

Proverbs 4:23

Wisdom for the Holidays: The Heart

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Have you ever had one of those moments where you're listening to a **teaching** or **reading** or watching a **documentary** and something “**clicks**” in your mind? You finally “**get it**” and the way you think has changed? Maybe it's a radical “**paradigm shift**” or just a “**aha moment**.” Something is different.

I had one of moments this fall when I began reading *Shepherding a Child's Heart* by Tedd Tripp. This is a book on **parenting**, but he starts with the **heart**. I'm going to be leading a **Community Group** for parents on [this material](#), so I hope today's sermon will intrigue you to learn more. He **defines** the heart as “the **control center for life**.”¹

Proverbs 4:23 (NIV)

Above all else, guard your heart,
for everything you do flows from it.

Everything we do comes from our heart. They're our control center. Our hearts **determine** our **behavior**. So when I say or do something—what I'm saying and doing are a **reflection** of what's going on **inside** me. Now he applies this to parenting. He argues most books on parenting focus on **behavior-modification** and **not heart-change** but Jesus is not interested in “**good behavior**” without a heart that **loves him**. In fact, pointing to Jesus' **judgment** of the **Pharisees** in **Matthew 15** for caring more about outward behavior than **impure hearts** (Matt 15:1-20), Tripp says:

“A change in behavior that does not stem from a change in heart is not commendable; it is condemnable.” - *Shepherding a Child's Heart* by Tedd Tripp²

We can finally start to behave and **do all the right things**, but if Jesus doesn't have our hearts, it **won't matter in the end**. As I've taken us through Proverbs this summer and fall we've talked a lot about the importance of living life God's way. But if all we do is walk away from these series in Proverbs and think, “I got to **do better**” than we're **actually no better off**. Why is that? It's because...

The heart matters most.

Jesus **condemns** the **Pharisees** and **teachers of the law**—the **most religious people of all**—because they **care more for** their traditions and **hand washing than people**. Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah.

Matthew 15:8-9 (NIV)

8 “These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.

9 They worship me in vain;
their teachings are merely human rules.” (see Isaiah 29:13)

It's **possible** for you and I to have **perfect church attendance**, to have **great behavior**, to always say “**please and thank you**,” to make others feel **respected** and **valued**, to be the **best of parents**, to always **vote the right way**, to look **outwardly fine**, **die** and go straight to **hell** because our hearts are **far from God**. We do want to **love** and **value others**, but it has to come from a heart that's **with God**.

In Proverbs we've talked about marriage, money, the things we say, leadership, parenting, alcohol, and so much more. If we're to **approach** any of those things the **right way**, our **focus** cannot just be on doing the **right thing**, but on **having a right heart**. Trip gives this illustration in his opening chapter.

The children are playing and a fight breaks out over a particular toy. The classic response is "Who had it first?" This response misses heart issues. "Who had it first?" is an issue of justice. Justice operates in the favor of the child who was the quicker draw in getting the toy. If we look at this situation in terms of the heart, the issues change.

Now you have two offenders. Both children are displaying a hardness of heart toward the other. Both are being selfish. Both children are saying, "I don't care about you or your happiness. I am only concerned about myself. I want this toy. My happiness depends on possessing it. I will have it and be happy regardless of what that means to you."

In terms of issues of the heart, you have two sinning children. Two children are preferring themselves before the other. Two children are breaking God's law. Sure, the circumstances are different. One is taking the toy that the other has. The other is keeping the advantage. The circumstances are different, but the heart issue is the same—"I want my happiness, even at your expense."³ - *Shepherding a Child's Heart* by Tedd Trip

With a little **imagination** I'm sure we can all think of **examples** where we **prioritized** our **own happiness** at the **expense of others**. This is an issue of the heart, and if we don't address our hearts, what's going on inside us, **change won't last**. But this isn't easy. In fact, it's **very hard to look honestly at ourselves**.

We all have defective hearts.

Our hearts are the "control center" of our lives. The Bible Project says the heart is where your **physical life**, your **intellect**, your **emotions**, and your **decisions** all come from.⁴ It's the **source of everything you**. But what if a **button** or **lever** isn't working in the **control center**? What if the **wiring** is wrong? What if something in your **mind** or **emotions** is off? That will **effect everything**. We all have something wrong.

Jeremiah 17:9 (NIV)

The heart is deceitful above all things
and beyond cure.
Who can understand it?

