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An Undivided Heart:
Growing in Christ on the Psalms
Sermon 1 of 6: An Undivided Heart

a sermon on Psalm 86
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I hope you are hungry. ... Not for lunch. We don't have a fellowship dinner today. So, don't start thinking about food yet. I hope you are hungry for God. He has set a feast before us in his Word. He has brought us here to nourish our souls. But it is hard to be nourished when your heart is dull and your mind is a million different places. We try to slow down. Focus ourselves in prayer. And really listen for God. But it isn't always easy. We *know* God is worthy of our worship. The problem isn't God. The problem is our hearts. They are often sluggish in responding to God. Theoretically, worship ought to be thrilling. If God is who we believe he is, worship ought to get our hearts racing. Sometimes that happens. But often it does not.

Wouldn't it be great to come to worship with the enthusiasm of a four-year-old going to a fast-food playground? Or to come with the excitement of a teenager going on a date? Or with the joy of a soldier coming home? Wouldn't it be great to come to worship, especially this part of worship – the sermon – hungry for God?

That's why I am preaching this passage this morning: Because it made me hungry for God. A couple of months back, I read Psalm 86 during my morning devotions. And yes, if you were wondering, I do read the Bible everyday for my own personal growth, not just for sermons or teaching. I have devised a system that works well for me. I read one chapter from the Old Testament (except for Psalms), one psalm, and one chapter from the New Testament each day. I keep track of where I am. If I miss a day, I don't try to catch up. I just keep going. That prevents discouragement. You ought to read your Bible regularly, and if you don't have a system, I recommend mine.

Anyway, I was reading Psalm 86, and I got to verse 11, and it hit me hard. "Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart to revere your name." The image of an undivided heart captured my imagination. What would that be like, to have an undivided heart, given wholly to God? I am sure it would prevent a lot of needless pain we bring upon ourselves because our loyalties are divided. Plus the idea is beautiful: an undivided heart. I want one of those. And so this verse became my prayer. I wrote it on a card and memorized it. If that sounds like something children do when they are in Sunday school ... well, so what? Anyone who

is serious about following Jesus must feed on his word. Memorizing verses can be a good way to do that. I want an undivided heart. This psalm made me hungry for God and hungry for a heart passionate for God.

One of the great things about this image, an undivided heart, is that it is so easy for us to understand. The Bible was written a long time ago by people who spoke different languages and lived in different circumstances from us. That's why some of the ideas and images in the Bible have to be explained. They are not instantly understandable. I think this one is. When the Bible uses the word *heart*, it means pretty much the same thing as a country singer you hear on the radio crying about a broken heart or a young man today means when he proposes to his girlfriend and tells her, "I love you with all my heart." The only error we have to guard against here is limiting the word *heart* to our feelings and excluding our thoughts and actions. A couple of months ago I preached about "renewing your mind." In that sermon I warned you that no line can be drawn between the head and the heart and the will. You think and feel and make decisions, and all those things work together. Your heart includes your feelings, but it also includes your thoughts and your decision making processes. That is how the Hebrews used the word *heart*, as the center of the whole person. That's how the New Testament used it. I am convinced we still use it that way today, most of the time. When that young man proposes and says, "I love you with all my heart," his girlfriend knows he is talking about how he feels toward her and how he thinks about her and that he is making a promise about how he will treat her in the future. Your heart is the center of you, the core of your self. That's what we're talking about. An undivided heart turns the whole person toward God; it draws your whole self toward God. We're not talking about a fleeting emotion. We're talking about the whole package.

The Bible has a lot to say about our hearts. Some people, who have a very superficial knowledge of the Bible, imagine that the Old Testament cares mainly about external things, but when Jesus came he made the heart important. That's not really true. Jesus did emphasize the importance of having what we might call an undivided heart toward God, but the Old Testament always did too. The Law of Moses was concerned with a lot of external rules and regulations. Don't eat this. Don't wear that. Offer this sacrifice in precisely this way. But the reason behind the command was always love. It was the Law of Moses that first commanded us, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut 6.5). When the prophet Samuel went to Bethlehem to anoint a new king for Israel from among the sons of Jesse, Jesse's oldest son impressed him. The prophet saw that young man and thought to himself, "Surely this is the man God has chosen to be our king." But God said, "Not so fast! He's not the one!" God chose little David, the youngest son, who wasn't even invited to the party until God had rejected all his older brothers. Why? God explained it to Samuel this way, "The Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart" (1 Sam 16.7). The heart has always mattered to God.

