

Understanding the Heart

“To be human is to rebel. To be Christian is to supernaturally submit. A Christian’s heart is the battleground.”

Gary Thomas

Look around, and I’ll bet you’ll soon come to the same conclusion I did: the heart matters. We use heart imagery to portray romantic love and talk about two hearts becoming one (where would Valentine’s Day be without the heart?). We speak of happy people as lighthearted. We call courageous warriors “brave hearts.” An intimate conversation is a “heart to heart.” And if you’re fully committed to someone, you love him or her “with all your heart.”

The heart is just as important for describing the dark side of life. The loss of a lover leads to heartache and a broken heart. A cruel person is heartless. And when you lose your passion for something, your “heart isn’t in it.”

Yet as prominent as the heart is in our everyday world, it is even more important to our spiritual lives. In over a thousand references throughout the Bible, God makes it clear that the heart is His central concern. As Scripture says, “The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7). What does God see when He looks at our hearts?

The Diagnosis

Ever had an electrocardiogram? A doctor places a series of electrodes on your body to measure electrical impulses generated by your heart. A machine produces a graph that shows how often, and how fast, your heart is beating. If you’re in good shape, the chart reveals a series of evenly spaced jagged lines—none of the beats measuring too high or

low, or too fast or slow. An EKG is a useful test for diagnosing all kinds of potential problems related to the heart.

Right now, though, I'd like you to take a different kind of test, one you might call a "spiritual EKG." You can use it to diagnose the health of your spiritual heart.

For this test, we're going to be looking for thirteen specific heart ailments listed by Jesus. The first seven are "inward" sinful attitudes that are harder to diagnose. The final six are "outward" sinful actions that may be visible to others who know you. All are deadly, however, and any one of them is the sign of a sinful heart.

Jesus describes them in Mark 7:21-22. "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*. Let's take a closer look at each one.

Sinful Attitudes (Inward)

1) Evil Thoughts. Every outward act of sin is preceded by an inward sinful act of choice. It's amazing how our minds work.

2) Greed. "The accursed love of having." Are you never satisfied with what you have? Do you always want something bigger and better—a new computer, a new dress, a new house? Many of us struggle with an appetite that always wants more.

3) Malice. A lingering desire to harm someone else—they got me, I want to get them.

4) Deceit. Translated in Scripture from the Greek word for *bait*; crafty, cunning. Some people seem to lie and deceive even when they have no reason for it.

5) Lewdness. A disposition of soul that resents all discipline: no restraints, no sense of decency or shame.

6) Envy. The "evil eye." It involves comparing yourself to others and wanting what they have—their success, their possessions, their happiness.

7) Arrogance. Literally "showing our self above." It means displaying a degree of contempt for everyone except yourself. Once again, it involves comparisons and thoughts such as *I would never do that or I can't understand that jerk!*

These are the inward sins that men may not observe, but God clearly sees. Then there are sinful actions. We see them every day, in the newspaper and in our own lives.

Sinful Actions (Outward)

1) Sexual Immorality. The Greek word used in Scripture for this is *porneia*, the root of the English word *pornography*. It means every kind of traffic in sexual vice. In today's highly sexualized society, it is one of the leading indicators of a troubled heart.

2) Theft. Taking what doesn't belong to you. It could mean using the handicapped parking spot at the grocery store, embezzling funds from your employer, and anything in between.

3) Murder. The taking of an innocent life.

4) Adultery. Sexual involvement with anyone other than one's spouse. It was a problem for King David in Old Testament times. It's still a problem today.

5) Slander. Insulting man or God. Though this may seem a specialty of politicians during campaign season, we all must be on our guard for this one.

6) Folly. Moral folly; playing the fool. Ever act without thinking on a foolish, selfish impulse? That's trouble!

These are the thirteen ailments that Christ has described as "vomit from the heart." Not a pretty list, is it? This list is not exhaustive but is indicative of what lurks in the human heart. But let's be honest—we've all had moments of struggle with a few of these, and perhaps many of them. The question is, what are you going to do about it?

