

Reflections on the Heart

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Solomon once wrote, *“Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life”* (Prov. 4:23). The heart is the most consequential aspect of our being. The motivations for everything about us can be traced to our hearts. Therefore, Solomon warns his son to vigilantly guard his heart.

In the Bible, there are three types of hearts described. These three types of hearts have certain characteristics; yet, sometimes their traits overlap. Which of these describes your heart?

1. The heart of a beast. During the Babylonian Exile, the prideful King Nebuchadnezzar was punished by God. His punishment involved him losing his mental faculties: *“But when his heart was lifted up, and his mind hardened in pride, he was deposed from his kingly throne, and they took his glory from him: And he was driven from the sons of men; and his heart was made like the beasts, and his dwelling was with the wild asses: they fed him with grass like oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven; till he knew that the most high God ruled in the kingdom of men, and that he appointeth over it whomsoever he will”* (Dan. 5:20-21).

The heart of an animal is wild. Animals act by survival instincts. They prey to catch and kill for food. Sometimes they kill for sport and to assert dominance. The strong devour the weak. Every new mating season, males find females with which to reproduce.

Does the heart of an animal describe your heart? Sometimes humans act like wild animals. Sometimes we give no regard to our fellow man. We act out of greed and self-interest. We can be governed by every passing lustful impulse.

2. The heart of man. There are many passages in the Bible that deal with the heart of man. Jeremiah was particularly insightful in his description of man’s heart when he wrote, *“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?”* (Jer. 17:9).

According to Jeremiah, our hearts can deceive our judgment. Our hearts can trick us into behaving like animals. The sickness of the heart is caused by lust. Concerning how the heart can become sick and deceive us, James wrote, *“But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death”* (Jas. 1:14-15).

As humans, we can all relate to the heart of man. We all have been enticed and deceived by lust. We all have been led by our hearts to act on lust. Recognizing this, Jeremiah asked, *“Who can understand it?”* This is a question of desperation. If our hearts can deceive us, what hope do we have in this life? Thankfully, there is a good answer to this question.

3. The heart of God. Our Creator has affection for us. He responds to us according to His heart. There are two basic aspects of God’s heart. First, the heart of God rejoices in good. Jeremiah wrote, *“I will rejoice in doing them good, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness,*

with all my heart and all my soul” (Jer. 32:41). Secondly, the heart of God sorrows over wickedness. This was noted regarding the state of the human family in the lifetime of Noah: “The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart” (Gen. 6:5-6).

A Change of Heart

As we consider these three types of hearts, at minimum, we can conclude that our hearts need attention. Too often, we act like animals. Too often, our hearts are deceived. Therefore, we need to have our hearts transformed into a heart like God.

Thankfully, such a dramatic transformation is possible. For example, David was a human just like us. Regrettably, there were times when he behaved like an animal and deceived himself from rightly discerning good and evil. Yet, David was described as a man after God’s own heart (1 Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22). But, how could a man like David with all of his sin be described as a man after God’s own heart?

In short, David had a change of heart. Like David, we too must have a change of heart. But, how can that happen for us? Consider the following three steps we can take towards changing our hearts.

1. Our hearts must be judged. Certainly, this is a concept which the world adamantly opposes today. We must allow God to judge our hearts. After describing the sickness of man’s heart, Jeremiah wrote, *“I the LORD search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds”* (Jer. 9:10). Similarly, David wrote, *“Judge me, O LORD; for I have walked in mine integrity: I have trusted also in the LORD; therefore I shall not slide. Examine me, O LORD, and prove me; try my reins and my heart. For thy lovingkindness is before mine eyes: and I have walked in thy truth”* (Psa. 26:1-3).

Today, God searches our hearts by His word. The Bible says, *“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart”* (Heb. 4:12). We must use God’s word to judge the motives of our hearts. This can be a painful process; yet, such judgments must be made in order for us to change our hearts.

2. Our hearts must be emptied. What are we to do when God’s word exposes lust and pride in our hearts? James wrote, *“Put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls”* (Jas. 1:21). We must use the instructions of God’s word to empty our hearts of impurity. Emptying our hearts of impurity is part of the process of repentance and transformation. This is how sin is sacrificed and discarded.

3. Our hearts must be refilled. As we empty our hearts of lust, we must refill our hearts with love. Animalistic impulses must be replaced with self-control. We must learn to share in

God's love for good and His sorrow over wickedness. To use the language of Paul, we must empty our hearts of the works of the flesh and refill our hearts with the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:19-23).

Conclusion

What is in your heart? Confronting our lust and pride is intended to be a heart-breaking experience. Acknowledging the pain our behavior has caused God and other people should make us grieve. However, this is precisely the kind of heart God will transform: *"Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad"* (Eccl. 7:3).

Thankfully, there is hope for the sorrowful. Godly sorrow over our sin will produce repentance (2 Cor. 7:10). Through penitent obedience, our hearts can be made right. Like the saints at Rome, we too can have our hearts judged, emptied, and refilled through the Gospel: *"But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness"* (Rom. 6:17-18).