



Lesson 3

Penetrating Hearts

Ezekiel 14; Hebrews 4:12-13

Desperately wicked and blinded hearts are open to God and His Word

Summary

While our hearts are desperately wicked, deceived and inscrutable, God knows our hearts and tests what guides our actions and emotions. God is working toward heart transformation through His work and through His Word.

TEACHER: Use an illustration about sometimes weak and unproductive plants can be pulled up and their roots will shriveled and withered.

Examining Our Bad R o o t s

Sinful Heart Issues

The Bible speaks powerfully about human motivations .

Ultimately, we are either driven and ruled by God or by someone/something else.

Biblical Models and Themes

The Bible describes sinful heart motives in many ways:

I d o l s

1 John 5:21; Ezek 14:1-7; Rom 1:18-32; Eph 5:5; Col 3:5;
Phil 3:19

False gods that function as idols of the heart, serving the creature rather than the Creator, greed as idolatry and appetite as a god.

Ruling D e s i r e s

Eph 2:3; 4:22; James 1:13-15; 4:1-3; Gal 5:16-17; 1 Peter
2:11; 4:2; 1 John 2:16-17; Exodus 20:17; Rom 1:24-27;
7:7-11,14-25; 8:1-17



How wants, pleasures, cravings are lusts that wage war on/in the soul.

M a s t e r s

Matt 6:24; Rom 6:15-23; Gen 4:6-7; Psalm 119:133

Rulers and what we serve/obey, where we cannot serve God and mammon and where sin desires to master us.

T r e a s u r e s

Matt 6:19-21; Matt 13:44-45; 1 Tim 6:19; Heb 11:26;
Psalm 119:72, 127

What we value, our riches, see as precious, worthy, and weighty.

Good or bad r o o t s with good or bad fruit.

Luke 6:43-45

A common illustration in Jesus' teaching where the kind of fruit is a natural and inevitable product of the kind of root.

What/whom we l o v e.

2 Tim 3:1-5; John 21:15-17; 1 John 2:15

What or whom your heart embraces along with being lovers of self.

E x p e c t a t i o n

Luke 24:17-21; 1 Timothy 6:17; Psalm 42-43; 71

In what/whom we hope, along with our yearnings, images and descriptions of the future, near and far – temporal and eternal.



In what/whom we t r u s t.

Jeremiah 17:5-8; Psalm 20:7-8; Proverbs 3:5

What we depend, rely, bank our hopes in or on along with verbs of resting, settling, building upon.

What/whom we f e a r.

Matt 10:28; 1 Pet 3:13-15; Eccl 12:13

Before what or whom we cower, bow, respect, reverence as having ultimate authority or ability to reward or punish.

F o u n d a t i o n

Matt 7:24-27; 1 Tim 6:17-19; Heb 12:27-28

On what/whom we build our life.

What/whom we h a l l o w.

Matthew 6:9

Whose character, reputation, qualities do we imitate, strive for, our hero whose name we own and owns us.



I d o l s of the Heart

The Bible represents the heart as having idols – anything that masters, rules or controls our desires and wants other than God.

Heart Idols in L e a d e r s

Ezekiel 14:1-7

Who are these idolaters?

Elders of Israel – spiritual leaders who come to approach and seek God

What sins does the Lord expose?

Set up idols in their hearts and put stumbling blocks in front of their eyes. Have class put their hands with their fingers spread in front of their faces. Notice how something right in front of us obscures our vision of other things, tends to dominate our vision of itself while itself being out of focus and therefore not clearly seen.

What is the Lord's goal?

(v.5) To r e c a p t u r e their hearts

What is the Lord's command?

(v.6) to repent – note how this repentance at the heart level is unpacked in Joel 2:13. Unless they remove the idols they will not be able to see anything clearly.

Principles from the Text

Idolatry is a problem for everyone, even r e l i g i o u s people.

Idolatry is rooted in our h e a r t s.

Our idols exert an inescapable, r u l i n g influence on us.

Transformation must occur at the h e a r t level.



Transformation involves turning from i d o l s to the L o r d.

Heart Idols in B e l i e v e r s

1 John 5:21

Written to believers who are being instructed on how they can know they have been born from above. Yet, truly born from above people still need to keep and guard themselves from idolatry.

Idolatry is any s u b s t i t u t e for the living God.
Idols are more in the self than up on the shelf.

Command: Keep/guard yourself! We must take action to guard our hearts by observing them, protecting them, analyzing them and repenting of any idols we see.

Heart Idols in C u l t u r e

Romans 1:18-32

There is here a great exchange that is operating at the personal and corporate level. Thus the cumulative effect of each of these in individual lives adds up to be the dominate exchange in the culture as a whole. Further, note how this text reinforces the root/fruit/harvest cycle as it works out individually and corporately.