I suggest you start with a self-examination—an EKG of your spiritual heart. Go back to the list above and write down each sinful action or attitude on a piece of paper. Then stop for a minute at each one, review your behavior, and ask yourself: Is this a recurring problem in my life? I'm not talking about if you once had a mean thought when a driver cut in front of you in traffic. Is this part of your everyday routine, something you struggle with on a regular basis? Write down the answer on your paper. Don't try to pass over any ugly truths—your honesty now is one of the keys to unlocking your future.

Now that you're finished, what's the diagnosis? The prognosis may not look good. The doctors may even be calling for life support. And you're lying on the table, asking, "How did this happen?"

Believe me, it's a common story—one as old as mankind.

The Devastated Heart

When God created the first man and woman, He made humans, not machines. God gave Adam and Eve rational and moral natures, so it was necessary that they be tested. When the Lord put Adam and Eve in the garden, He said, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. (Genesis 2:16–17). The test God gave forbade the minimum and allowed the maximum. But you know what happened and it's the same path we still go down when confronted with temptation. Satan isn't very creative. He doesn't have to be. His old pattern still works.

When we look at the third chapter of Genesis, we see five downward steps that we know all too well:

1) Listening: "[The serpent] said to the woman, 'Did God really say, "You must not eat from any tree in the garden"?''" (v. 1).

Satan speaks to us with deviant messages placed throughout our culture and even in our own minds. The messages are like TV commercials. You know it's best to tune them out, but sometimes, like Eve, you stop and listen—just for a minute.

2) Loosening: "But God did say, 'You must not eat from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it'" (v. 3).

Satan can be subtle, and even a subtle change can have dangerous consequences. The serpent asked Eve whether God really said she couldn't eat from any tree. Eve corrected him, saying God's only restriction was eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But then she attributed a new statement to God, that "you must not touch it." Eve added to the Word of God. She loosened her hold on what the Lord had actually said.

Once you loosen your hold on the Word of God by adding to it or subtracting from it and think He doesn't really mean what He says—or say, “Yes, that's true for you, but not necessarily true for me”—then it's like letting go of your anchor at sea. You're setting yourself adrift and headed for a storm.

3) Looking: “The woman saw the fruit of the tree was good” (v. 6).

When Eve looked, she decided that the fruit looked pretty good! *Why*, she thought, *would a good God withhold anything like this from me?* It starts with the eyes and launches a thought progression that leads to trouble.

4) Longing: “[The fruit] was pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom” (v. 6).

The longer Eve looked at the fruit, the stronger her longing for it grew. Satan has ways to make any sin appear desirable. The more our eyes dwell in places they shouldn't, the easier it is to cross the line.

5) Laying Hold Of: “She took some and ate it” (v. 6).

Eve pulled the fruit off the tree, ate it, and as the saying goes, the rest is history. All the problems you or I have in life, all the problems our world has, can be traced right back to these five steps Adam and Eve took in the Garden of Eden.

Ravi Zacharias says, “Evil is not just where blood has been spilled. Evil is in the self-absorbed human heart.”¹ That's where it starts. Sin is basically man's rebellion against the authority of God and pride in his own supposed self-adequacy. This results in alienation from God.

We are left with a desperate need to have our hearts radically changed by Christ.

Conversion

When we commit our lives to Jesus, what is really happening? Our hearts are being transformed. From the inside out, we begin activating the faith we were meant to experience. This spiritual conversion takes place in three dimensions of our hearts: our intellect, our emotions, and our will.

For many people, conversion begins with the intellect. There is a fact-based, positive recognition of the truth of the Bible and the person of Christ. There is at least some understanding of the facts of who Jesus is and what He did. Many people in our culture have had an intellectual conversion. Every Sunday, churches across the country are filled with people who have investigated, thought it through, and believe the propositional truth. You don't put your brains on the shelf when you become a Christian. But don't stop there—nobody goes into heaven head first!

