

Christian Life Sermon
A Journey of the Heart

Introduction:

Scripture teaches us to look at life as a journey. When we understand this, it raises the question about the nature of the journey we are on. One of the most central answers we receive from the Scriptures in response to this question is that it is a journey that is focused on recognizing our new identity in Christ and learning how to live in harmony with that new identity. The Scriptures teach us that to truly understand our new identity, we must understand that this new identity is rooted in the transformation of our hearts.

In both the Old and New Testaments, the word “*heart*” is used metaphorically. It is used to refer to the inner self of a person, including their thoughts, their feelings, their perspectives, their values, and their will; everything that makes them who they are. In regard to the heart, the Christian is meant to understand that what is important to God about a person is different than what tends to be important to other people. God expressed this very truth to the prophet Samuel when speaking about why He was choosing David to be the next king of Israel:

“But the LORD said to Samuel, do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature...for the LORD does not see as a man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart”.

I Samuel 16:7

God’s point was that the condition of an individual’s heart was of paramount importance to Him. This study will explore why the heart is so important to God, and what God wants us to know about the central role that the transformation of our hearts plays in our lives.

I. The Importance of the Heart:

In the Book of Proverbs, we find the following admonition:

“Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life.”

Proverbs 4:23

The instruction that is given here is that we are to “*keep*” our hearts. The Hebrew word translated as “*keep*” means to guard in the sense of protecting something so as to keep it secure or to preserve it. The implication in this instruction is that there is something that threatens to change our hearts in a negative way. No specific threats are identified in this proverb, but those threats are identified elsewhere throughout the Bible. Instead, this proverb focuses on why the individual needs to guard his or her heart. It is because of the central role that the heart plays in the life of a person. The author wrote that “*out of it spring the issues of life*”. The Hebrew words translated as “*spring*” and “*issues*” refer to one or more things pouring forth from something else. The imagery behind this proverb is an artesian well, where water emerges from underground and inundates the surface. The idea

is that the heart is the internal source of what is manifested outwardly in our lives; thus, everything that is observable in our lives finds its source in our hearts. Therefore, it is critical to guard one's heart, because what is in one's heart will shape everything about us. If one's heart is touched by evil, then it will cause us to do evil things. This is why the wise person will diligently guard his or her heart, because it is key to genuinely being the person God wants us to be.

II. Understanding the Role Our Hearts Play in our Lives:

Another proverb builds on the instruction that we are given about the nature of the heart. It informs us that what we know about others (or even ourselves) from outward observation can be radically misleading:

“Do not eat the bread of a miser, nor desire his delicacies; for as he thinks in his heart, so is he. ‘Eat and drink!’ he says to you, but his heart is not with you.”

Proverbs 23:6-7

This proverb warns us that the way a person conducts himself or herself outwardly can be different from what is going on in that person's heart. In this proverb we are warned that a person who is actually antagonistic to us can pretend outwardly to be friendly and hospitable. The intent in the warning is to advise us not be deceived by outward pretense.

Jesus taught that such pretense is the source of hypocrisy, and that one of the most offensive forms of hypocrisy is when one pretends to be acting out of pious convictions, but those actions are actually a mask that hides a wicked self-serving heart. This was a charge He made against the Pharisees and scribes of His day:

“Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

Often human beings conclude that evil is something that ultimately has its source outside of us, that we are innocent, and simply were misled in certain situations. While in a superficial way this can be true, a deeper reality is that it is not the evil that surrounds us that represents the greatest danger to our soul, it is the evil that we cultivate within our hearts that is the greatest threat to our moral lives before God. Jesus taught this truism to His disciples:

“So Jesus said, ‘Are you also still without understanding? Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man’.”

Matthew 15:16-18

Elsewhere Jesus taught that the goodness or the evil that is expressed outwardly in our lives is ultimately an expression of what exists within our hearts:

“A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil.”

For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.”
Luke 6:45

The important theological truth in Jesus’ statement is that since what is in our hearts shapes the sort of person we will be (righteous or wicked) it is vital then that we cultivate godly obedient hearts (Prov.4:23).

III. The Sort of Heart that Pleases God:

Understanding the important role our hearts play in determining the sort of person we will be, should result in us actively cultivating a godly heart. The next question then is what are the qualities that God wants us to cultivate in our hearts? The following verses answer that question. First, we read:

*“Lord, who may abide in Your tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy hill?
He who...speaks the truth in his heart”*
Psalm 15:1-2

In this psalm we are told that God wants us to speak truth in our hearts. That means our hearts should not be filled with falsehoods, fantasies, and popular myths. The idea is that we are to train our minds to focus on what is true, so as to protect ourselves from falling into any sort of spiritual or moral deception. Next, we read:

“Let...the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight”
Psalm 19:14

The Hebrew word translated as “*meditation*” conveys the idea of muttering something over and over again to oneself. In our modern culture we refer to something like this as self-talk. The idea in this psalm is the need to seek God’s aid in helping us to have our minds filled with the proper things. He aids us by enabling us to identify things that are spiritually unhealthy, and then consciously not allowing ourselves to entertain those ungodly thoughts. This is then more than just we ourselves deciding what is beneficial or harmful to us, it is opening our hearts to God and asking Him to guide us in that evaluation.

