



### *Emotions and the Heart*

Pastor David Bovenmyer, Ames, IA

“You are going through the motions, but your heart is not with me.” These or similar words tumbled from my wife’s mouth while tears started to form in her eyes. We were on one of our weekly dates, our designated times for planning, prayer, and connection with each other.

“Oh, man, I’m busted, and she is *not* happy” I thought. I knew I should be interested and involved in the conversation, and part of me wanted this, but I found my thoughts wandering and my emotions drifting toward frustration and grumpiness. There were so many other things to do, and our conversation seemed comparatively unimportant. I was tired and not in the mood to be pressured by questions and decisions. I love my wife deeply, but at that moment a large part of me wished that she and her problems and questions would just go away. The part of my heart that copes through denial and procrastination was winning that day and my lack of love deeply hurt my wife, the human being I’m supposed to love the most. I felt embarrassed, ashamed, and defensive. But I forced myself to shut my mouth and listen. Through a huge amount of tension, we talked about why these times were sometimes difficult for me and left the conversation with a bit more understanding of what was going on in each others’ hearts. Yet I was saddened that our relationship can sometimes be so difficult and my mind and emotions so hard to control.

Why is this so? How could part of my heart be so committed to my wife and to loving her as Christ loved the church, yet another part be so selfish and hurtfully disinterested? And why did the detached, procrastinating part of my heart win so often? I didn’t want it to. Something was going on within my heart that was obviously awry. What should I do? Should I just chalk up my attitude to the “flesh,” the part of me that advocates selfishness and sin, and try to do better next time? Or would some self-examination help, some effort to look below the water line of my heart and try to discover what was causing my dissatisfaction and detachment?

When is such an inward look helpful and when is it simply fruitless introspection? Is it good to examine what is going on within the heart or is it better to simply concentrate on the externals, on doing what is right, with the hope that our steps of obedience will

gradually change whatever can be changed within the inner world? And what should we think about our emotions? My wife had tears of hurt and rejection. I felt impatience and annoyance and then shame. How should we deal with our emotions, so difficult to control and hard to hide, yet so influential?

In this paper, I will argue that it is both Biblical and essential to diligently watch over our hearts, paying close attention to our inner fears, frustrations, desires, attitudes and motives. I will propose that paying attention to the inner workings of the heart is necessary for sanctification and transformation into the image of Christ. Without heart exposure and transformation, our lives, families, and churches will not truly develop a deep love for God and others and will gravitate toward externalism, pressure, legalism, and pride.<sup>1</sup> Finally, I will argue that noticing and evaluating our emotions is particularly helpful in exposing our inner false beliefs, doubts, fears, and pride, leading us to deeper repentance, faith, and character growth.

In making these arguments, I will first define what the heart is, talk about its condition in both unbelievers and believers, and discuss the goal and purposes of watching over our hearts. I will then look at the heart's complexity, the existence of the subconscious, and some pitfalls to avoid. Finally, I will spend considerable time defining what emotion is and through that definition show how emotion can greatly help us watch over our hearts. This paper is written with some depth, so put on your thinking cap and dig into a subject that has been both liberating and life transforming for me.

### *1. What is the heart and why is it important?*

Although the word “heart” has a broad range of usage in the scripture (it is used 856 times in the NASB), its primary use is to refer to the inner world as a whole—our thoughts, desires, attitudes, will, and emotions. If, then, we define the heart as the totality of our inner world, it is obvious that what happens in our hearts is of utmost importance as Proverbs 4:23 states, “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.” All our choices and decisions originate from within, from our hearts. What happens there determines all that we say and do. Choices involving faith, love, hope, patience, righteousness, and loyalty all take place within the heart. Paul wrote to Timothy, “...the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith (1 Timothy 1:5).<sup>2</sup> Paul’s goal went far beyond outward obedience and outward conformity to the will of God. He was concerned about the heart—that it be absent from impurity. He cared about the conscience—that our inner quality-control monitor be satisfied. And he wanted faith to be sincere—not simply a profession or agreement with a creed, but genuine, deep faith, from an undivided heart.

### *2. What is the natural condition of the hearts of men?*

---

<sup>1</sup> Jesus rebuked the hypocrisy and externalism of the Pharisees and their failure to tackle the lusts, anger and impure motives of the heart, (Matthew 15:15-20, 23:25-28).

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB), 1995 Update, used by permission.

Jesus knew what was in the hearts of men; therefore, He would not entrust Himself to men (John 2:24-25). Repudiating the Pharisees emphasis on outward conformity to rituals and laws, he summarized the core of mankind's problems, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man" (Matthew 15:19-20).

As a consequence of Adam's sin, mankind has fallen and become radically corrupt in every aspect of his being—body, mind, emotions, and will. Although man has retained the image of God (Genesis 5:1-3 & James 3:9), every part of our being has been damaged and spoiled, like a diseased tree with blight on every branch and every leaf. A close enough look will reveal that even our most noble moments are usually mixed with impure attitudes and motives. Man is so completely fallen that he is held captive by the deception of the devil (Ephesians 2:1-2, 2 Corinthians 4:4, 1 John 5:19). Jeremiah aptly summed up the condition of the heart when he said, "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9).

### *3. What is the condition of a Christian's heart?*

When a person believes in Christ he<sup>3</sup> is born again (John 1:12-13) and becomes a new creature (2 Corinthians 5:17). He commits himself to Christ instead of sin as his master, is set free from slavery to sin, and becomes a slave of righteousness (Romans 6:17-18). Yet freedom from sin and slavery to righteousness is not total or automatic. He must present his members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification (greater holiness) of the heart and life (Romans 6:19). Although profound changes in loyalty and perspective occur when we are born again, so profound that we are considered new creatures, our minds are not fully renewed and must go through a renovation process (Romans 12:2). We must pursue daily encouragement so as to avoid the deceitfulness of sin (Hebrews 3:13), a deceitfulness that still plagues us. And we are still vulnerable to the deception of the devil, the enemy of our souls (1 Peter 5:8-9, Ephesians 6:10-12, James 4:7). Agreeing with a Greek philosopher, Paul told Titus to severely reprove the Cretans so that they may be sound in faith, since "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons." Paul understood that coming to Christ would not automatically change the Cretans' character, shaped by the tendencies and influences of their culture. Titus was to work hard and give them special instruction to counter these personal and cultural weaknesses. Believers carry into their new life, convictions, ways of thinking, habits, and worldview perspectives learned from their families, culture, schooling, and experiences. These old commitments, ways of thinking, and behavior must be "put off" and new perspectives and commitments must be "put on" (Ephesians 4:22-5:14). So, although believers are "new creatures" in Christ with a new destiny, identity, relationship with God, and power for living, our hearts are still largely corrupted, sick, deceitful and deceived. Yet they are in the process of being redeemed by the work of the Holy Spirit within us and by our efforts to renovate our minds, put off the old, and put on the new. Thus, the heart of the Christian is a place of conflict between the desires of the flesh and

---

<sup>3</sup> I have chosen to follow the convention of referring to men and women with a masculine reference. No inequality of women and men is intended through the use of this convention.

the desires of the Spirit (Galatians 5:17). And as we have seen, heart renovation is the goal of all Christian instruction—producing love from a pure heart, clear conscience, and sincere faith.