The second dimension of the heart is emotional. That's where the Holy Spirit enables a passionate drawing of your heart to the truth and person of Christ. Jason, a man who attended one of the churches I pastored years ago, recalled that he knew *about* Christ, but it wasn't until a day in church when the words of Scripture seemed to physically reach out and grab him that he *felt* the presence of Jesus. At that moment, tears came to Jason's eyes. Something had happened to him. His emotions had finally caught up with his intellectual understanding.

The last dimension of the heart is volitional. It's a matter of the will—a decision. You may believe in God and sense His presence in a compelling way, yet still hold back from following Him. You must *choose* to commit your life to Christ. As the apostle Paul wrote, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9).

It's like the inner workings of a grandfather clock—every element must be in sync for that clock to keep running and keep accurate time. In the same way, you won't know true spiritual conversion until all three dimensions of the heart—intellect, emotions, and will—are working together.

I once had the privilege of watching these three dimensions come together in a strong and powerful way. Years ago, I served as board chair for a missions organization that was going through a crisis with its team in the Philippines. I was asked to travel there to help with the situation. I went to a doctor to get my immunization shots for the trip. I'd met Robert Nichols only recently. His son-in-law had been killed in a car accident and I'd counseled the family. I knew that Robert was not a believer.

When Robert learned where I was going, he said he'd like to go too. As a joke, I said, "Well, why don't you come along?"

The next day, Robert called and asked if I was serious about my invitation to the Philippines. "No!" I said. "This isn't a pleasure trip. I'll be there just a few days and I'll be in meetings the whole time."

Robert said he really wanted to go. I explained that I was leaving soon; he wouldn't have time to arrange for tickets, a passport, and a visa. Robert insisted that he could get the paperwork done on time.

"You don't understand," I said. "I'll be busy the entire time I'm there. I won't even have time to talk to you."

"That's all right," Robert said. "I can talk with you on the plane."

I didn't understand why Robert was so persistent. *Lord, what are You doing here?* I thought. *I hardly know this man.* But eventually I relented.

Three days later, Robert and I sat together on a Boeing 727 for the long flight to Manila. We talked the entire time, with Robert firing question after question at me. How do you know the Bible is really the Word of God? What about people who've never heard of Jesus? Is Christ really the only way to salvation? The tragic death of Robert's son-in-law had inspired a searching self-examination. I realized he was sincerely seeking the truth. He was trying to satisfy the intellectual dimension of his heart.

It wasn't until after we landed, however, that I discovered just how much was going on with Robert during our trip. A group from our missionary team picked us up at the airport and took us out to eat. I hadn't had a chance to explain Robert's presence. I kept looking for a moment to pull them aside and let them know he wasn't a believer.

I never got the chance. Just after we sat down in the restaurant, one of the men with us looked at Robert and asked, "Doc, when did you come to know the Lord?"

I cringed, fearing an awkward moment for Robert and for me. I'll never forget his answer. Robert looked at his watch and said, "When? Oh, about six hours ago at thirty thousand feet."

Somewhere over the Pacific Ocean, Robert had invited the Lord into his heart. He'd experienced spiritual conversion. Robert was excited—he'd committed himself to the Lord, entered into a holy relationship, and was looking at a bright new future. He'd left the struggles and miseries of his old life behind.

Or had he?

Converted But Not Consecrated

When a person experiences spiritual conversion, he gains a new heart. God says, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 36:26). The Lord fills that new heart with love: "God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" (Romans 5:5).

The new believer is "born again" (1 Peter 1:23) and takes on a new identity: "For if a man is in Christ he becomes a new person altogether—the past is finished and gone, everything has become fresh and new" (2 Corinthians 5:17 PHILLIPS).

The past is gone. Everything is fresh and new. It all sounds pretty good, right? And it is—it's the most wonderful thing that can happen to a man or woman on this side of heaven.