Jesus, of course, made this clear in his sermon on the mount. He said hate is as bad as murder and lust as bad as adultery. Whatever is in your heart usually comes out in your actions, but even if it does not, it is still who you are. The heart matters to God.

The heart matters to us too. We have been taught, all of our lives, "Follow your heart!" That's the message behind most of the movies we watch and the books we read. Never before has a culture cared so much about the individual and what *I* feel and what *I* want. We've been taught to mistrust authority, and when you stop taking directions from authority, how do you find your way? Your heart, of course. So we have been taught to follow our hearts. Unfortunately, our hearts often betray us.

Let me ask you a question: Has your heart ever led you the wrong way? You followed your heart, and it led to disaster? A young woman follows her heart, and she ends up pregnant and alone. A man follows his heart, and walks away from his marriage, and devastates his ex-wife and their children, and in the end he is no happier. A teen follows his heart because he craves acceptance. He wants to fit in. But he gets pulled into a bad crowd and ends up in trouble. Our hearts betray us. Their betrayal is not limited to when our feelings cloud our judgment. We could probably all tell stories of that happening, but most of us have learned to use sound judgment and avoid these kinds of mistakes. But our hearts still betray us. They crave recognition or status, and the result is we are never satisfied with who we are or what we've done. Our hearts desire wealth, so we are never content with what we have.

If you have ever thought about your life and said, "I have every reason in the world to be happy, so why am I not happy?" Your heart is probably betraying you. It is set on the wrong things, or it is divided. A divided heart really hurts, because you want two different things that don't go together. You want to live a holy life that honors God. Deep down you really do. But you also want revenge on those who have hurt you. Deep down you want them to pay. When your heart pulls you in two directions like that, you get stretched thin spiritually. You get exhausted.

These are just a few examples, of course. Has your heart betrayed you? You were told all your life, "Follow your heart!" And you did. And you got burned. Or you are spiritually exhausted. And now you're a bit confused, because if you can't trust your own heart, whom can you trust?

There is good news. God says your heart matters, and he loves you. He wants to save you, and this means much more than just going to heaven when you die. It means a new heart. In fact, if God let you into heaven with the heart you have now, you probably wouldn't be happy – even in heaven. Not if your heart is the kind that gets jealous or proud. You need a new heart, and that is what God gives you. In fact, God sometimes describes salvation this way in the Bible: Through the prophet Jeremiah

God promised, “I will give them a heart to know that I am the LORD; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart” (24.7). Through Ezekiel he said, “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” (11.19). That’s another powerful heart image. Our hearts are made of stone, and God gives us a new heart made of flesh.

Then, of course, there is Psalm 86. This psalm knows the pain of a divided heart. The psalmist longs to experience salvation, and so prays to God for an undivided heart loyal to God.

One of the first things scholars do when they interpret a psalm is, they identify its basic structure. I read three commentaries about this psalm and each one outlined it in a different way. All of them, though, pointed to verse 11 as the center. That’s our verse. The undivided heart.

When I read Psalm 86, it probably raised some questions for you. Verse 8, for example, “There is none like you among the gods, O Lord.” Does this mean the psalmist believed in many gods? No. But in the ancient world so-called gods were a fact of life. Every nation had a set of gods – Baal and Dagon and Molech – but these were just idols. Except the God of Israel. That’s why the psalm says this. The nations had their so-called gods, but none was like the true God. Part of the point of the psalm is that God is worthy of our undivided loyalty and love. No one else is. Nothing else is. Nothing compares to God, so nothing is so worthy of our undivided heart as God.

Verse 13 says, “You have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol.” If you don’t know what Sheol is, this is how the Old Testament talks about the abode of the dead. Sometimes it gets translated “grave” – “you delivered my soul from the grave.” Other times it is translated “hell.” Either way gets at the same truth: Only God can give life, and without God there is only death, physical and spiritual. This is why we turn to God. Only God can give life. This too makes God worthy of our undivided heart.

If you followed along in your pew Bibles, you noticed that the Revised Standard Version renders verse 11, “Unite my heart to fear thy name.” That’s a little different – a little closer to the Hebrew, actually – but the basic idea is the same. My heart is divided, Lord. Unite it. Pick up these broken, scattered pieces and bring them together with one passion, to know and love God.