#### *4. Why should we take efforts to examine our hearts?*

There are three reasons why honest heart evaluation can be profitable and even necessary for growth. First, exposure of wrong thinking, beliefs, motives, fears, doubt, anger, etc. is the first step in heart transformation. Without exposure of what we are wrongly thinking, feeling, or choosing, we will not see a need for change and therefore will not change.

Exposure can be either external or internal. Internal exposure may come from our conscience, which, if ignored, can lead to the shipwreck of our faith (1 Timothy 1:19). Internal exposure can also happen as we notice inconsistent or seemingly illogical emotion and discover the faulty beliefs behind it. External exposure comes from the instruction and example of others, from God's Word, from trials, or from the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup> Often several of these sources work together to expose disobedience, impure motives, inner lies that we believe, unhealthy emotions, or unloving attitudes.

Exposure of our sins, weaknesses, incorrect attitudes, wrong thinking, and lack of love is painful to our sense of self-respect, yet we ought to rejoice greatly whenever it happens, since it is the key to heart and life transformation. Instead of becoming defensive or mourning when our faults are exposed, we ought to rejoice that an amazing thing has happened. We were given the grace and humility to actually see our faults clearly and therefore have an opportunity to change. Why should we be surprised by our own sinfulness and failings? Our tendency to think too highly of ourselves often keeps us from admitting our faulty thinking, unhealthy emotions, and rebellious choices and thus from any possibility of change. How much better to follow the example of David, who said, "Let the righteous smite me in kindness and reprove me; it is oil upon the head; do not let my head refuse it (Psalm 141:5).

Often exposure can happen almost automatically. Proverbs 13:20 say, "He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm." Being with wise and righteous people and seeing their example results in that example rubbing off on us, almost like osmosis. But even though this process often happens without much effort, it is still exposure, revealing our faults and weaknesses and calling us to change. The same sort of near-automatic exposure occurs when we immerse ourselves in God's word. We are taught and reminded of His truths and ways, and this exposes and checks our tendencies to drift from them. At other times, God will expose us in more dramatic and difficult ways, such as through reproof or through trials or through emotional pain. But for growth to occur, exposure of our faults and improper thoughts, actions, and emotions must happen.

---

<sup>4</sup> Although the Holy Spirit dwells within us, is united with us, and influences our hearts, I consider His exposure "external," since He is a separate being from us.

The second goal of heart evaluation is repentance. The root meaning of the word “repentance” is a change of mind; yet in the scripture, the word often carries with it the idea of a consequent change of behavior as well. Repentance involves a change in belief and usually an accompanying change in emotional state. Repentance can be in areas in which we have made conscious decisions to sin against God—what might be called “blatant sin.” Alternately, repentance can be in areas where we are unaware or only vaguely aware that our thinking or actions are wrong.<sup>5</sup> For example, someone who had a distant and uninvolved father might inwardly view his Heavenly Father in the same way, leading to recurring episodes of resentment and rebellion against God. Repentance might involve grieving his lack of connection with his human father and discovering that his Heavenly Father is constantly interested, involved, and aware. Such a case of faulty belief about God would certainly be “sin” in the broader sense of “missing the mark,” and joyfully discovering a loving Father could be considered “repentance,” even though no blatant sin was involved.

The third goal of heart evaluation is to comprehend and accept the truth of the gospel more deeply. In Ephesians 3:16-19 Paul prayed that the Ephesians would be strengthened by the Spirit in the “inner man” and “be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of God which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.” Being transformed into Christlikeness happens as we comprehend and accept the love of God more fully in the “inner man.” As we notice and acknowledge our inner doubts, fears, passions, and desires and lift them up to the Lord, the good news of the love of God penetrates our hearts more fully. If we hide our doubts from ourselves, they cannot be resolved with God’s truth. If we ignore our fears, we cannot be calmed by God’s promises. If we bury our pain and anger, it cannot be soothed by the comfort of God’s Spirit. Honest heart evaluation helps bring the good news of God’s love into the fearful, doubting, hurting places of our hearts.

##### ***5. How does the complexity of the heart argue for inner self evaluation?***

Our hearts are complex, complicated, and often confusing. We tend to hide our doubts, impure thoughts, anger, and fear not only from others but also from ourselves. Honest heart evaluation, often in longer times alone with God, can help us sift through the confusing chorus of inner voices, emotions, and desires that drive our behavior. Exposure of inner lies and misconceptions about God, ourselves, and the world will more readily happen if we have learned to purposely notice what’s happening in our inner world.

The existence of the conscience is one indicator of the complexity of the heart. As depicted by Jiminy Cricket in *Pinocchio* or Cronk’s angel in *The Emperor’s New Groove*, we often find ourselves debating with this inner moral compass which holds our understanding of right and wrong. We see from the existence of the conscience that our hearts are very capable of containing conflicting desires, purposes, and perspectives.

---

<sup>5</sup> The broadest meaning of the word “sin” is “missing the mark,” whether the missing comes from willful disobedience or from ignorant mistakes.

Inner complexity is also shown in the concept of a divided heart, found in a “double-minded” man (James 1:8, 4:9). One of the most disturbing descriptions of such double-mindedness is found in Romans 7, where Paul describes how he found himself enslaved to doing the very thing that his inner heart hated. Yet assuredly, at the moment that he chose to do it, some deep and seemingly inexplicable part of his heart *wanted* to do it and overwhelmed his better judgment, causing him to declare “wretched man that I am.” Psalms 64:6 also affirms the complexity of the heart when it says: “the inward thought and the heart of a man are deep.”

Commonly, we divide the activities of the heart into three categories—thoughts, emotions, and will. All three aspects of the heart are exemplified and appealed to in scripture. Yet, although such a division is helpful, these aspects are in no way independent of each other. For example, our thoughts affect our emotions and undergird the choices of our will. Similarly, our emotions affect our thinking and choices. For example, consider how powerfully the emotion of anger can affect a person’s thoughts and actions. And our will affects our thoughts and emotions, as is seen when a stubborn, willful choice is made and our minds work hard to rationalize it. Yet even in this case, along with a stubborn will and rationalizing thoughts, there may be an opposite emotion, a subtle sense of shame as some deep part of the heart knows that we are resisting and feels guilty about it.

Clearly, our hearts are complex and difficult to manage. Diligence is required to adequately watch over the heart (Proverbs 4:23) so that we do not end up like the Israelites who were, “A stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation that did not prepare its heart and whose spirit was not faithful to God (Psalm 78:8).