- 18-23 The e x c h a n g e that operates as lies in the realm of heart idols.
- Exchange the eternal g l o r y of God for the mortal creatures (v.23).
 - Exchange the t r u t h of God for a lie (v.25a).
 - Exchange worship and service of God for the c r e a t u r e (v.25b).
 - Exchange o b e d i e n c e to God for pleasure (v.26).
- 24-25 Given over to l u s t s because of embracing l i e s.
- 26-28 P u n i s h e d by being given over to the flesh
- As d e g r a d i n g passions (v.26-27)
 - As d e p r a v e d minds (v.28)
- 29-32 Y i e l d i n g fruits and harvests of ever more dominating sins

Examples of Idol Clusters

Greed

Ephesians 5:5 // Colossians 3:5

Greed is idolatry – ruled by wanting what we ought not have so that it rules us and masters us into disobedience. This is a primary category for idolatry today. The desire for what is thought of as “wealth” becomes a ruling desire of greed and coveting. Thinking of it this way allows this category to be trans-cultural.

Fear of man, acceptance, approval

Proverbs 29:25

Brings a snare

John 12:42-43

Kept some leaders from confessing Christ – they were more concerned about acceptance and approval

Galatians 2:11-13

Feared the circumcision party resulting in an offense to Gentile believers and miscommunication of the gospel

Success, power, control

1 Sam 13:8-14

Impatience of Saul usurps priestly function

Luke 22:24-27

Discussion about who is greatest.

3 John 1:9-10

Loving to be first bears fruit in suppressing opposition in church life

Isaiah 30:1-2

Make plans and alliances apart from God

Comfort, convenience, tranquility, ease

Luke 9:23-24,57-62

Will often be used to excuse from immediate obedience and sacrificial ministry. Is exposed by a call to discipleship and challenged by the cross



Money, possessions, coveting

Matt 6:19-24	The heart will tend to follow where what it treasures is placed (storing up)
Luke 12:15; 16:13-15	Cannot serve God and money (material wealth) because of its status as idol
1 Tim 6:9-10,17	Desire for riches and love of money as roots and sources of all kinds of evil including many pains and not caring for others.
2 Tim 3:2	Characteristic of this age

Sensual pleasure

2 Samuel 11:2-4; 13:1-14	Patterns of ease, comfort and self-indulgence as part of the heart themes and idols leading to adultery and incest.
Philippians 3:19	Their stomach is their god
1 Thessalonians 4:3-8	Knowing God and God's power makes purity possible, even in a sensual culture. We want to begin setting up the boundaries in the heart: know God and love brother so as not to defraud.

What does it mean, then, to allow Jesus to be Lord of our lives? What does it mean that anything is the lord of our life? Just this: Whatever controls us is lord. The person who seeks acceptance is controlled by the people he or she wants to please. We do not control ourselves. We are controlled by the lord of our life. If Jesus is our Lord, then he is the one who controls, he has the ultimate power."

(Rebecca Pippert, Out of the Saltbaker, p. 53)



Summary about Heart Idols:

Heart idols are the f a l s e gods we erect in our hearts in competition with the true and living God.

We choose to obey them and trust them to bring us the b l e s s i n g s we want

In turn, they rule and drive us. We are both willful choosers and helpless s l a v e s to our idols.

“The fallen human heart cannot see beauty in holiness, but finds pleasure in that which ultimately brings ruin.” (Thomas E. McComiskey, Hosea, on Hosea 11:5)

Idolatry: “When we act as if something below God could make us happy without God, or that God cannot make us happy without the addition of something else.” (Stephen Charnock)



The Difficulty Examining the Heart Jeremiah 17:5-10

The Severe C h a s t e n i n g of God's People

Jeremiah is preaching/prophesying to the remnant of Jews left in Jerusalem after the Babylonian deportation. He is a contemporary of Ezekiel who is preaching to the Jews in exile in Babylon. The Jews simply refuse to believe Jeremiah's message and keep making alliances with surrounding nations to defend themselves. Jeremiah will eventually be thrown into prison and sawn in two. The Jews will come under a Babylonian siege that becomes so bad, they resort to cannibalism.

This context is very important for this text. Here we have a people who reject God's severe and hard providences, reject God's message and messenger and are being confronted about their heart issues.

The M o d e l for Interpreting God's Providences (v.5-8)

This is based on Psalm 1 while reversing the order: the cursed man is first preceding the blessed man. Here, the heart is specifically identified as the "heart" of the issue.

The primary contrast is between those who trust in the f l e s h and those who trust in the L o r d.

The Thorn Bush (v.5-6)

The cursed man is one whose heart turns away from the Lord and puts its trust in the flesh.

The comparison is to a thorn bush in the wilderness where both the situation is bad and the person is failing. Unlike Psalm 1 where the Lord's judgment exposes, here the situation does.

The Fruitful Tree (v.7-8)

The blessed man is one whose heart trusts in the Lord. Notice this is emphasized by repetition.

The comparison is to a fruitful tree in a good place that is prosperous even when the situation becomes bad (drought).



The T r o u b l e with the Heart

(v.9-10)

The problem is the heart. God is not emphasizing the nature of the situation, but the problem in and out of the heart.

Its D e p r a v i t y

(v.9)

It is desperately wicked and deceitful. The tendency of the sinful inner man is deceive through self-talk lies, self-justifications, myths, half-truths, etc. TEACHER: Talk briefly about depravity as both the place of the heart and a power in the heart. The heart still resides in the flesh and in this fallen world. The heart is still influenced and can be mastered by sin.