But there's one little piece that's missing from this picture—a key element that needs to fall into place. It's easy to understand, yet so very difficult to do. When we give our lives to the Lord, we must change our focus. Our purpose now is no longer to just take care of ourselves and our families. Instead, "we make it our goal to please him" (2 Corinthians 5:9). It's not about us now. It's about Him.

There's a word for this vital step in order to experience God's best: *consecration*. It means that we are devoting ourselves wholeheartedly to the Lord. As the Bible says, "Your hearts must be fully committed to the LORD our God, to live by his decrees and obey his commands" (1 Kings 8:61). According to M. H. Miller, "consecration is handing God a blank sheet to fill in with your name signed at the bottom."

Consecration means consenting to God’s supremacy in all things. This is what Jesus had in mind when He said, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). There is a moment of consecration and then a process of consecration—an ongoing commitment to daily obedience. God is the boss. I want to do it His way. When I find myself doing things my way, I have to stop and pray, “Lord, not my will, but Yours.”

Consecration is the process of changing from a self-centered life to a God-centered life. Let’s face it—many of us are very self-centered. This is what *I* want. This is what works for *me*. Consecration is letting God work in us so that life is no longer about ourselves. We want to come to the place where we always desire to seek His kingdom first. That’s when everything else starts working as it should.

So many Christians today are converted but not consecrated. If you accepted the Lord as a child, you were certainly welcomed into the family of God, but likely not consecrated. If you entered into salvation as an adult, you still probably lacked the spiritual maturity and biblical understanding to also be consecrated—to devote yourself without reservation to God’s way.

What’s the result of this converted, yet unconsecrated life? You can guess the answer: a troubled heart.

Freeing the Changed Heart

Remember what we learned in the first chapter? Our hearts are “full of evil” and need to be changed. We may be converted. We may have salvation. We’ve undergone a spiritual change. We may even have consecrated our lives to the Lord. Yet in this life, we’ll never know the deep joy that comes from joining God’s family if our plan is simply to go to church and try to follow the rules. We’ll battle daily with temptation and lose most of the time.

When Jesus listed His thirteen “heart ailments,” He took the focus of attention away from external rituals and placed it on the need for God to change—to *renovate*—our sinful hearts. This process begins when we are genuinely converted and consecrate our

lives to Him. However, we still may need to have our hearts freed from the chains that keep us in bondage so that we can experience all that God promises.

Is your heart still in bondage? Do you sense that something is holding you back from the joy and peace that the Lord offers even though you have received Christ as your Savior and desire to live for Him? You may be struggling from unresolved spiritual and emotional conflicts. As Dr. David Allen explains, there's still work that needs to be done in our hearts.

Our challenge is to become missionaries to our own hearts. So often we forget the painful feelings buried deep inside us—anger, fear, guilt—and the experiences that led us to feel that way. The heart is the repository for those painful feelings, but like a sponge it can only absorb so much emotion. Once it's saturated, there's little room left for love and joy and beauty.²

My research and my own personal experience have shown that there are three major issues that prevent men and women from living with a free heart. They are:

- **Guilt** in our relationship with God. This is a *vertical* issue.
- **Bitterness** in our relationship with others. This is a *horizontal* issue.
- **Anxiety** in our relationship with ourselves. This is an *internal* issue.

Hearts must be free from guilt, bitterness, and anxiety. If you are not free from all three, watch out—the timer has been set, and sooner or later you're going to implode or explode. The good news is that when you know where to look, Scripture gives clear guidance on how to deal with each of these core issues. You *can* unshackle your heart and experience a life of love and peace. You'll be able to say, like the psalmist, "I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free" (Psalm 119:32).

Chances are, if you're reading this book, that at least one of these issues is plaguing you right now. Let's dig deeper and find out.

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A Thought to Remember

A Christian's heart is the battleground.

A Verse to Review

“If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.” Romans 10:9–10

A Question for Reflection

Have you received a new heart by accepting Christ as your Savior?