Our hearts are so complex and radically corrupted that we desperately need God’s help to figure them out or make progress toward purity of heart. After His declaration about the sickness and deception of the heart, God says through Jeremiah, “I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind” (Jeremiah 17:10). God sorts through all the complexity and haziness caused by sinful commitments, impure motives, and shaping experiences and helps us understand what’s going on within our hearts.

***6. What does the Bible have to say about the subconscious and how does this affect how we watch over our hearts?***

Subconscious means “Not wholly conscious; partially or imperfectly conscious.”<sup>6</sup> And although the word “subconscious” is nowhere found in the Bible, the Scripture alludes to hidden or unnoticed motives, attitudes, and thoughts that would be considered subconscious according to this definition. For example, in Psalm 19:12, David prays, “Who can discern his errors? Acquit me of hidden faults.” Evidently David was not consciously aware of any outright disobedience to God, yet He was concerned that he

---

<sup>6</sup>The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition copyright © 1992 by Houghton Mifflin Company.

might have hidden attitudes, motives, and faults that he was ignorant of or refusing to notice and admit.

In Psalm 51:6, a prayer of repentance after committing adultery and murder, David prays to God, “Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being, and in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom.” Evidently David discovered that he had been dishonest (lacked truth), not only with others, but also with himself in his “innermost being.” He realized that he needed God’s wisdom, not only as an outward confession of faith, but also in the “hidden part” of his soul. Evidently God was making him aware of previously unacknowledged pride, selfishness, and errant affections, and he prayed for God’s help to “Create in me a pure heart, O God” (vs. 10).

In Psalm 139: 23-24, David again asks for God’s help concerning his inner heart, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way (vs. 23-24).” He assumes that he does not and cannot fully know the depths of his heart and asks for God’s help to expose hurtful attitudes, desires, and motivations and to bend his heart toward the way of righteousness.

In Hebrews 12:15, the author of Hebrews warns, “See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled.” A root is a structure that is hidden and covered up, yet supports and nourishes the part of the plant that is visible. So, buried anger can seethe under the surface of our hearts, largely hidden from our conscious thinking, yet powerfully shaping and directing the course of our lives in destructive ways.

Proverbs 18:8, 20:27 and 20:30 view the heart as deep, using the Hebrew word *cheder*, “inner chamber” to speak of the hidden places of the heart. For example, Proverbs 20:27 says: “The lamp of the Lord searches the spirit of a man; it searches out his inmost being (*cheder*)” (NIV).

Finally, Romans 1:18-32 shows evidence of the subconscious. Here Paul describes sinful man’s repression of the knowledge of God within his heart as he exchanges the truth of God for a lie. As mankind didn’t approve (*dokimazo*) acknowledging God any longer, God gave them over to an unapproved (*adokimos*) mind (Romans 1:28). Yet sinful man still retains some knowledge of God and His ways, being “God haters” (vs. 30) and knowing full well that God’s ordinance demands death for such wicked behavior (vs. 32). Conscious repression of the truth of God causes man to lose much of that truth, yet the knowledge of God cannot be entirely eliminated. Deep within, a shadowy, yet persistent knowledge of God remains, so that mankind remains actively rebellious against a continued inner, partially-repressed knowledge of God’s existence and commands.

Indeed the scriptures do speak of an “innermost being” and “hidden parts” of the heart. King David’s prayers for God’s help to create in him a clean heart, to search his heart, and to lead him in the everlasting way show that our subconscious desires, perspectives, and attitudes *are* important and worthy of our notice, attention and prayer.

7. *While watching over our hearts, how can we avoid painful and fruitless introspection?*

Many believers have found that a certain form of heart evaluation can be painful, unproductive, and an incessant burden, often leading to discouragement or doubt. Such fruitless introspection usually happens when we lose sight of the goals of self examination—exposure, repentance, and assimilating the good news of the love of God in Christ. We can avoid painful and fruitless introspection as we remember the following:

- 1) God is rich in mercy, grace, and forgiveness towards all who have believed in His Son, since His holy wrath was poured out on Christ Jesus in their place (Ephesians 1:3-7). Meditating on His mercy and grace soothes the pain of harsh self-criticism that can sometimes accompany self evaluation.
- 2) Any prideful notion of health or wholeness or righteousness in ourselves apart from God's grace and help must be cast away. We need not be discouraged or despair when we find that we are more deeply sinful than we thought or have pretended to be. God accepts and justifies the wicked in Christ (Romans 4:5, NIV).
- 3) As we grow in Christ we must give up the prideful illusion that we should have matured beyond certain sins—pride, lust, willful independence, selfishness, etc. As they grow, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness within will become increasingly aware of the sinful inclinations within their hearts (1 Timothy 1:15). Greater awareness of our sinful tendencies, weaknesses, and brokenness accompanies greater maturity. Yet, although we feel our brokenness more, our life increases in righteousness as our hearts are transformed.
- 4) God is patient with our weaknesses and habitual failings and sins (Exodus 34:6-7). Since He is patient, we must be patient with ourselves, yet confidently hopeful concerning our eventual transformation, which He has promised (Romans 8:29).
- 5) It would be safe to say that fruitless introspection is not led by the Holy Spirit, otherwise it would not be fruitless. Even the work of heart and mind evaluation must be led by the Spirit of God (Romans 8:13-14) and is not primarily our responsibility (1 Corinthians 4:3-4). We must trust in God and ask Him to continually lead us into the next step of exposure, repentance, and heart transformation (Psalm 139:23-24).
- 6) God's Spirit is the source of power for conquering habitual sins and persistent false beliefs of the heart (2 Corinthians 3:17-18). No sin, hurt, hang-up, addiction, or weakness is greater than His power to transform. Often, fruitless introspection and discouragement stem from attempts to change ourselves, forgetting that our only hope of salvation and growth is with the power and help of the Holy Spirit.
- 7) Fruitless introspection may be similar to the "sorrow of the world" that "leads to death" which Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 7:9-11. In this passage, the difference between the "sorrow of the world" and "sorrow that is according to the will of God" seems to be that the latter results in repentance, whereas the former

does not. Taking steps to insure that our self examination results in active changes with the help of God can ensure that it is not fruitless.

## 8. *What are emotions?*

As we have seen, heart exposure happens through many means—through our conscience, through the Word, through the example of others, through reproof, through the Spirit’s work, through our own self-examination, etc. Yet there is an often-overlooked means of exposure that I would like to concentrate on in the rest of this paper—our emotions. Emotion is such an important and pervasive element of our heart that when a person does something without emotion, we often say that their “heart was not in it.” When we say that someone is “whole-hearted” about something we mean that they are passionate and emotional about it. Indeed, emotion or lack of it can be powerfully and faithfully expose our true inner beliefs, fears, hesitations, hopes, and passions. What are emotions and how do they do this?