Psalm 86 is the prayer of an individual in distress. The exact nature of the problem remains a mystery, and for good reason. By leaving the source of his pain unspecified, the psalmist can give this prayer to others. It is not the prayer of one person with a specific problem. Now it is your prayer and my prayer, whatever our problem may be. The whole thing works because of a constant swing, back and forth, between cries for

help and praise to God. Over and over the psalm pleads for God to *do something!* “Help me!” Over and over it comes back to God’s steadfast love. And right in the center, holding it all together, “Give me an undivided heart to revere your name.” When you cry out to God, he hears. He rescues. He is merciful and good and abounding in steadfast love. There is nowhere better for you to turn, and only God is worthy of your undivided heart.

So, what is an undivided heart? Is it even possible? We know that even when we come to faith in Christ, we still struggle against our old nature. We love God and want to please him, but at the same time we find it so easy to sin. Part of us still wants to be in charge, to have our way. So where does that leave us? Is an undivided heart one of those wonderful gifts we only get in heaven? Or is it something we can experience in this life?

If an undivided heart means a sinless heart, a morally perfect heart, then obviously we have to wait. We are forgiven in Christ, but we remain a work in progress until we die. I do not think that’s what an undivided heart means, though. That’s not how scripture talks about it. The way scripture talks, an undivided heart seems like a real possibility today. In fact, I think a number of people in the Bible loved God with an undivided heart. They still sinned, but they tried to honor God and were fiercely loyal to him. You might say their hearts were undivided, in terms of loyalty, but their hearts were also weak. Their hearts were not big enough to love God with the perfect kind of love God loves us with, so they sinned, but their hearts beat for God nonetheless.

David was one. David had brilliant successes and terrific failures, but through it all he loved God. His loyalty never waivered. Later kings introduced the worship of foreign gods to Israel. In fact, his son Solomon did. Not David. David was a one God man. As long as he was king, Israel served the Lord and only the Lord. David made plans for the temple and gathered the materials to build it. He cared about worship, and organized the musicians and outfitted them with instruments. He wrote many of the psalms. In fact, Psalm 86 bears his name. If it is not his prayer, it is certainly his kind of prayer. He genuinely loved and trusted God – whether he was fighting giants or dancing in worship.

Paul was another. He sinned because of his ignorance. He did not believe the gospel until he met the risen Jesus, so he persecuted the church. He thought he was doing God a favor. Paul loved God passionately, even when his zeal was not guided by knowledge. Once he met Christ and received the Spirit, he became a one-man missionary army. His heart was always undivided in its zeal for God, and God honored that.

In Luke 7 we meet a woman with an undivided heart. Jesus is eating dinner at the home of a Pharisee. This woman comes in and begins washing Jesus feet with her tears.

She dries his feet with her hair, and anoints them with costly perfume. It's all very improper, and the host complains. If Jesus were a prophet, he reasons, he would know what sort of woman this is. Jesus answers, "Her sins, which were many, have been forgiven. That's why she has shown such love." The woman had a past, but she showed through her actions an undivided heart.

I look at these examples, and I can't wait. I want an undivided heart right now. Enough of the pain of divided loyalties! I want the joy of an undivided heart.

What about you? If you want an undivided heart, make this prayer your own. This sermon is only the first of a six-sermon series called "An Undivided Heart: Growing in Christ on the Psalms." Each week you'll visit a new psalm and learn how God unites your heart. So be here. Make the effort to come and worship and listen. Meanwhile, write Psalm 86.11 on a little card, or cut it out of the bulletin, and begin memorizing it. Write it on your heart.

An undivided heart begins when you experience the grace of God through Jesus Christ. He died for you, so that you can be forgiven and reunited with God. He promises eternal life to all who come to him in faith and give themselves to him. That's the start. When you put your faith in Jesus, he gives you new life. He picks up those broken, scattered pieces of your heart and brings them back together. And that's when growth begins.

Throughout your life as a follow of Jesus, you continue to grow and mature. The idea is, you become more like him. His heart was so undivided that he could pray "Not my will, but yours be done" before going to the cross. That's your goal, that kind of love for God. You grow as you worship, as you feed on his Word, as you learn to trust him when you suffer, and as you serve others in his name.

As you grow like him, you grow in peace and joy as well. Your heart becomes more and more undivided, beating stronger and more passionately for God. You become more secure in who you are and better able to love others.

So that's what this series is about: growing in Christ. We will feed on the Psalms. We will learn some spiritual disciplines that foster growth. Above all, we will surrender ourselves to God and pray verse 11 the way a starving person prays for food: "Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart to revere your name." Amen.