The instruction above is by nature general, but in the New Testament the Apostle Paul gave us some instruction that gives us some concrete examples of the things that we should meditate upon:

“Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy – meditate on these things.”
Philippians 4:8

As we continue, we read about additional things that should characterize our hearts:

“The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart”
Psalm 34:18

In modern speech, the idea of a “*broken heart*” normally brings to mind the idea of deep emotional pain because of tragedy or loss of a significant relationship. However, that is not the idea that David was expressing in this psalm. That this is true is demonstrated by the fact that the state of having a “*broken heart*” is paralleled with the idea of having a “*contrite spirit*”. To be contrite is to be repentant, to be humble and acknowledge where one has been wrong, with the desire to change so that in the future one will do what is right. Therefore, the brokenness of heart that David was referring to here, was no longer resisting the will and ways of God, it is surrender to His rule over one’s life. This means that God wants us to have submissive hearts before Him. Next we read:

“Create in me a clean heart, O God”

Psalm 51:10

The sort of cleanliness that David was referring to in this psalm was moral cleanliness. The idea is that God wants us to desire to have morally pure hearts. Elsewhere we find the following statement:

“Your word I have hidden in my heart that I might not sin against You.”

Psalm 119:11

This relates to achieving a clean heart. This psalm advocates memorizing Scripture so that it not only resides in our hearts, but so it is there for us to meditate upon so that it might shape our thinking, our values, and our priorities. The more Scripture is engrained in our thinking, the less inclined we will be toward sin. Next, we read:

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

Matthew 5:8

Because of the way purity is spoken of in the Scriptures one might think that the idea here is identical to the previous verses, that it encourages us to remove sinful inclinations from our hearts. However, Jesus was expressing a different truth in this beatitude. The basic idea of purity in both the Greek and English language is the idea that something is free from any sort of foreign element or contaminant. When we speak of pure orange juice for instance we have in mind the idea that there is nothing but orange juice in a given container. In speaking of a pure heart here, Jesus meant a heart that is completely devoted to God, a heart that has no competing affections. The idea in the beatitude is to distinguish the heart attitude that is pleasing to God from what exists in most religious people, a mix of religious and secular devotions, where one loves God and the world at the same time. The idea then is God is pleased by a heart that is devoted exclusively to Him. Finally, we read:

“So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver.”

II Corinthians 9:7

The point in citing this verse is to note that in it Paul addresses the importance of what motivates godly choices. In speaking of giving the Apostle Paul urged the saints at Corinth not to give out of compulsion, but to give because they wanted to. This is not only true of giving, it is true about everything we do in our relationship with God, He wants us to do what we do, not because we feel we must, but because we share God's values and we genuinely want to do what we are doing. In other words, God wants our actions to be genuine reflections of our heart's desires.

IV. Warnings Regarding our Hearts:

The Scriptures not only teach us what God wants us to pursue; it also warns us about what we are to avoid. These warnings are meant to protect us from things we might not see or prepare ourselves for:

“If I regard iniquity in my heart, the LORD will not hear”
Psalm 66:18

The Hebrew word translated as “*regard*” literally means to see something, but it was used here in a metaphorical way. One translation renders the word as “*cherished*” (ESV), another as “*harbored*” (NET). The idea translators sought to capture in both cases is the idea of giving sin a place in one's heart. Therefore, the warning here is that if we allow sin to take up residence in our heart, accepting it and giving it that place in our hearts, then doing this will actively hinder our prayer lives, because it is an act of rebellion against God. Therefore, we are warned not to tolerate sinful ideas or beliefs in our hearts.

“So I gave them over to their own stubborn heart, to walk in their own counsels”
Psalm 81:12

Stubbornness is a sinful posture when exhibited toward God. It implies that one will not surrender their will to that of God. The warning in this verse is that eventually God will give the individual precisely what they want, they will have their way, but at the same time their sensitivity to God's promptings will diminish and they will experience the consequences of disobeying God.

“Everyone proud in heart is an abomination to the LORD”
Proverbs 16:5

Pride is a sinful posture before God, because it implies a number of falsehoods. One, that a person has more confidence in themselves than in God; two, that one is oblivious to how inferior our understanding and perceptions are to the perfect understanding of God. There is a defiance about pride, and a lack of recognition of our rightful place before God. That it is an abomination to God means the same things that we read in another proverb, that God hates human pride (Prov.6:17).

“he who hardens his heart will fall into calamity”
Proverbs 28:14

The only way to know the truth and to understand what is best for us is by listening to the truth that God has revealed to us. To allow one's heart to be hardened, means to allow it to be resistant to God's truth. This will lead to disaster and ruin, because sin always leads a person toward that destination.