During the first half of the last century, psychology was dominated by the view that emotions are primarily spontaneous biological and physical reactions to various stimuli—laughing, crying, elevated heartbeat, etc. This “non-cognitive” theory of emotion followed the teaching of Descartes, Darwin, William James,<sup>7</sup> and others in the belief that emotions consist of these physical reactions and grow out of the most basic instincts for survival. In this view, emotional impulses are primitive reactions and come spontaneously upon a person—they happen to us rather than being produced by our thinking. Thus, according to the “non-cognitive” theory, emotions and passions are fundamentally different from reason, inferior to it, and not to be trusted.

In contrast to the non-cognitive theory of emotion, recent psychological theory has moved toward a “cognitive” theory of emotion. This theory defines emotion as a person’s evaluation of an object, situation, or event in relation to himself and according to his values. Thus emotions reveal whether he sees the person or situation as threatening or safe, pleasant or painful, distressing or comforting. In this view, emotion is tightly bound to reason, interacting with it according to what is valued. Emotions have objects, and an object must be perceived to have value to produce an emotion. We don’t get angry when we bend a paper clip, because this object has little value to us. Emotions may be irrational, but this is only because the thinking and values that produce them are irrational. According to this theory, emotions can show us the truth about our own beliefs and values and give us insight into the beliefs and values of others. The theory acknowledges that it is not possible to produce emotion upon demand, to grit your teeth and say, “I will now be happy.” However, it may be possible, when feeling sorrowful, to sit down and think about all the good things you have in life, resulting in feelings of happiness. Thus emotions are tightly bound to thinking, reason, and belief and can be changed by altering the thinking behind them.

---

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the ancient Greco-Roman views on emotion, see Matthew A. Elliott, *Faithful Feelings, Rethinking Emotion in the New Testament*, pp. 56-79. Plato and later Stoic philosophers defined emotion similarly to the non-cognitive view, while Aristotle and Epicurus defined emotion more similarly to the modern cognitive theory of emotion.

Clearly, a Christian view of emotions will more closely resemble the cognitive theory than the non-cognitive. The Bible teaches that we do have some control over our emotions and sometimes commands that we change them. We are commanded to be slow to become angry (James 1:19), to rejoice (Romans 12:12, 15 and Philippians 4:4), not to be anxious (Philippians 4:6), not to be afraid (Acts 18:9), to weep with those who weep and mourn with those who mourn (Romans 12:15), and to be compassionate (Ephesians 4:32). Scripture closely ties emotion to beliefs and values. For example, Paul encourages the Philippians to “be anxious for nothing” (Philippians 4:6) and follows this with instruction on how to deal with the emotion of anxiety. He tells them to bring their fears and concerns in prayer to God and to give thanks to Him for His help. He also encourages them to set their minds on whatever is true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy and states that as they do this, “the God of peace will be with you” (Philippians 4:8-9). Anxiety is inappropriate for Christians who are loved and accepted by an all-powerful God, so Paul instructs the Philippians to seek God’s help in prayer, believe in His power and goodness, and remember the things that are true and good. Then their anxiety will be replaced by peace, a peace that is beyond explanation. Clearly, Paul believed that the emotion of anxiety could be changed by a change in thinking and belief.

Another example is James’ exhortation to: “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials” (James 1:2). Trials would naturally produce fear, sorrow, and anger, but James exhorts his readers to adopt a different goal than what they would naturally have: “knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:3-4). They were to value their own perfection and character growth above their comfort or temporal security. Truly accepting that this is of greater value would bring them genuine joy, even in their trials. James shows that a change in what we love and value can produce the emotion of joy, when otherwise joy would be impossible.

### *9. Are emotions primarily physical or spiritual?*

The history of Christian theology includes serious argument that God as impassible (without passion). Yet both the Old and New Testaments portray God as unmistakably passionate and emotional. God loves affectionately (Deuteronomy 10:15), longs to bless people (Isaiah 30:18), delights (Isaiah 62:4), rejoices (Zephaniah 3:17), hates (Psalm 11:5), is grieved (Genesis 6:6), becomes angry (Deuteronomy 9:8), is jealous (Exodus 20:5), and has compassion (Exodus 34:6).<sup>8</sup> Yet, God is spirit and has no physical body (John 4:24). So a Christian view of emotions must view them first of all as spiritual, however much they affect and are affected by the body.

---

<sup>8</sup> Attempts to relegate these descriptions of God’s passion to anthropomorphisms (attributing human qualities to God) make the statements meaningless. God’s passionate nature differs in some way from that of fallen man, yet in other ways His passions are like ours, since we are created in His likeness. Historical arguments for the impassibility of God most likely reveal syncretism with Platonic and Stoic philosophies present in the Greco-Roman cultural environment of the western church.

### ***10. What are some other characteristics of emotion?***

A precise definition of emotion is somewhat difficult and disputed, even among Christian theologians and psychologists, so perhaps the best way to approach a definition is by describing some of the characteristics of emotion:

- 1) Emotions are similar to impressions; they involve interpretations of life situations and tentative judgments. Our eyes may perceive that a stick in a bucket of water is bent, yet from experience, our mind can tell us that the stick is actually straight and that the perception is in error. Similarly, emotions, for example fear on a roller coaster, may arise from a perception of danger, yet our minds may conclude that that perception is not correct, but that we are actually quite safe.
- 2) Emotions revolve around our passions—deep and lasting convictions concerning what we value and desire. Our passions produce a wide variety of emotions. If we value someone, we become *anxious* when his safety is threatened. We become *angry* when he is injured or insulted. We *rejoice* when he is happy or successful. We *grieve* when he suffers loss. So our passions are the basis for a wide repertoire of emotions. Thus, our emotions indicate what we value and what we are passionate about. The more we value something or someone, the greater the associated emotions.
- 3) Emotions are transient; they come and go, sometimes lasting just a second or two and sometimes longer. Emotions are episodic states, while passions are long-term interests, concerns, and preoccupations.
- 4) Emotions are motivational—they often have an urgency to them. They can powerfully motivate us to action, whether it be toward good or evil.
- 5) Emotions can be pleasant or painful, similar to physical pain and pleasure. They are often tied closely to physical pain and pleasure, sometimes originating from them and sometimes producing, them.
- 6) Lists of emotion vary, but usually include anger, loneliness, fear, shame, jealousy, joy, love, peace, hope, compassion, and gratitude.