Have you ever had **your heart lie** to you? You're at the **store** and you're walking down the **desserts aisle** and you spot a **triple dark-chocolate cheesecake**? You look at it and imagine **how good it is** and how **happy** you'll be once you eat it. Then you remember you're on a **diet** and a **budget**, but your heart tells you you'll be happy so you buy it. You go home, **eat two slices**, feel **sick**, and immediately begin to **condemn yourself** because you **can't lose weight** and this **cycle** has happened before. *That's a defective heart.*

How about **when you're at the office** and you're **working on a project** with a **coworker**? But then you see them **talking** to your **boss** and you **begin to wonder** if they're **gunning** for the **promotion you deserve**. You get **suspicious**, start **alienating** them, the **relationship breaks down**, and you **find out** they **didn't want** the promotion; they just **wanted to help you succeed**. *That's a defective heart.*

What about your **family**? Have you ever **fought** with a **brother** or **sister** or **parent** over something it turns out you **actually agree upon**? Or maybe something that's really **not a big deal** but you **make it a big deal** because you **have to be right**? *That's a defective heart.*

Our hearts are **constantly telling** us that **we're so good we don't need a Savior** but **we're not good enough to stop trying**. It's **exhausting**.

Proverbs 20:9 (NIV)

Who can say, "I have kept my heart pure;
I am clean and without sin"?

Who can say they have a **pure heart**? No one! Who can say they are **clean** and **without sin**? No one (Matt 5). Who can say their heart is fine? No one! I watched a clip from an [interview on Youtube](#) between **George R. R. Martin**, the author of *Game of Thrones*, and **Stephen King**, the best-selling horror author, probably ever. I **don't recommend** either of these authors but I found what George R. R. Martin said about the human heart to be fascinating:

My fantasy series is often compared to Tolkien... Tolkien's view of good and evil is externalized. It comes from Sauron or Morgoth before it and there are Orcs who are absolutely irredeemable. The good people get together and stop the Orcs. Good people are good. I've always been more interested in gray characters... I do think the battle for good and evil is a great subject for fiction but in my view the battle for good and evil is waged within the individual human heart... We're all partly good and partly evil. We make decisions everyday. We may do a good thing on Wednesday and an evil thing on Thursday, or a selfish thing. It's all very complicated.

When I heard him say that it just struck me as **exactly** what the **Bible teaches**. **Humans** do have good inside. We're made in **God's image** and **can do good deeds**, but we all also have **evil inside us**, and its root is a **defective heart**. A world without the possibility of change would be one of **darkness** and **horror** like these authors have created, but there's **good news**, there's **hope**.

The Holy Spirit can change our hearts.

This is a **two-part change**. The first change is that of **salvation** and the second is that of **sanctification**.

Salvation

The first part is that **initial change** from a **heart of wickedness** that rejects God to a heart that **loves God and worships him**. This is only possible if the **Holy Spirit** (God's Spirit) comes and gives us **entirely new hearts**. He has to **renovate** the **control center** of our **lives**.

The **prophet Ezekiel** promises **God's people Israel** as they are **exiles in Babylon** that God is going to deal with their **fundamental problem**, which **lead** to their **exile**, their **sinful hearts**.

Ezekiel 36:25-26 (NIV) 25 I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. 26 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.

Do you see the **connection** between **forgiveness** and **new hearts**? In verse 25 God promises to come and **cleans** his people and **forgive** them. And in verse 26 he is removing the **old stony heart** and giving a new healthy **flesh-heart** to his people. A **heart of stone** comes from **trying to live up to God's standards without God's Spirit** (2 Cor 3). But if the **Holy Spirit** comes and **transforms** our **hearts first**, the new heart enables us to **love** and **obey God**. See the very **next verse** in Ezekiel.

Ezekiel 36:27 (NIV) And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

We receive salvation when the **Holy Spirit** comes and changes our hearts and washes away our sin (salvation). He does this by **setting our hearts on Jesus** and what he has done for us. Jesus was **stabbed** in his **literal heart with a spear** on the **cross** so that your **spiritual heart** can be **made new**. Jesus' **physical heart** was broken but so was his **emotional heart**. Jesus was **forsaken** and **abandoned** by his Father so that we don't have to be. He **didn't feel his Father's love** so **we could have it**.