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked, who can know it? I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings”

Jeremiah 17:9-10

Here God warns His people about the natural state of the fallen human heart. It is important to understand that our hearts are naturally deceitful. This is because if we aren't, we won't take any precautions against those times when our own hearts are inclined to lead us astray. The modern adage that we should follow our hearts is a profoundly foolish notion. This is because in reality we can convince ourselves to believe almost anything if it satisfies some desire or aspiration we have. We see this phenomenon all around us, where people allow falsehoods that appeal to their hearts to shape their lives. It is also important to understand that our fallen hearts are profoundly wicked by nature. Apart from the grace of God, a person's heart can lead them into degrees of wickedness they never thought they were capable of expressing, while the deceit in their heart convinces them that everything they are doing is justified. The intent in this instruction is to make us wise, by making us suspicious of our own reasoning and conclusions. Instead, we must trust God's word completely and understand that if our hearts ever disagree with God's word, it is always our heart that is wrong.

“These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me”

Matthew 15:8

This is a warning about how easily hypocrisy can manifest itself in our lives. Jesus was speaking about a culture that was supposedly built around the Law of Moses, and that supposedly had as its highest good, pleasing the one true God. But the reality was that this was all a sham. They were religious, but they did not genuinely understand or love their God. For He was in human form among them, and they hated Him. Therefore, the lesson to be learned is to seek to recognize when our devotion to God is becoming only an outward act, and not the true reflection of our hearts.

V. The Impact of Redemption on our Hearts:

Next, is the question of what God is seeking to accomplish as He transforms our hearts. The following verses are prophetic promises concerning the future coming of the New Covenant that God would make with His people, a covenant that would radically change the way that God's people would relate to Him:

“I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts”
Jeremiah 31:33

*“I will give you a new heart...I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh
and give you a heart of flesh”*
Ezekiel 36:26

In these prophecies, God promised that a time would come when He would do something that would change the heart of His people. Through Ezekiel He revealed that they would be given an entirely new heart. The elaboration that God would remove their heart of stone and replace it with a heart of flesh was expressed to give the Israelites a general idea of what the change would involve. A heart of stone pictured a resistant heart, while a heart of flesh pictured a sensitive and receptive heart. God's redemptive plan was to change the very nature of His people. Through Jeremiah, God revealed that He would write His Law upon their hearts. He would cause His word to become a part of the very nature of His people. This means that the change would be that instead of God merely giving them truth, He would also be transforming the nature of their hearts so that they would have a new capacity to understand and obey God's truth. Next, we turn to the time when this was fulfilled:

*“that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that
God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one
believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.”*
Romans 10:9-10

Through the coming of the Messiah, God revealed how His promises about the New Covenant would be accomplished. In the verses above, Paul explained that the promised salvation of that New Covenant is received by faith in the completed redemptive work of Christ (as summarized above in the reference to Christ's resurrection). What is important to recognize here is that this saving faith, though it is expressed outwardly by verbal confession, is realized only when that verbal confession reflects genuine belief in that person's heart. Therefore, the entire process of salvation hinges on whether or not there is genuinely faith in the heart of the individual who professes to believe that Jesus is their Savior.

*“let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts
sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water”*
Hebrews 10:22

This verse from Hebrews summarizes what God accomplishes in the salvation of each individual who genuinely believes. He does not simply forgive the sins of His people. For those who believe, God also cleanses them from their sin. Using what the readers knew about OT worship, the author pictured the one who truly believes as having been cleansed from the sin that had separated them from God by the ultimate atoning sacrifice and then entering into the very presence of God precisely because they had received that cleansing (Heb.10:19-23). The author specifically

mentions the heart as having been cleansed. The idea then is that the new life in Christ is defined by the transformation of a person's heart, made possible by the substitutionary death of Christ.

Conclusion:

Understanding these things helps us recognize what our life is all about. It is about heart change. Because of the work of God, we are given new hearts when we are born again at our conversion. However, that is not the entire story. If it were, then all genuine Christians would be perfectly and continuously godly and never sin. We are also told that though we have been made new creatures (II Cor.5:17), sin is not entirely absent from our lives. Sin is not native to our hearts anymore, but we can still submit to it, and when we do, it rules over us (Rom.6:16). Therefore, the teaching above helps us understand how we are meant to look at our lives. We are to see ourselves on a very specific journey. The journey began at conversion. We started the journey having chosen to leave behind the life of a fallen sinner. That life was built around following the inclinations of our sinful deceptive hearts. The nature of our new life is a journey in which we seek to have our hearts transformed more and more by God's truth. Our journey is leading us to the ultimate destination of having hearts that mirror the nature of our God. Therefore, our focus every day should be on how God is accomplishing that transformation, and on how we can seek to obediently respond to God's work in our lives to make that happen.

that as we go forward, our lives are meant to be centered on the idea of how we live in light of who God created us to be, and not according to our previous pattern of life. What exactly is involved in doing this, and precisely how we do this is the subject of future studies.