### ***11. Are some emotions good and others bad?***

We tend to think of some emotions as positive and others negative. Yet, upon closer inspection, emotions are neither good nor bad in themselves, but are morally neutral. The moral appropriateness of an emotion depends almost entirely upon its object. “Do not fear” is one of the most common commands in the Bible, yet “fear the Lord” is even more common. Proverbs 10:23 says: “Doing wickedness is like sport to a fool, and so is wisdom to a man of understanding.” Some teenagers from my wife’s hometown used to drive into the city, steal whatever they could from Target and then throw the stuff out the window on the way home so that their parents wouldn’t find it. Why did they steal when they knew they couldn’t keep it? They did it for sport, for the joy of getting away with it. Such joy is obviously evil. Many who have had adulterous affairs will confess that they found in the affair the most exhilarating joy they have ever experienced in life. Again, such joy is not from God. Similarly, love is only as worthy as the object that is loved, as shown by Jesus’ command to love God rather than money (Matt 6:24). One of the

identifying marks of the ungodly is what they love: themselves, money, and pleasure rather than God (2 Timothy 3:2-4). In the same way, anger is not intrinsically good or bad. God becomes angry. Jesus, the exact representation of God's nature, became extremely angry when he drove the money changers from the temple area (John 2:15-17). Righteous anger is righteous. Even hate is not always wrong; we are commanded to hate evil. God hates pride, arrogance, evil behavior, and perverse speech (Proverbs 8:13). Hope in the wrong thing is destructive. Even jealousy is good and proper in many situations, as show by the fact that God is sometimes jealous (Deuteronomy 4:24).

## *12. Is love an emotion?*

At times and places in the church history, Christian thinkers, perhaps influenced by Platonic and Stoic ideas favoring the non-cognitive view of emotion, have devalued emotion, seeing it as inferior to reason and not to be trusted. Even in modern times, many Bible commentaries, Bible study notes, and other reference works have tended to de-emphasize the emotional nature of certain Biblical words, particularly love and joy. This belittling of emotion can subtly rob our faith and Christian experience of passion, excitement, and joy, leaving us content with external obedience and even cold duty. Therefore, in my argument that emotions are powerfully helpful to heart evaluation and life transformation, I would like to look carefully at what the Bible has to say about the emotional nature of love and joy.

Christian pastors and teachers often deny that Christian love, agape love, is an emotion and claim that it is rather an action, centered in the lover rather than any worthiness or attractiveness in the one loved. One of the reasons for this denial may be an attempt to balance the myth in popular culture that romantic love is almost entirely emotional ecstasy with little to no consideration for commitment, loyalty, or responsibility. Couples who have "lost that loving feeling" are encouraged to remain loyal and committed to each other despite their feelings and to demonstrate their love by their actions.

Additionally, philosophers and theologians, noting that love for our enemies is commanded in the scripture, reason that God would not command us to do something that we are incapable of doing. Since loving emotions cannot be produced at will, they conclude that agape love must be action and not passion or emotion.

Thirdly, Christian love has been alleged to be different from human love in that God's love for mankind is said to be based not on anything in man, since we are wholly unworthy of His love. Thus, God's love is said to stem wholly from God's loving nature and not in any value or delight that He finds in man.

In opposition to these arguments, Scripture depicts Biblical love as both emotional and based in the perceived value of the person or thing that is loved. The Biblical words commanding love of God and neighbor are the same ones used for human love in general. The Hebrew word for "love" used in Leviticus 19:18 and 34 "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" is the same word used of Isaac, who "loved Esau because he had a taste for game" (Genesis 25:28) or of Jacob, who "loved" Rachel so much that his seven

years of service seemed like a few days (Genesis 29:18) or of Abraham, who was told by God to sacrifice his only son, whom he “loved” (Genesis 22:2). Nothing in the context or syntax of these different uses of the word “love” indicates that one refers to an emotional love and the other to a love consisting purely of action. Similarly, the New Testament word “love” (*agape*) in “love your enemies” (Matthew 5:44) is the same word used in “Jesus felt a love for him” (Mark 10:21) or of the woman overcome with emotion who “loved much” (Luke 7:47) when she wet Jesus’ feet with her tears or of the Pharisees who “loved” the “chief seats in the synagogue and the respectful greetings in the market places” (Luke 11:43). Again, nothing indicates that some uses of *agape* indicate an emotional love and others a love consisting of action devoid of emotion.

God’s love for Israel was tender (Hosea 2:14), affectionate (Deuteronomy 10:15), and compassionate (Psalm 103:8). His love was so emotional that He rejoiced over them with “shouts of joy” (Zephaniah 3:17). His love was a jealous love (Deuteronomy 4:24), passionately desiring the *entirety* of their worship, not willing for them to share any of their devotion with other gods. He longed for His people to respond to His love (Psalm 81:8, 13).

In 1 Corinthians 13:3, Paul indicates that genuine love is more than just action: “And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:3). Even the ultimate sacrifices—giving up our possessions and even our lives—can conceivably be done without love, perhaps in an effort to be self-righteous. To Paul, love was more than simply action, but involved motive and attitude as well.

The great commandment, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37) indicates that love for God involves much more than just action—it is centered in the thoughts, attitudes, and emotions of the heart. Should we believe that God expects less than the passionate love we naturally give our spouse or our children? Those who argue that love is synonymous with action reduce our love for God to a code of duty. But the story of the woman who wet Jesus’ feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair (Luke 7:36-50) shows that He deserves and desires full, extravagant, and wholehearted love, not just actions done out of duty. Similarly, our love for people must also be more than just action, as Peter commands us to love our brothers deeply, from the heart (1 Peter 1:22, NIV).

Having stated this, however, it is probably best to view love, not so much as a simple, transitory emotion, but as a passion, a value-orientation that produces an entire range of emotions. We find great *joy* in what we love. We become *angry* when those we love suffer. We are *lonely* when we are without those we love. We become *bitter* and *despondent* when someone we love rejects us. So love is best understood as a passion, an attachment and orientation toward someone or something that we value. Genuine love is certainly not void of emotion, but is more than a transitory emotion. If there is an aspect of love that corresponds to more transitory emotions, it would be adoration—the feeling that comes from contemplating the qualities of what we love. Certainly love as a passion

and its accompanying emotions will result in loving actions, but love cannot be reduced simply to action.

Understanding that love is a passion with many accompanying emotions answers the previously-stated objections to love being emotional. Our goal must be to restore passionate, emotional love to a troubled marriage, not simply to get couples to act rightly out of duty. Our exhortations for couples to act rightly should be with the hope that as they treat each other kindly, patiently, and graciously that their passion for one another will be re-kindled.