If you **want** to be **saved** that's a **sign** the Holy Spirit is **working on your heart** to **convict** you of your sins and give you **faith in Christ**. You can receive salvation by repenting and believing in Jesus. That's just the **beginning**. When the Holy Spirit takes up **residence** in our hearts, granting us **salvation**, it **enables** our...

Sanctification

Sanctification is **growing** in **holiness** and **obedience** to God. It's when our lives begin to **look a little less** like our old **defective selves** and a **little more like Jesus**. It's when we start to see **fruit** in our lives even if the **harvest isn't complete**. A heart that **loves** and **worships God** produces a **heart that obeys God**. It's like God comes in and **rewires** the **control-center** of our lives (that's salvation). Sanctification is when we **begin to use** our control-center to **do the things God wants**. We see it in Proverbs.

Proverbs 4:4 (NIV)

Then he taught me, and he said to me,
“Take hold of my words with all your heart;
keep my commands, and you will live.

God changes our hearts—he saves us—and then he **molds** our hearts—he **sanctifies** us. He puts **situations, circumstances, and people** in our lives to **make us more like Christ**. This is a **journey**. It takes **time**. Sometimes we even **fight against** our **sanctification**. Our **old defective hearts rear up** and try to push us **off-course**. C.S. Lewis writes in *Mere Christianity* of how our **old natures** don't want to be changed. Lewis uses the illustration of a toy soldier made of tin.

Imagine turning a tin soldier into a real little man. It would involve turning the tin into flesh. And suppose the tin soldier did not like it. He is not interested in flesh: all he sees is that the tin is being spoiled. He thinks you are killing him. He will do everything he can to prevent you. He will not be made into a man if he can help it. - *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis⁵

Our **selfishness doesn't want to stop being selfish**. Our **resentment** doesn't want to stop being resentment. Our **pride** doesn't want to **stop** being prideful. Our **sin** doesn't want to stop being sin. *God can change our hearts. He can save us and sanctify us, but we have to get involved.*

We work with God's heart change.

We have a **choice** in the matter. We can choose to **work with or against** the change God is working in our hearts. We can **shut down** what the Holy Spirit is doing by **not humbling** ourselves, by **not seeking a relationship with God**, by **fighting against** what God is doing in our lives.

Proverbs 28:14 (NIV)

Blessed is the one who always trembles before God,
but whoever hardens their heart falls into trouble.

Don't harden your heart. There's lots of **ways to work with God's heart change**.

1. By studying God's Word (Prov 2:2, 10; 3:1; 6:21; 7:3; 22:17).

2. By trusting in the Lord (Prov 3:5; 23:17; 28:26).

This requires we **humble ourselves** and **seek a relationship** with him.

3. By guarding what influences our hearts (Prov 4:23; 23:15).

4. By receiving correction (Prov 5:12; 24:32).

5. By being peacemakers (Prov 6:14; 24:2, 17).

6. By guarding who we give our hearts to (Prov 7:25; 23:1, 26; 26:25).

Who you marry, who you love, what you love, by **giving** our hearts **to the Lord**.

7. By seeking God's way and not our own (Prov 18:2; 19:3; 23:19).⁶

The heart matters most. We all have defective hearts. The Holy Spirit can change our hearts. We work with God's heart change.

The heart matters for **parenting**, for **teaching**, for dealing with **coworkers**, for **family members**, and for us **as a church**. When we **see something** that **bothers** us in ourselves or in someone else, our **normal response** is, "**Stop that**" But if we're really going to **address the heart**, we need to **first ask ourselves**, "**What is going on in my heart?**" And **second**, "**Whats going on in their lives and hearts that I can care for?**" It takes **patience**, and **humility**, and **courage**, to **address our own hearts** and to **care for the hearts of others**. May the **Lord change each one of our hearts**.

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above, which includes endnotes and references, or share it through Apple podcasts or Google Play Music. Read the story of our church here.

¹ Tripp, Tedd. *Shepherding a Child's Heart*. Shepherd Press. Kindle Edition. Location 214.

² Tripp, Tedd. Location 229.

³ Tripp, Tedd. Location 240.

⁴ Word Study: Lev - "Heart" The Bible Project. Youtube. Published August 31, 2017. Accessed December 19, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aS4iM6KpPYo>

⁵ Lewis, C. S.. *Mere Christianity* (C.S. Lewis Signature Classics) (pp. 178-179). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

⁶ I've defined wisdom as "God's words and ways" before in the Everyday Wisdom series on Proverbs.