Its O b s c u r i t y

(v.9)

The effect of the depravity and deceitfulness of the heart is that it is difficult to know. Its deceitfulness appears to make it inaccessible. People have an enormous capacity for self-deceit – to believe and want under the cloak of different words. Piercing self-truths is rare. This makes knowing our own hearts and the hearts of others difficult This is posed as a question.

Its S e a r c h a b i l i t y

(v.10)

Not impossible to know

Do not answer, “It is impossible to know that heart...” That is not true. The heart can be known. It is fully known by God who not only knows our thoughts, but knows our thoughts before they come to us.

Searched by the Lord

The Lord is given a name here: the searcher of hearts and examiner of minds. This is Hebrew parallelism – searching hearts and knowing minds is the same thing, NOT two things. What is in the heart, in the inner man, is known or experienced in our minds.

Evidenced by fruit and ways

(v.10)

God examines the heart so that the fruit the heart produces is dealt with. God examines the heart, evaluates what it produces and responds accordingly.

God deals with what is actually going on in the heart and brings about circumstances that will expose it to us.



The Power to Penetrate the Heart Hebrews 4:12-16

The issue is a lack of faith (entering into the rest) that results in disobedience.

Another way to say this is: all disobedience issues from what is believed/doubted in the heart. Given the terrible problem of both our sin and the deceitfulness of the heart and the great need to exercise true faith, how do we deal with the heart?

Three basic solutions are pointed to: power of the Word, visibility to the Lord and the responsibilities in its light.

***The Characteristics of the Word* (v.12)**

Notice that this opens with “for”. We must strive to enter rest by faith because the Word of God is like this, heart penetrating and exposing.

In its Attributes

The Word is not dead, alive and active.

The Word is not just a book, but a sharp, penetrating sword.

In its Abilities

The Word p e n e t r a t e s the heart's hardness.

God who sees the heart uses the Word to drive deep into the heart.

It is able to get to the core of things – this is what is meant by the division of soul/spirit and joints/marrow.

The Word e x p o s e s the heart's functions.

The Word is able to discern, to bring into clarity, to truly evaluate the heart's beliefs and wants, its thoughts and motivations.

***Our Exposure to the Lord* (v.13)**

The Word exposes us to ourselves so that we can change and grow. But we are constantly and totally visible and vulnerable to the Lord.

Our exposure is also one of accountability – the One who sees us also is the One who deals with us.

***The Exhortations for the Christian* (v.14-16)**

In the light of our being exposed by the Word and to the Lord, we need the merciful ministry of our great high priest so that we will do two important things.

TEACHER: Note that this is a chiasm with the exhortations surrounding the main point. This is why verse 15 is at the last.



Continue to C o n f e s s Truth (v.14)

We must speak the truth to ourselves in a way that we hold fast our public confession of faith.

D r a w N e a r to God with Confidence (v.16)

In the trials and temptations of life, we must draw near to Christ with confidence at the throne of grace for His life transforming mercy, grace and help.

E x p e c t i n g the Mercies of Christ (v.15)

We do so because Jesus has personal and practical experience with our situation, our struggles and our temptations.

Lessons for Living

God is working to show you what you t r u s t in.

Note how Jeremiah 14 is contrasting trust in the flesh and trust in the Lord. The drought and wilderness expose whose promises we believe and what pleasures we will desire.

Know that your heart is d e c e i t f u l and d i f f i c u l t. It is not easy to “read” or “hear”.

This very inscrutability is the reason God works through situations so that what is going on in our hearts becomes evident. From the fruit, the root is more easily seen.

God p e r c e i v e s our hearts and the Word p e n e t r a t e s our hearts.

The Word of God is His chosen instrument to illuminate the words in the heart that constitute our beliefs and wants, our motivations. We are laid open by the Word before Him to whom we are already laid bare.

Our merciful and faithful high priest will show us mercy and give us g r a c e in our time of need.

Keep this verse in its context: in the midst of trials and temptations we must remain faithful and obedient by asserting what we know is true and coming with confidence seeking God’s help of enabling grace.



Questions for Discussion

Is the inner man, the heart, totally hidden from us? From God?

No, it is visible to both, but difficult for us because of its deceit.

How do we respond to people who say, “No one but God knows what is going on in the heart?”

Yes, only God can actually see or hear the exact thoughts and words flowing through your heart. However, God has designed a connection between fruit and root so that the heart is exposed by actions and emotions.

What are the hard times (and sometimes the good times) doing for us?

Bringing up to the surface beliefs and wants that are often buried.

What tool has God given us so that we can “see” our hearts?

The powerfully penetrating Word of God.

What are the great dangers to us (in Hebrews 4)?

That we will not enter God’s rest of faith, trust and obedience.

That we will not use the Word of God.

That we are *visible* and *vulnerable* to God.

What does God expect from us if Jesus is a merciful High Priest?

To hold fast to truth and to draw near to Christ.

What do we expect from God if we do the above?

Mercy, grace and help



Notes