Also, if love is a passion, then love for our enemies can be commanded. There are sufficient reasons to passionately love our enemies, even when they are intensely unattractive to us. Along with His command to love them, Jesus gives some of the reasons. One is that God shows them love by causing the sun to rise and the rain to shine upon them (Matthew 5:43-47). So, we should love them because God does—He values them and patiently hopes for their repentance (Romans 2:4, 2 Peter 3:9). Another is that such love distinguishes us as followers of God as opposed to the tax collectors and Gentiles who only love those who love them. Typically, only God and His sons are others-oriented enough to value and love an enemy. Thirdly, God will “reward” such unusual love. So Jesus gives three powerful reasons to turn our hearts toward our enemies and love them, not just with our actions, but with our hearts and even our emotions.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, it is incorrect to assert that God’s love differs from ours because it is totally dependant upon God’s nature and not at all on anything God sees or desires in us. God greatly values those made in His image, the pinnacle of His creation.<sup>10</sup> He loves and values us so much that He sacrificed His Son to die for us (John 3:16). Certainly, our rebellion evoked His wrath and made us worthy of eternal damnation, yet He knew that many humans would believe in His Son, receive forgiveness through His death, and thus be redeemed. He loved us, desired us, and valued us so much that He went through great suffering to reconcile us to Himself.<sup>11</sup>

Nowhere in the scripture is there a unique sense of a “Christian” love, a love that consists in action devoid of emotion. The uniqueness of Christian love is not in its nature, but in the belief that the other’s value is so high that he is worth the greatest sacrifice.

### *13. Is joy an emotion, the opposite of sorrow?*

---

<sup>9</sup> Certainly love for an enemy would differ in emotional intensity from love for a friend or loved one. The point is not that we must love an enemy with the same emotional intensity as we love a friend, but that it is possible to love an enemy from the heart, without bitterness, and with the joy and peace that comes from believing God’s promises and imitating His nature.

<sup>10</sup> Humans retain the image of God even after the fall, as shown in Genesis 5:1-3, Matthew 22:20-21, and James 3:9.

<sup>11</sup> The scripture indicates that His love for us is not based on any good works that we do or any moral goodness within us (Romans 9:10-16).

Similarly to the concept of love, the emotional and ecstatic nature of joy has tended to be downplayed by many Christian thinkers throughout the history of the church. Noting that we are commanded to “rejoice always” and also noting that delight-filled joy cannot be called up upon demand, they again reason that God would not command us to do something outside of our power. Adding to the confusion is the question of sorrow and mourning. If we are to “rejoice always,” are we ever to weep and mourn? These questions have led many to minimize the exultant, delight-filled nature of joy and redefine it as a quiet, inner strength or sense of security that believers can experience even in mourning.

But I must vigorously argue for retaining the exultant, ecstatic nature of joy. Could we be called to anything less? Should we yield to the dullness and somberness of such placid “joy”? As helpful and comforting as it is to have a sense of security and wellbeing in trial and sorrow, these emotions would be better defined biblically as peace or hope, not joy. The Greek word for joy (*chara*) means. “1 ...gladness, state of rejoicing, happiness (Mat 28:8; 2Co 1:15); 2 ...reason for gladness (1Th 2:19).”<sup>12</sup> The Apostle John gives an example of the normal meaning of the word “joy” in the New Testament:

*“Truly, truly, I say to you, that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will grieve, but your grief will be turned into joy. Whenever a woman is in labor she has pain, because her hour has come; but when she gives birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy that a child has been born into the world. (John 16:20-21).*

It’s clear in this passage, that Jesus considered joy the opposite of weeping and lamenting. Rejoicing and grieving are opposites. Anguish and joy are opposites. Jesus did not speak of joy as a deep inner peace even in the midst of sorrow, but rather that their grief would later be turned to exultant joy.

#### ***14. How are we to rejoice always?***

If joy and sorrow are opposites and if we are to “rejoice always” (Philippians 4:4), is there any room for sorrow and grief in the life of a Christian? Paul evidently thought so, for earlier in Philippians, he talked about his concern that he might experience “sorrow upon sorrow.” Even while he wrote the letter, he was overcome with tears of grief and weeping for those who were enemies of the cross of Christ (Philippians 3:18). In Romans 12, he commands believers to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. Weeping, not joy, is commanded when others are in sorrow. In light of his reader’s sins, James commands that they weep, and he rebukes them for being joyful in such a case, “Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom (James 4:9). Jesus, Himself, said: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matthew 5:4, NIV). Clearly, mourning, grieving, and weeping have a place in the life of a Christian. How then are we to “rejoice always”?

---

<sup>12</sup>Swanson, J. (1997). *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains : Greek (New Testament)* (electronic ed.) (GGK5915). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

In Philippians 4:4, perhaps Paul is not so much forbidding grief or mourning or sorrow but is giving the Philippians a reason for joy in *every* circumstance. They can always find joy “in the Lord.” He’s the one to rejoice in, no matter if everything else falls apart and everyone else fails us. Paul is not forbidding times of sorrow and grief here, but simply giving his readers a reason and a way to return to joy.

But isn’t joy a fruit of the Spirit? We are told to constantly “be being filled” with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18). Wouldn’t this show that joy should be constant? But we know that Jesus was always filled with the Spirit, yet He was sometimes angry (Matthew 21:12-13), grieved (Mark 3:5), troubled (Mark 14:23), and sorrowful (Isaiah 3:3). In the Garden he was so filled with anguish that he sweat drops of blood. Few others have so intensely lacked peace and joy and been filled with such angst as our Savior was in those moments. From our Savior’s example we can conclude that the fruit of the Spirit refers to an orientation of life, not a constant state of the heart. Take for example the fruit of “peace.” We are not to be at peace with everyone, as Jesus came “not to bring peace but a sword” (Matthew 10:34-35). And again, Jesus was not inwardly at peace in His agony in the Garden. The same can be said of “patience.” There is a point where continued patience may no longer be the proper response. God is patient and long-suffering, but there will come a day when His patience gives way to His wrath and judgment on those who refuse to repent (2 Peter 3:9-10, Romans 2:4-6). The fruit of the Spirit can best be understood as basic orientations of our character and life rather than uninterrupted states of the heart.

Rather than minimize the emotional nature of love and joy and content ourselves with an “*agape*” love that is little more than cold duty or with a Christian “joy” that is little more than tepid dullness, we ought to ask ourselves, “Why is my heart not filled with passionate, emotional love?” “Why is my life not filled with exultant joy?” “What lies am I believing, what truth am I missing, what burdens am I carrying, what idolatrous things am I desiring that are robbing me of the whole-hearted passion and delight-filled joy that our Lord promised?” And unless we retain a bold, undiluted view of what our emotions *ought* to be, we will not be able to properly use our emotions, or lack of them, to help us monitor and accurately assess the condition of our hearts and see what needs to change within.

### ***15. How do mourning and sorrow protect our hearts?***

One purpose of sorrow is to bring us to repentance when repentance is needed. Paul speaks of this purpose to the Corinthians:

*I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance; for you were made sorrowful according to the will of God, so that you might not suffer loss in anything through us. For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death. For behold what earnestness this very thing, this godly sorrow, has produced in you: what*

*vindication of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what avenging of wrong! In everything you demonstrated yourselves to be innocent in the matter (2 Corinthians 7:9-11).*

According to Paul, godly sorrow *produces* repentance, salvation, indignation in regard to sin, fear of sin, longing for good, zeal for righteousness, and desire to avenge wrong. So, godly sorrow can help us gain a proper perspective towards sin and its devastation. How often do people lack these qualities and continue on in their sin because they refuse to feel the shame of sin and refuse to acknowledge its devastating consequences and grieve over it?

As well as sorrow over sin, the Bible encourages and exemplifies mourning losses of other kinds as well. The book of Lamentations was written to help the Israelites mourn their losses. Mourning and sorrow help us to honestly face loss in order to move on in faith and trust. Mourning could be defined as the process of facing loss and returning to joy. Ignoring or minimizing a loss or trying to distract ourselves with work, entertainment, or other activities simply pushes the sorrow and grief into the background, where it will tend to rise up whenever something reminds us of it. How much better to face the reality of the loss and seek to find comfort and perspective in God so that the heart can return to sincere faith and heart-felt joy?

#### ***16. What is the Christian response to trauma and its accompanying emotion?***

The modern word “trauma” might correspond Biblically to a severe trial or testing. If this is so, then the Bible has much to say about trauma. Many Biblical characters experienced what today would be considered trauma or abuse. Examples would be Job, Joseph, David, Daniel, Jeremiah, Jesus and Paul. Perhaps the book of Job, as much as any other portion of the Bible, demonstrates how a godly man ought to respond to trial. Job faced his losses; expressed his complaint; acknowledged his despair and despondency; persevered in essential faithfulness to God as the trial went on and on; looked to God for answers, instruction, and correction; and refused to accept undeserved blame for the catastrophe that befell him. Job responded to trial honestly, with emotional fullness, sometimes in anger and great grief, and yet with an underlying fear of God and trust in Him. The Psalms also reveal the angst, fears, doubts, and disorientation of Godly men as they brought their heart concerns and complaints before Him in the midst of trials.

These examples teach us that it is important not to stuff down our fears, complaints, doubts, anger, grief, and feelings of isolation and aloneness. If we fail to face our losses and their accompanying emotions, our faith will be weakened and hearts damaged. Unresolved anger can give the devil an opportunity (Ephesians 4:26-27). The word “opportunity” is literally “place.” Buried anger—and I would argue buried grief, fear, doubt, and pain—provide a place, an attack point, for the devil to tempt and deceive. We must find God’s grace and truth in order to view trials and trauma from God’s perspective and forgive those who have hurt us (Hebrews 12:15). Like Job, we must fight to maintain an honest faith in God’s sovereignty, goodness, and justice.

### ***17. How can our emotions help us guard our hearts and grow in character?***

We have loosely defined emotion as “a person’s evaluation of an object, situation, or event in relation to himself and according to his values.” Therefore emotions can be faithful witnesses concerning what we value, love, think, and believe. Often our emotions are confusing, and we will ask ourselves “why am I reacting in anger like this?” or “why am I taking this so personally?” In this way, emotions reveal inner, hidden beliefs, desires, doubts, fears, concerns, and perspectives. These inner voices may differ considerably from what we say we believe or what we know we ought to believe. Yet, as Paul describes in Romans 7, these inner beliefs and commitments can have as much, if not more, sway on our behavior as our more external, conscious thoughts.

So, emotions are faithful indicators of what we do believe in the recesses of our hearts. At times, our emotions may seem irrational, but an honest look within will reveal that there is always a reason for the emotional response.<sup>13</sup> When the opinions, fears, values, and perspectives of the inner heart are exposed, we realize that the emotion was totally reasonable from that perspective. Finding those reasons can powerfully expose beliefs, values, convictions, and commitments that we have made but are largely hiding from ourselves.

### ***18. Practically, how can we watch over our hearts?***

The major ways of watching over our hearts are familiar to most Christians—Bible reading, fellowship, prayer, and time alone with God—disciplines that have always been emphasized in Great Commission Churches.

First is Bible reading and study. In Romans 12:2, Paul states that we will be transformed by the renewing of our minds. *The Enhanced Strongs Lexicon* defines the word “renewing” as “a renewal, renovation, complete change for the better.”<sup>14</sup> We must daily discipline ourselves in the Word to renovate our minds from old ways of thinking to God’s ways of thinking.

According to *Vine’s Expository Dictionary*, the word “fellowship” means “a having in common, partnership, fellowship.”<sup>15</sup> Living in community with Spirit filled believers helps guard our hearts and protect us from deception and pride. Particularly powerful are times of honest and forthright sharing of our fears, hurts, hang-ups, struggles, sins, and griefs. An empathetic listener, who notices and shares our emotions, can greatly assist us in drawing out our deeper concerns, emotions, fears, and doubts.

---

<sup>13</sup> The mind and body are tightly interrelated, and physical sickness, hormonal imbalance, or organic brain disease can greatly affect emotion. In such cases, emotion may not always stem from thoughts and beliefs.

<sup>14</sup> Strong, J. (1996). *The exhaustive concordance of the Bible* : (electronic ed.) (G342). Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship.

<sup>15</sup> Vine, W., & Bruce, F. (1981; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996). *Vine’s Expository dictionary of Old and New Testament words* (2:I-215). Old Tappan NJ: Revell.

The book of Psalms illustrates the power of prayer to open up the heart, as it demonstrates how the Psalmists bared their souls before God. The Psalms teach us how to handle our emotions and heart concerns in a very personal and relational language of prayer. Prayer to God, using the words of a Psalm but adapting them to our own situation, can bring out the longings, fears, and doubts below the water line of our souls.

One particular discipline stands out to me as perhaps the most helpful in my own experience—that of finding extended time to be alone with God. In our culture of busyness we tend not to value time for personal reflection, solitude, and self-examination, and it easily ends up being neglected. Yet extended time alone to talk to God, to listen to Him and to listen to our hearts can powerfully expose what is happening within. Such time is built right into my annual schedule. I would encourage you to do the same and learn the power of being alone with only your thoughts, your Bible, and your God. Solitude and extended time open up the heart, allowing renovation in rooms of the heart that would otherwise be off limits.

These disciplines can be very powerful in transforming our hearts. Yet all of us know that they can also become routine, rote and lifeless. Usually this happens when we concentrate on external duty and don't really connect with the passions of our hearts. Learning to pay attention to the emotional state of our hearts can bring an orientation to these disciplines that brings them back to life. A new perspective on emotion can revitalize our walk with God. We must not let our emotions rule our lives when they are advocating disobedience to God and His Word. Yet even when this is the case, our emotional state can help us honestly see the true condition of our hearts and expose deeply believed lies, doubts, and fears—leading us to more wholehearted obedience and faith.

For the first 30 years of my walk with Christ, I received clear instruction concerning how to guard and transform my heart through the Word, prayer, obedience, and times of solitude and seeking God. I diligently worked to keep my heart right with God. Yet I was largely uninstructed and unaware of the role that listening to my emotions could play in this process. About eight years ago, I began to learn to listen to my emotions more seriously. This has been incredibly life-transforming and has powerfully helped my walk with God. I'd like to share one example from a few years ago.

During one of my scheduled times alone, I decided to stop and prayerfully let myself feel whatever emotion was inside. I did this with some doubt that anything would happen, since I'm not typically a very emotional person. To my surprise, within a few minutes I found myself weeping. At first I had no idea where this deep sorrow was coming from, but as I continued to feel it and pray about it, I remembered a time ten years earlier when I had felt this same way.

I had been the initial leader of Great Commission Ministries with the goal of helping people raise financial support to minister on campus. Our job was to support these brave souls and for three years my team and I worked zealously to do so. But as the ministry rapidly expanded, it became obvious, first to others and then reluctantly to me, that I was

not qualified or gifted to lead the organization through the next stages of growth. Along with this conclusion came some criticism of our efforts, criticism that was mostly valid, yet we felt we could not correct the problems because of a lack of funds and staff.

During this difficult time, my wife and I and my closest co-leader and his wife went to a dinner theater together. The entire evening, I was on the verge of weeping uncontrollably, thinking about the criticism and the failure of my dream to lead the ministry into the future. Yet I controlled myself, not wanting to ruin our time together or embarrass myself. During the following months of transition, I prayed a lot about how God wanted to use me and did my best to claim promises and trust God for the future. I eventually found a place in pastoral ministry that better suited my gifts. Yet here I was, ten years later, looking back on this difficult time and still finding deep sadness.

I spent the afternoon praying and exploring the thoughts underneath my sorrow, trying to discern why it was there and what I was believing that was making me so sad. That afternoon and over the next couple weeks, God spoke deeply to me through several verses and thoughts that seemed to come from Him, reassuring me that I hadn't failed. One particular thought spoke deeply to a sense of feeling unappreciated that seemed connected to the criticism that we had received. As I was in prayer, He simply told me, "I saw." That simple truth, a truth I had known logically all along, spoke powerfully to my inner heart. Even if no one else saw or appreciated the sacrifice and efforts that we had made, God did. And that was all that counted. Even today, this thought brings me great comfort whenever I think about it.

Over the next few weeks, as I continued to reflect and pray, I realized how significantly my feelings of failure and lack of appreciation had affected me. One of my fellow pastors once sat down with me and asked why my first reaction to any new endeavor or step of faith was almost always negative. After my afternoon of listening to my emotions, I was amazed to see that my unresolved feelings of grief and failure had fueled much of my negativity over the subsequent ten years. Something deep within my heart would immediately object and say, "It's not worth the sacrifice. You'll probably fail anyway and no one will see or appreciate your efforts." My failure to adequately grieve, process the painful emotions, and change the beliefs beneath them had put a significant ding in my faith and zeal for God.

This is just one example of the hundreds of times that paying more attention to my emotions and reflecting upon the beliefs, values, and perspectives that cause them has resulted in significant exposure of impure motives, hidden resentments, and unacknowledged fears. As I have brought such things out into the light before the Lord and sought His perspective, I've been comforted, reassured, reproved, encouraged, and instructed. Sometimes the thoughts and perspectives behind my emotions have led me to resolve still-painful remembrances from my more-distant past and sometimes they have led to fears about the future or to situations that happened just days or hours before. Yet I've found that, if I take the time to look, my heart will faithfully reveal the reasons for my emotions—the loves, concerns, values, and perspectives behind them. I perceive that

this has resulted in far greater growth and life transformation than would otherwise have occurred.

### *19. Is heart evaluation worth the time and emotional energy that it requires?*

Since the human heart is so broken, tainted, and prone to evil, watching over our hearts can be a time-consuming chore that seems to keep us from our calling of preaching the Word and advancing the kingdom. But we would do well to remember the story of Mary and Martha. How might Mary have felt as she sat at the Lord's feet listening to His word? She probably knew her sister well enough to suspect that she was getting in a stew about all the preparations that "had to be made." She probably felt torn between her responsibility to help and her tremendous desire to be close to Jesus and learn from Him. She may have feared that her sister and others would look down on her, thinking that she was self-indulgent, as indeed became the case. How amazing it is that the spot right at Jesus' feet was even open. And how bold she was, especially as a woman, to take it. Evidently her love for Jesus and her passion to know Him overwhelmed whatever shame, guilt, or fear that she had. What is so *amazing* about this story is that Jesus actually *commends* her for her seemingly self-serving choice, stating that "only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:42).

Jesus has given us difficult and overwhelming work to do in a shattered and broken world. Yet, evidently, He knew that we could never do this work unless we also do the work of our own heart transformation. So, he used this situation with Mary and Martha to teach a shocking lesson. We must take care of our own hearts first, especially watching the condition of our heart attitude and relationship with Him. Do we deeply understand and accept His incredible love for us? Do we love Him in return with a passionate, emotional love? Do we yearn to be with Him in the coming kingdom? Are we joyful and delighted with Him and all that He has done and is doing in our lives? Too many great servants of God, even some within the Great Commission movement, have, for the sake of ministry, neglected their own inner world and have ended up with shipwrecked ministries and lives. The spot at His feet is still open. We must not be ashamed or embarrassed to take it and let His Spirit and Word minister to the needs of our own souls so that we have something within to enable us to minister to the souls of others.

Is it worth the time and energy to look within and examine our hearts, a process that can sometimes be confusing, humbling, and even disheartening? Is such work profitable or simply fruitless introspection? Psalm 51:6 says: "Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place (NIV). God is not simply concerned with our external behavior, He deserves, desires, and demands much more—love from the heart, a heart of pure motives, a clear conscience, and sincere faith. Developing such purity, faith, and love requires self-evaluation, an inward look, and a process of heart transformation—a transformation that involves our wills, thoughts, attitudes, values, beliefs, and emotions.

## **Bibliography:**

1. Crabb, Lawrence Jr., *Real Change is Possible if You Are Willing to Start From the Inside Out*, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 1988
2. Crabb, Lawrence Jr., *Understanding People, Deep Longings for Relationships*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1987
3. Elliott, Matthew A., *Faithful Feelings, Rethinking Emotion in the New Testament*, Kregel, Grand Rapids, MI, 2006
4. Elliott, Matthew A., *Feel, The Power of Listening to Your Heart*, Tyndale House, Carol Stream, IL, 2008
5. Roberts, Robert C., *Spiritual Emotions, a Psychology of Christian Virtues*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007
6. Scazzero, Peter, *The Emotionally Healthy Church, A Strategy for Discipleship that Actually Changes Lives*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2003
7. Smith, Edward M., *Healing Life's Hurts through Theophostic Prayer: Let the Light of Christ Set You Free from Lifelong Fears, Shame, False Guilt, and Emotional Pain*, New Creation Publishing, 2005
8. Sweeten, Gary, *Listening for heaven's sake : building healthy relationships with God, self, and others*, Equipping Ministries, Intl, 1993
9. Wardle, Terry, *Draw Close to the Fire: Finding God in the Darkness*, Leafwood Publishers, 2004