart of a lawyer, so it's never been used."

Spiritually speaking, it doesn't matter whether you're a rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief, doctor, lawyer, or Indian chief—you need a spiritual heart transplant. Our original heart is a cheatin' heart, and God knows we need a new one. That's why He promised through the prophet Ezekiel, "I will cleanse you from all your impurities...I will give you a new heart and a put a new spirit in you." (Ezekiel 36:25-26)

There are many country songs about the pain of a broken heart. When you love someone, you risk that pain. When Jesus died on the cross, He was providing a way for us to receive a new, pure heart. The Bible says when He died, the Roman soldier had to confirm His death. So the soldier took a long spear and thrust it up into the side of Jesus. The Bible says in John 19:34 water and blood flowed out together from the wound of Jesus. Doctors who have studied the crucifixion assert the water was from the pericardial sac surrounding Jesus' heart. In order for water and blood to flow together, the heart of Jesus had to literally burst. He really died of a broken heart for you. And the Bible says the "blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all unrighteousness." (I John 1:7)

(2) Jesus lives to make your heart His home

Jesus told us faith is not a matter of externals—like how you dress, or what you eat or drink. Salvation is a matter of the heart. It's what's inside that counts. When you see a computer with a little sticker, "Intel inside" you know it's a computer using a microprocessor from the #1 chip maker in the world. It's that chip enabling your computer to process millions of bytes of data.

In the same way, Jesus wants to come and live in your heart. He wants to make your heart His home. When He does, He enables you to live the Christian life. It's like having a sticker on your

forehead that says, "Jesus Inside." The Bible says, "...so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith." (Ephesians 3:17)

There are seventeen different words in the Greek language for "dwell" or to "take up residence." This word means "to take up permanent residence." Jesus doesn't use your heart like a hotel room where He checks in and out. Once He comes in, He comes in to stay.

A Christian surgeon wrote about his experience with a little boy who had a congenital heart problem. Before a risky surgery he was speaking with the boy and his parents about the operation. He said, "Tomorrow morning, I'll open your heart..." And before he could finish, the boy said, "And you'll find Jesus there." The surgeon continued, "I'll go into your heart to determine how much damage there is..." And the boy said, "And you'll find Jesus there." The surgeon's patience was being tested and he said to the parents, "What I'll find is damaged tissue and weakened valves. I'll find out if I can make him better." And the boy said, "And you'll find Jesus there, because the Bible says that Jesus comes to live in our hearts."

The surgeon returned to his office and as he reviewed the boy's chart he saw the tests had revealed such damage and muscle degeneration that a transplant or cure was unlikely. He knew the boy probably would die within a year. He got really honest with God. He said, "God, why? You placed him here and you gave him that heart. Why?" And the surgeon said it was as if God said to Him, "My son, this boy is my precious lamb. He is not meant for this flock for long, but he will forever be part of my flock. Here in my flock he will be without pain and will be comforted forever. One day his parents will join him here."

With that assurance the surgeon proceeded with the exploratory surgery. Later he was sitting there as the boy awakened. The little boy said, "Did you cut open my heart?" The surgeon smiled and said, "Yes, I did. And do you know what? You were right. I DID find Jesus there."

My friend, do you know for certain Jesus is living in your heart? As one of my favorite songs says, "He lives, He lives, Christ Jesus lives today! He walks with me and talks with me; along life's narrow way. He lives! He lives! Salvation to impart! You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart!" And He wants to be more than merely the *resident* in your heart, He wants to be the *president* in your heart.

CONCLUSION

Your actual heart is an amazing organ. It pumps about 4 quarts of blood a minute, which translates to the equivalent of 2 million quarts a year. So, if you live to be 70 years old, your heart will have pumped over 36 million gallons! Put your hand over your chest and feel it beating. It beats an average of 72 times a minute. That means if you live to be 70 years old, that it will beat over 100 million times! But one day it will stop—then what?

Do you have the confidence to say, "I KNOW I'm on my way to heaven." Salvation is a matter of the heart. You must simply admit you have a cheatin', sinful heart. You must not allow your heart to become so hardened that you think you don't need a savior. And you must ask Jesus to give you a clean heart and to make your heart His home.

OUTLINE

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"Today, if you will hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." *Psalms 95:8*

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes