Getting to the Heart

Understanding the Key to Change



Jeremiah 17:10   
I the LORD search the heart and test the mind,   
to give every man according to his ways,   
according to the fruit of his deeds.”

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Over the next few lessons, we are going to develop Biblically the key to human behavior. Understanding this concept helps an individual discern why they do the things they do and helps them to walk more consistently in Christ likeness. Be diligent in your studies, and grow in your understanding of the importance of examining our hearts according to God’s Word.

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Introduction

A family wakes up at six in the morning one January day. As the alarm clocks go off, each member of the family pulls himself out of bed, opens the drapes, and sees everything outside covered by a blanket of fresh white snow.

The husband sees the snow and immediately turns on the TV to reports of slick roads, accidents, and traffic tie-ups. He becomes anxious and irritated. The wife gets up, heads downstairs to the large bay window, and stands for a few moments beholding the beauty of the snow. The two school-aged children went to bed last night knowing that snow was in the forecast, but no one knew how much or if it would stick. They leap out of bed excited to see how deep the snow is and to hear school is cancelled. (It is!) As Dad makes his way outside to scrape the snow off the car, he notices his neighbor shoveling, grumbling, and mumbling about the snow, he is doing the same under his breath.

* *Did you notice how each person in the story responded differently to the same event?*
* *How is it that there are so many different ways we can react to the same situation?*
* *Why is each person reacting the way they are; what is the* ***key*** *to their behavior?*

Answering questions like these is what this study is about. Here’s our first clue to the “why” and “how” we respond as we do: Proverbs 4:23 says, “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.”

Together we are going to learn the **biblical key to human behavior**. Ask yourself: How do you think you would be different if God gave you the key to human behavior—that key piece of information that enables you to understand why people do the things they do. Well, He has, He has given us His Word to help us to find the source of why we do the things we do, He has revealed in His Word that the source of why we do the things that we do is the heart. Our desires, our motivation in life, our behavior, thoughts, speech, and actions all flow from the heart. Proverbs 4:23 is a key verse to memorize in this study because it describes the place that everything in life issues forth. It challenges us with the importance of guarding our hearts, and how we should be vigilance in doing so. God desires our hearts, and He will strengthen our hearts to reproduce His Son in us for His glory. That is so reassuring!

In this study we will discover why we do the things we do, how God views us from the inner man level, and how we can identify areas of our lives that do not please God. Then, with that knowledge, we will be able to please God, by applying Biblical truth practically, learning to walking consistently, by becoming more like Christ from the heart level.

This study is designed to take you to another level of growth, to introduce to you why you respond to life in the way that you do, to discover how to overcome sin, to deal with inner struggles, to deal with being sinned against, to deal with the things that life throws at us, as well as bring you to a better understanding of your inner person. Psalm 119 targets the heart in many ways as well, it helps us to revise our inner logic and the intentions of our hearts. Reading through Psalm 119 as you do this study, purposely looking for places to lay truth against your heart’s thoughts, intentions, and desires, will help immensely. Keep Psalm 119 close by, glean from its different thoughts, intentions, and desires, and make them shaping influences upon your heart as you do this study.

Let’s discover together what is at the heart of the matter in our walk with Christ.

Brad Hilgeman

Lesson 1

Defining the Heart

*The Heart is the Heart of the Matter*

Why do you think each individual in the previous story responded the way they did to the same circumstance?

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“The heart is the real or essential you. All of the ways in which the Bible refers to the inner person (mind, emotions, spirit, soul, will, etc.) are summed up with this one term: *heart.* The heart is the steering wheel of every human being. Everything we do is shaped and controlled by what our hearts desire. That is why the Bible is very clear that God wants our hearts. Only when God has your heart does he have you. As much as we are affected by our broken world and the sins of others against us, our greatest problem is the sin that resides in our hearts.” How People Change, Timothy Lane / Paul David Tripp, New Growth Press

A. Look up **James 4:1-3**. What does this passage say is the source of our behavior?

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B. Look up **Matthew 15:19**. What does this passage say is the source of our behavior?

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C. Look up **Mark 7:20-24**. What does this passage say is the source of our behavior?

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As we compare Matthew 15:19 with James 4:1-3 we notice that the “passions” within are actually *within* the heart, “are at war within you “. The heart is our “control center.” It contains our desires, our motives for doing what we do. James 4:2 speaks of this as inner desires. Desire is simply a fulfilment of a craving. When one desires, the thought of satisfaction gives pleasure and that of non-satisfaction pain. There can be good or bad desires, but every craving has its root within the heart of man.

The heart is our control center. It controls our desires, our motives for doing what we do.

D. Look up **Hebrews 4:12**. What does this passage say about the Word of God and our hearts?

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The Bible tells us *the heart* is what motivates our behavior. At any and every given moment of time, you are acting upon your desires, the intentions of your *heart*. What is in our heart leads to our thoughts as well as our behavior, speech, and actions. The illustration below helps us to understand this concept.

**FOR**

**THOUGHTS**

**BEHAVIOR**

**SPEECH**

**ACTIONS**

**THE HEART IS THE CONTROL CENTER**

Matthew 15:18-19   
*But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander*

Consider the above passage. We may at times say that we did not mean to say something to someone who we have offended. But according to this passage, to believe that we did not mean to say something that we did indeed say, is not true. In other words, our hearts are so self-deceived and constantly changing, we are blinded by our own desires, we don’t even realize that we said it out of a heart that meant it. Therefore, you cannot say that you did not mean to say what you have just said in that cutting manner, that is not true, because what comes out of the mouth, “comes from the heart.” The heart is multilayered, complex, and deceptive, we don’t see ourselves as God sees us, so we go about deceptively sinning. We trivialize or excuse our sin, we make excuse, we sometimes protect our sinfulness. We do not realize, or want to realize, how sin has deceived our hearts. Our behavior, speech, and actions are the outward show of what is in our heart.

*Jerimiah 17:9   
The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?*

The answer to the above verse is that only God can know it, Jeremiah 17:10 “I the LORD search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds.” He is the revealer of the thoughts and intents of the heart (Hebrews 4:12). Our thoughts and our behavior, as well as attitudes, words, tones, and demeanor communicate what's in our heart. The deception of our hearts, “above all things”, should above all things be confessed before God. We may sense that deception but usually God uses others to help us to recognize that deception. Pray for the Spirit to reveal heart deception in you as well, Psalm 139:23-24

Psalm 139:23  
 Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! 24 And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!

When speaking of attitudes, tones, inappropriate thoughts toward something or someone, as well as wrong motives, we are speaking of communicating without using words. We are addressing attitudes of the heart, such as silence, avoidance, disgust, dislike, and other non-communicated *inner* thoughts.

As we have already learned, we communicate (outward) what is already in our heart (inward). Can you think of examples of outward sinful expressions of the heart?

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Oftentimes we do not even realize some of our most obvious habits are, in fact, sins. Here is a list that might help you identify any wrong outward expressions of the heart you may have become accustomed to doing. Have you been guilty of any of the following kinds of things?

Reckless words, Grumbling and complaining.  
Lying, Gossip, Slander.  
Hurtful or destructive words, Harsh or abusive speech.  
Hurtful criticism / Backbiting Spreading rumors.  
Cynical of others motives.  
Angry outbursts,   
Outward sins of the flesh and of the mind, adultery, fornication, lust, greed, bitterness

* This list is by no means comprehensive, so you might add something that is going on in your own heart.

E. Can you think of a time recently when you reacted in one of the above ways? Perhaps there are other ways not listed above that you can think of. Now that you understand such reactions come from the heart, and its motives, write down what was going on in your heart that led to the outward reaction. What did you think to accomplish or fulfill?

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F. Desires of the heart can take many forms. Sometimes they are expressed in uncontrolled desires or passions. If we struggle with uncontrolled desires that cause us to lust after someone, that evil thought in our heart can eventually express itself in outward behavior that is sinful and destructive. Uncontrolled desires express themselves as destructive attitudes of the heart. Our heart attitude about life, any part of life, express themselves in actions. Discontent, anger, hostility, unhappiness, dejection, and a thousand other expressions will follow. A person’s life is an expression of their heart. Attitudes of the heart must be guarded diligently.

Matthew 15:19

For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery,   
sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.

Evil thoughts of any kind are a heart issue. None of us are immune from evil thoughts that are in our hearts and are expressed at different times. The lust to fulfill an uncontrolled, unchecked desire poisons every area of our lives. Remember, the heart is the control center; if we allow our hearts to follow those uncontrolled, unfulfilled, and selfish desires, we will eventually harden our hearts toward repentance. In the end that hardness of heart will lead to death.

James 1:14-15

But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

G. What should be the utmost desire and focus of our hearts? 1 Corinthians 10:31 & 2 Corinthians 5:9

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Our heart’s desire should be to please God as Jesus did, John 8:28, 29. Many times our desires are not this at all! Think about times when you were behaving sinfully, perhaps you were anxious, angry, despairing, fearful, lusting, etc. What did you want during those times, i.e., what was your heart’s desire?

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1 Corinthians 10:31  
So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

* Pleasing God by bringing Him ultimate glory, by becoming like His Son, should be the greatest desire of our heart. Is that your hearts focus?

**Lesson 1 Summary**

We covered a lot of ground in this first lesson. We can benefit from digging into God’s Word and learning important truths. God has much more to say to us about our hearts. As a final recap, fill in the blanks of what we learned in this lesson:

1. The heart is our “\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.” It contains our desires, our motives for doing what we do.

2. Our behavior, speech, and actions are the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ of what is in our heart.

3. Pleasing God by bringing Him \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, by becoming like His Son, should be the greatest \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ of our heart.

*Optional*: Use the space below to jot down any thoughts or questions you have about this lesson. For example: What was most interesting to you in this lesson? How can you see yourself applying what you learned to your life right now and in the years to come?

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Lesson 2

Understanding our Emotions

*Right & Wrong Desires*

* Below is the diagram we saw in Lesson 1. In this Lesson we are going to add another aspect of our behavior: Our Emotions.

**THE HEART IS THE CONTROL CENTER**

**FOR**

**THOUGHTS**

**BEHAVIOR**

**SPEECH**

**ACTIONS**

God makes it clear in his Word that when we have as the goal of our heart to please Him, when we align our thoughts, words, and actions with his commands, something happens as a result. Our emotions begin to take shape in a different way. Our emotions do not easily overwhelm us, but rather the source of our emotions change. For example: joy in the Lord, 1 Peter 1:8,9 takes shape, peace that passes all understanding, Philippians 4:7, takes shape. These become shaping influences upon my heart. Grace abounds, sufficiency in all things abound, and good works abound, 2 Corinthians 9:8. My heart is responding to the divine influence upon my heart, that influence is Grace, and it is reflected in my life. Grace is unmerited favor, but grace is also God’s influence upon the heart. This is a short list of how our emotional life is changed just by changing how our heart is influenced by grace, populated with truth, as well as cultivated in the promises that God gives to every believer.

Let’s look at the following verses together.

A. Look up John 13:12-17. What word does Jesus use to describe the person who does what he commands?

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B. Look up Philippians 4:9. Paul is writing to the Christians at Philippi. This verse has a cause-and-effect quality about it; if you do *this*, then *that*… What is Paul telling the

Philippian Christians to do, and what does he promise the result will be?

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We already know from Lesson 1, that out of our heart flows our thoughts, behavior, speech, and actions. When our heart is in tune with God’s thoughts, and our aim from the heart level is to please him our behavior will change. Our emotional life will become much more stable. He endows us with a sense of joy, satisfaction, peace, blessedness—we might even say *happiness* as we change*.* Grace abounds when we Please God by bringing Him ultimate glory by becoming like His Son. Becoming like Christ, or Christlikeness, brings about a joy, a blessedness, a happiness, and a satisfaction, that no other source of change in one’s life can bring.Our emotions change because our hearts have changed. Believers should gain great confidence and hope in this because God is most glorified when we reproduce His Son in our lives in obedience from the heart level. Let’s add this to our diagram.

**TO PLEASE & GLORIFY GOD BY BECOMING LIKE HIS SON**

**OBEDIENT ACTIONS & SPEECH**

**BLESSED  
 JOY / HAPPINESS SATISFACTION**

**ABOUNDING GRACE**

**HEARTS DESIRE**

**BEHAVIOR**

**EMOTIONS**

* Just as Jesus taught in John 13:17 *If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.* The word blessed can be translated blessed, happy or fortunate. When our hearts are in tune with pleasing God by becoming like His Son, our behavior will change and then our emotions will follow.

**Not All Happiness is Blessed Joy**

For instance:

* Having a loving spouse
* Success
* Money
* Health
* Approval
* Things going your way
* Material things
* Convenience
* Satisfaction
* Fulfillment

This list is certainly not comprehensive, but for illustration purposes let’s think about the ten things that are listed. If our happiness is based on just these things, the sometimes shallowness of our expectations, or the disappointment of our hopefulness will create great disappointment. There is nothing wrong with having a loving spouse, success, money, health, or some of the other things listed. The problem is when our hearts desires are based upon our happiness being determined by them, when happiness is the goal, when happiness, not joy is paramount in our thinking. Joy produces happiness as I will explain later.

If we were to stand on a busy street corner and ask people what they want most in life, we probably would not be surprised by the answers they give. The answers would probably be very similar to those above.None of these answers are necessarily wrong. All of them can really fall under one over-arching word: *Happiness*, but not necessarily blessedness or joy. Happiness is fleeting, joy is eternal. Happiness and joy are not the same. Let me explain.

What the world thinks of as happiness is rooted in this life. It’s temporary. Imagine going out to dinner at the fanciest restaurant in town. The atmosphere is perfect. Your food is perfect, everything about the evening is *perfect*. That’s all great, but the truth is you will be hungry again by tomorrow morning! That’s what this world’s version of happiness is like. When happiness is rooted in what life gives us rather than what the Lord gives us in life we struggle. That is exactly what happened to Adam and Eve. What God gave them was not enough, complete happiness was in the “the good”, “the delight”, and “the desire” of the forbidden fruit, Genesis 3:6. In their hearts they thought that God was withholding the best from them, the thing that would completely satisfy their self-imposed need for happiness. What the Lord gives us in our lives has eternal value and is rooted in internal significance and spiritual satisfaction. The Lord gives us joy that produces happiness, happiness is fleeting, joy is eternal. Adam and Eve lost both happiness and joy because they sought happiness in “something” rather than “Someone”. Joy is found in the Lord, and He is our strength. Nehemiah 8:10. We are happy because of, and for many things, but joy is rooted in a “Person”, not possessions, status or what have you.

We are joyful in our blessedness, because of the Person of God in our lives. We are blessed with all spiritual blessings because of Christ, Ephesians 1:3. If you had nothing you would still be blessed!

The chart emphasizes Pleasing God as our hearts desire. To please God by bringing Him ultimate glory through becoming like His Son. Believers should gain great confidence and hope in this, because God is most glorified when we reproduce His Son in our lives. If a believer has this kind of confidence and hope, they can grow in their understanding of how to handle issues that are present in their lives, they will grow in joy and that joy will produce a happiness in life. Our behavior will change, and our emotions will exude a blessedness, a satisfaction, a happiness about life.

* *So, is it wrong to desire happiness?*

No! God gives many of these things as natural blessings of being alive, like sunshine or green grass or the simple pleasure of delicious dinner at the best restaurant in town. But, God has much more in mind for his children than temporary, fleeting happiness, He gives us joy inexpressible. ***1 Peter 1:8*** *Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory,* Only that kind of joy can be expressed in happiness, satisfaction because of our being blessed. That joy is lasting and eternal.

*Matthew 5:1 Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2 And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: 3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4 “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. 5 “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. 6 “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. 7 “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. 8 “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. 9 “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. 10 “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so* they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Notice the Bible is saying that blessed people are the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, the hungry and thirsty, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted, the slandered. Happiness is not in the circumstances, but joy is in the heart going through the circumstances thus creating happiness. A happy heart is first a joyful heart. There can be a sense of joy in all things knowing your life is in the hands of the Lord. *James 1: James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings. 2 Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*

Our blessedness is in God, God is the source of blessing and that never changes. I may be happy because of something outward; I am blessed and have joy because of my inward relationship with God. I am not always happy, but I am always blessed.

The word *blessed* comes from a Greek word that basically means *happy* or *blissful*. It comes from a root word which means to be *happy*, but not in the usual sense of happiness based on positive circumstances. It’s a John 16:22 kind of joy, “*So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.”* Happiness takes on a very different place in our hearts when we context it with joy. Joy is not temporary because it is in the Lord.

To know Christ is to know blessedness, to experience deeper joy than just happiness, it is a blessedness that causes my heart to hunger and thirst after His righteousness, Matthew 5:6. It is a joy that causes my heart to seek His kingdom purposes for my life, Matthew 6:33, thus having the things that produce happiness, peace, and satisfaction to be a part of my life as I seek His kingdom purposes. That’s the idea behind *blessedness*. But first we have to ask why we have the desire to be happy or fulfilled?

**How do we know when a legitimate desire becomes a sinful lust desire?**

Keep in mind that our inner desires and motivations are all within our heart. We are full of desires that battle within us, passions that war within our hearts. God wants us to connect our desires with His ultimate goal, to glorify Him, and His ultimate purpose, which is to become like His Son. When our goals and desires do not fit within this grid our hearts are leading us astray with its passions and lusts.

These questions can help guide us in knowing when a legitimate desire becomes wrong:

1. Am I willing to sin in order to get what I want?

2. What and where is my focus and purpose in my desires?

3. Do I respond sinfully when I don’t get what I want?

4. Are these godly desires?

5. Would God be honored and pleased with this desire?

This is not a comprehensive list of questions we could ask about our desires, but they are an excellent starting point that fits with the Genesis 3:6 “good”, “delight” and “desire” narrative. Asking these questions can help keep our hearts focused on what God desires, rather than on what we might desire.

C. Look up James 4:1-4. Think about what James is saying and re-state it in your words in the space provided.

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It’s not that wanting things is bad or sinful. There is nothing wrong with wanting something that God would take pleasure in allow us to have in our lives. It’s when we want them too much—when that desire grows into an “*I must have it”* lust that it becomes a sin problem. When we want them too much, when the goal is having them, rather than enjoying them in concert with God’s purpose for those things in our lives, we are resisting God and telling him we know better than him what is best for our lives. And those things we want become what the Bible calls *idols* to us.

In the Old Testament, Israel is constantly lapsing into sin by following after the wicked practices of the pagan nations around them, particularly in worshipping handmade gods and statues instead of the One True God. Even today there are billions of people around the world who light candles and incense, leave little gifts and pray to their handmade gods on a shelf or table.

In our culture we might be tempted to look at that and dismiss it as a strange form of religion, or an ancient and primitive way to worship. *How could anyone worship a statue that they created?* But are we really any different? What if the statue we create just happens to be an immaterial one we cannot touch, like career success, bank accounts, or images on a computer screen, or a way of living, or what people think about us? All of those can become idols in the same way as a handmade material statue is. It is just that, man-made within the heart, but still an idol.

And what about material idols, houses, cars, boats, campers, possessions in general. Things that might communicate status or significance or sense of worth. Having a car or boat or other possession is not inherently sinful, but do you see how it could turn into an idol if we let it? Can you see how both material and immaterial things can become idols?

Theologian John Calvin was right when he said that, by nature, our human hearts are “idol factories.” If God does not intervene and change our hearts to give us new, godly desires, we would do nothing our whole lives but search out new idols to worship, and if we don’t find ones we like, or we get bored with them, we invent and manufacture new ones.

That’s exactly how God diagnoses Israel’s problem to Ezekiel in Ezekiel 14:3 “Son of man, these men have taken their idols into their hearts, and set the stumbling block of their iniquity before their faces. Should I indeed let myself be consulted by them?

“These Men Have Taken Their Idols Into Their Hearts”

“As much as we are affected by our broken world and the sins of others against us, our greatest problem is the sin that resides in our hearts. That is why the message of the gospel is that God transforms our lives by transforming our hearts. Lasting change always comes through the heart. This is one of Scripture’s most thoroughly developed themes, but many of us have missed its profound implications. We need a deeper understanding of Proverbs 4: 23, “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.” How People Change, Paul Tripp, Timothy Lane pg.14,15, New Growth Press

Ask God to help you to change your heart; to change from the heart level before you seek out how to change your thinking or behavior, because the change must first come from the heart. *Psalm 51:10 Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.* This is where change must begin.

By now the warning should be clear for us in this Lesson: When desires become lusts, or “idols of the heart” we are driven by those lusts. And then we become captive to those desires and our lives take on a direction and meaning God never intended. Not only will we reap the consequences of our sin (Gal 6:7), but we also miss out on the blessedness, joy, happiness, and peace the Lord gives as we keep him first in our lives.

We’ll look at “idols of the heart” in more detail in Lesson 3

Lesson 3

Idols of the Heart  
*We are all Worshipers*

In Lesson 2 we were introduced to the idea that idols are not always handmade statues worshipped by “ignorant” people in some far-off country. In our culture idols could be something material, cars, bigger homes, recreational vehicles, cloths, money, possessions.

There are many things that people are tempted to make an idol out of. The idols we secretly worship can be *intangible* as well*.* Our own career success, or the admiration of others, or our endless pursuit of being perfect, a retirement investment portfolio, comfort, control and even significance are all examples of potential intangible idols. Idols can even be a mix of both, like having an expensive vehicle or house to display your economic status. Wearing cloths to be seen or to be fashionable. Making tangible academic efforts in order to secure a certain respect or qualifications that people will admire because of your degrees or credentials. The need for those tangible things for inner approval and regard. Comfort, control, and significance are key factors in identifying immaterial idols. In this Lesson we will explore idols in greater detail.

Has it ever occurred to you that every culture, in every age, all *worship*? Every civilization that has ever existed on the face of the planet has had some kind of god which it worshipped. That’s because God created Man for *worship*. We’re all worshippers.

Originally, we were created to worship the Lord, the One True God. Adam and Eve quickly ruined that opportunity by rebelling against God to worship their own craving there in the Garden of Eden. And so, it goes… Ultimately all of Scripture is God revealing himself to Mankind that we would turn from our idols and our sin and find life worshipping Him. In fact, this was the main theme of Paul’s sermon to the people of Athens in Acts 17. Paul noticed they were so religious and so eager to worship *something* that they had even erected a statute to “the unknown god” in case they missed him! Paul used their idolatry to launch into the message of the Gospel, noting that, “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:22-31).

The Right Object of Our Affections

A. Look up Exodus 20:3. This is one of the Ten Commandments. What does God say?

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B. Look up Mark 12:29-30. What is the command Jesus is teaching in these verses?

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C. Look up Matthew 6:33. What does Jesus command we should seek first? In your own words, what is Jesus telling us?

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The Effects of Idolatry

Everything in life has some related result or consequence. A positive example would be to point out how brushing our teeth regularly results in healthier teeth, which also results in less trips to the dentist. A negative example would be to point out how being distracted while driving could lead to a serious accident. Worshipping idols of the heart may seem harmless, but it definitely has consequences in our lives.

Worshipping idols of the heart may seem harmless,  
 but it definitely has consequences.

A. Look up Psalm 32:10. What are the consequences for the wicked? What are the results of the righteous (the one who trusts in the Lord)?

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B. Look up James 3:16. What does James say are the consequences of jealousy and selfish ambition?

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C. Look up Romans 2:9. What are the consequences for every soul who does evil?

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D. Look up Psalm 32:3-4. What did the writer “keep silent” about? How did that work out for him? What was the result of his choice to keep silent?

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Man was created to worship God with our whole heart, Psalm 111:1. Idols within the heart compete with whole heart worship. Ruling desires of the heart for comfort, control or significance compete with Godward satisfaction and worship. They captivate your thought life, dominate your time, sap your energy, and undermine relationships with God and people. The demands of ruling desires of the heart enslave us, idols enslave, deceive, and constantly badger us for comfort, control and significance. Habits of the heart are the shaping influences that can dominate in such a way, that the effects are life debilitating. Under the habitual taskmaster of heart idolatry life is draining, incapacitating, and distressing. The consequences of heart idolatry are toxic and destructive.

Lesson Summary

When our heart’s focus/goal is right and is reflected in our outward behavior, God brings about a state of blessedness, joy, satisfaction, peace, and happiness. When our heart’s focus/goal is not right and is focused on other desires that we want too much, and we are willing to sin to get them, God removes his peace from us and allows us to experience a state of distress, like he did with Cain in Genesis 4, as he did with those who refused to acknowledge God in Romans 1

**When Our Heart’s Focus/Goal is Right (Righteousness Reigns)**

**TO PLEASE & GLORIFY GOD BY BECOMING LIKE HIS SON**

**OBEDIENT ACTIONS & SPEECH**

**BLESSED  
 JOY / HAPPINESS SATISFACTION**

**ABOUNDING GRACE**

**HEARTS DESIRE**

**BEHAVIOR**

**EMOTIONS**

**When Our Heart’s Focus is Not Right (Sinfulness Reigns)**

**NOT FOCUSED ON PLEASING & GLORIFY GOD BY BECOMING LIKE HIS SON**

**DISOBEDIENT ACTIONS & SPEECH**

**DISTRESS, GUILT, ANXIETY, FEAR DEPRESSION ANGER, DISSATISFACTION**

**HEARTS DESIRE**

**BEHAVIOR**

**EMOTIONS**

Remember, we are all worshipers. God created man to worship. “The Bible alone declares that human beings are worshipers by their very nature and that everything we say and do is shaped by worship. God’s Word alone insists that we are always serving God or some aspect of the creation, and whatever rules our hearts will exercise inescapable influence over our lives and behavior.” …….“My daily behavior is my attempt to get what is important to me in various situations and relationships. My choices and actions always reveal the desires that rule my heart. I never come empty. This is the deepest issue of human experience and a major answer to the question, why do people do the things they do? As James says, we are led away by our own desires James 1:14.” Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands: People in Need of Change Helping People in Need of Change, Paul David Tripp, P&R Publishing

Can you see how devotion to worshiping self has turned into a shaping influence in your life? Can you explain how this works in your life?

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“My daily behavior is my attempt to get what is important to me in various situations and relationships. My choices and actions always reveal the desires that rule my heart. I never come empty. This is the deepest issue of human experience and a major answer to the question, “Why do people do the things they do?” As James says, we are led away by our own desires, James 1:14.” Ibid.

*James 4:1 What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this—that your passions are at war within you? 2 You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. 3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. 4 You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.*

The same passions that are warring against your soul James describes as uncontrolled passions. “*Your passions are at war within you.”* They are unfulfilled desires, “*You desire and do not have”* and they are selfish passions. “*You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.”* James, in bold exclamation, says “*You adulterous people!” H*ere James is addressing the unsettled destructive conflict of the “*war within you,*” the perpetual unfulfilled void brought about by uncontrolled passions, unfulfilled desires, and selfish passions.

This never-ending toiling over and over again within the heart creates a terrible and destructive “war within.” This uneasiness and conflict within the heart actually causes a self-imposed penalty within. Peace is absent, fulfillment is absent because fulfillment is spent “*on your passions,”* and misguided passions are never, ever fulfilled. It is one more look, one more experience with sin, then the need for more looks and more sinful experiences. It is never ending. It escalates until, as James points out, the uncontrolled, unfulfilled, selfish desires end in destruction, quarrels, fights, murder, or death. And this is all self-inflicted!

*James 1:14 But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. 15 Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. 16 Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers.*

Each person who succumbs to his own desire births sin and then that birth is death, self-inflicted death by sin. Anything that you have no right to, that you want more than God, is a test of who you worship. If you worship God, you say no at that point. If your conscience is weak or seared you will worship yourself, saying say yes at that point; and that’s what James says lust wants, because then lust conceives and brings forth sin. And ultimately sin brings forth death. It brings forth the demise of relationships, with God first, with others, and then finally your own spiritual death, even possibly your physical death. We could say that all feelings for anything begins to wane because of total dissatisfaction created by this cycle of desire and passion. James says, “*Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers.”*

Perhaps you have not thought of yourself as being unthankful; however, can you see how deceived we can all become because we search for satisfaction in sin, thinking it will satisfy? Can you see how ingratitude is a strong case against us for not being completely satisfied with what God has provided to satisfy our desires and express our passions? God has not given us passions or desires without the means to biblically express these appetites; in fact, He delights in our expression of these good gifts.

Remember, the heart is the control center, if we allow our hearts to follow those uncontrolled, unfulfilled, and selfish desires, we will eventually sear our conscience and harden our hearts toward repentance. The plague of the inner turmoil of desires boiling over and over again within an unsatisfied, unthankful heart is the scourge of having no peace within. That war within will continue until your desires become God’s desires. Ungratefulness for God’s provisions in life will eventually lead to hardness of heart, which will lead to distancing yourself from your Creator God. What cruel deception! What could be worse!

If you now understand these keys to human behavior that we have been studying in these lessons, try now to answer the following questions.

E. When I am distressed, anxious, guilty, shamed, fearful, depressed, angry, or communicate wrongly, what is that telling me?

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F. And based on the above, what do you suppose is the right way to correct the problem?

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Evaluate yourself, do some inventory and ask what your emotional state is telling you about where your heart is. Just like when you think you’ve made a wrong turn driving, if you think you’ve lost your way you need to pull over and assess your situation.



If you are experiencing troubling emotions in your heart, it could be that you are wanting something (even if it is a good thing), more than you want to please God. Pleasing God is not your central focus, perhaps it is yourself or someone else or even something. The Holy Spirit is being kind to you by letting you experience distress so that you check yourself and your situation and get back on track spiritually.

The key is intentional repentance, deliberately turning back to the Lord. No matter how you feel, take control of the situation by taking control of your desires and emotions. Put on the desire to please him instead of your own desires. Evaluate and assess your life in light of 2 Corinthians 7:10 & 11. (Ask for the Confession & Repentance study) This idea of taking control of the situation is the topic we’ll consider in Lesson 4.

Lesson 4

Actions & Reactions

*Counting it All Joy*

In Lesson 1 we said that the heart is the control center. It contains our desires, our motives for doing what we do. In Lessons 2 and 3 we saw that when our heart’s goal is right and is reflected in our outward behavior, God brings about a state of blessedness, joy, satisfaction, peace, and happiness. And when our heart’s goal is not right and is focused on other desires that we want too much, those are called *idols*. We are, in effect, worshiping our hearts desire, and we are willing to sin in order to fulfill the desire of our heart. We are willing to forsake God’s Word, Godly advice, or counsel, create tension, heartache and accomplish our own will. When we let that happen, we experience the distressing emotional consequences of our choice. In this Lesson we will look at our actions and reactions when things don’t go our way.

Consider the following scenario:

You own your own advertising sales firm, and you are going to make a sales pitch to a major client. If the client likes your idea, they will sign a multi-year contract worth millions of dollars. If not, you go home empty-handed. You want this project really bad.

The meeting is scheduled for noon. It is now ten-till noon, and you are still 20 miles away and haven’t moved in traffic for 20 minutes. You look at your watch constantly, punch the radio buttons, throw your hands up in the air…

You decide to call the client again to let him know you are still stuck in traffic. You reach for your cell phone only to realize the battery is dead because you forgot to charge it last night. In a fit of rage, you throw the phone across the front seat, where it smashes against the passenger door. You just broke your $800 phone.

As the traffic crawls forward, a car comes racing up the right-hand shoulder and tries to cut in front of you. Furious, you try to out-maneuver him as you think, *no you don’t, man! You’re not going to get in front of me! I’ll show you! I’ll get as close to the car in front of me as I can!*

An unwilling and stubborn attitude is definitely a heart issue. Vengeance, arrogance, and pride, posturing, unwillingness to forgive, or an unwillingness to maintain a heart of forgiveness even if the other person does not repent. A positioning of yourself to another’s disadvantage, making life difficult for someone, being troublesome. Our heart attitude will come out just as it has with the man in our story. When we are under some sort of pressure, expected or unexpected, when we are just living life and things happen, our hearts attitude must be constantly examined.

‣ **What is my situation?**

God puts you and me in all kinds of situations every day. In any given situation we either react biblically or sinfully. But we first need to stop and take a reality check, and ask first, what is the situation of the salesman? Summarize his situation. Now ask yourself, *what is my situation?*

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‣ **How am I reacting?**

This question probes our emotions, our behavior. Are you joyful? happy? peaceful? angry?

distressed? arguing? etc.? Very rarely is the answer only one emotion or behavior. Often it is a combination of two or more. List some of the salesman’s reactions. List your reactions to circumstances.

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Anxiety, fighting, quarreling, despair, angry outbursts, etc. are born out of cravings that go unsatisfied. Those unsatisfied desires are what the Bible calls “lusts.” These works of the flesh come from the “lust of the flesh” we have talked about. They come from wants, like a child throwing a tantrum in a toy store when told to put back the toy they found and now “must” have. Your manner of life comes from the heart, which leads us to the next question.

‣ **What rules you? What do you expect/want/demand/crave?**

This question gets to the heart. What is it that has become so important to you that you are willing to sin to get it, or to respond sinfully if you *don’t* get it?

Summarize the salesman’s utmost desire(s) or “idols of the heart”. Now do the same for yourself.

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‣ **Apply God’s Word to the situation and your behavior.**

Bring God into the situation. Looking through eyeglasses helps people see clearly, seeing yourself and your situation through the eyeglasses of God’s Word will bring the right perspective. It should not be a mystery to any believer that God’s Word is the single most important guide in life, that if followed carefully, it will bring prosperity and success. *Josh 1:8 This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.* Here the Bible is speaking about flourishing with the favorable outcome of *good success.* Spiritually speaking we can flourish, and as a result there will be spiritually favorable after-effects, *good success*. Patiently and persistently pursuing truth from God’s Word will produce results. To be *prosperous* and have *good success,* God’s Word must be actively pursued and applied, *so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it.* Ultimately, we are asking, *what truth from God do we know about the situation and about our own response(s) to the situation?*

List below some truths God has revealed in the Bible about the salesman’s situation. What truth is relevant to the salesman at a time like this? (Hint: How do Romans 8:28-29, Philippians 4:19, and Psalm 49:7-20 apply to him and his situation?)

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List what God has revealed in the Bible about the salesman’s response. (Hint: Ephesians 4:29-32, Galatians 5:19-20, Proverbs 14:29 are good starting points.)

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* **How might this apply to you?**

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**Thinking Biblically vs. Functional Atheism**

By now you may already see some of the reasons why it is good to think biblically—that is, looking at every situation and ourselves through the light and truth of God’s Word. List some reasons/benefits in the space below.

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‣ **Practical Atheists?**

Why do we feel anxious, fearful, or distressed in various situations—including a simple traffic jam? The truth is, we often live our lives as practical atheist or as functional atheists—we say we trust the Lord but our reactions to circumstances show quite the opposite! Practical or functional atheism is the idea that a person believes in God, yet they live as though God does not exist in their everyday life. that does not mean that they do not acknowledge God is in their lives, it does mean that they are not acting as though God exists in given moments. They are not technically atheists; however, their profession and life don’t always add up. Decisions are made, emotions are portrayed, beliefs are formed, influences are unchecked, motivations and desires are restricted by personal choice and circumstances not upon God’s Word. God’s Word is in a category of a head nod, acknowledged as God’s Word but not followed as though it was God’s Word. The reality of the person’s life is not in tune with God and His Word but rather only given measured acknowledgement. Not completely disregarded, but not completely adhered to as an authority structure, an overarching part of living, or a decision-making influence. God’s Word has little or no influence in shaping influences, or everyday life.

For some God and His Word has been a dynamic in their lives, but at times it is difficult to see that dynamic in action because circumstances are dictating their response to life, their decisions in life look different than their profession of knowing and following God and His Word. Not all who profess that they know God have disciplined their lives to respond as God would have them. Thinking God’s kind of thoughts fly’s out the window and circumstances, emotions, and attitudes of the heart take control, ruling the heart, creating idols of the heart that cause us to function like a practical or functional atheist.

We forget truths, or more likely, we choose not to believe them. We are too busy being anxious or angry to collect ourselves and remember that the God of the universe is with us, and that he is in control of all things, and whatever he allows in our lives is ultimately for our good, no matter what the present circumstance might seem to say otherwise. We are too horizontally focused, too absorbed in the moment or ourselves to see that our desires are not God’s desires. We Function outside of God’s desires within the realm of comfort, control, significance, self-reliance, or selfish desires. God is there, but not functioning as ruler of our hearts, we have replaced His desires with ours, we have acknowledged God with a wink, a nod, but in our hearts, we are functioning as though He really isn’t present or doesn’t care. Our focus and goals are centered on self where God exists but is functioning in a secondary manner, a controlled manner, in the background when we need Him. God may even be at our beckon or ignored.

We profess to know the God who controls all things for His glory, the God with whom there are no accidents, the God who holds atoms together, the God in whose palm spin all the galaxies of the universe. We profess that this is not an accidental world, and He is not a God who is remote and aloof. Rather, we proclaim that He is actively, intimately, and purposely involved in this world and up to something good. But then we fear, we may curse, and get angry, we live lustfully, we may crowd out holiness from our lives, we may crowd out the voice of God through His Word by turning to everything else. We sometimes become blind to the fact that we are being carried away with life and its twists and turns, with attitudes of the heart that are creating tension in our lives. God’s goals and God’s purpose for us in life dim, we function as our own god not even realizing our functional idolatry. Yes, God is there, but not now, not at this moment, we are deceptively in bondage to ourselves thus becoming our own god. No one wants to admit that their heart has been deceived, Jer 17:9, so much so that we don’t even know it. God wants to free us from ourselves. “His goal is to free us from our slavery to sin, our bondage to self, and our functional idolatry, so that we actually take on His character!” How People Change, Paul Tripp, Timothy Lane pg.15, New Growth Press

* The question, “What has God revealed about you and your situation?” should help draw you back to God and to his Word.
* The question, “What are the controlling motives in my life?” should help you think about where focus is every moment of your life.
* The question, “What desires rule your life and make you do things that are not pleasing to God?”, should cause you to pause and check yourself to see who really has control over your life.

Friend, no one wants to really look within and see what kind of person they really are, no one likes the sin they see in their own lives. It is a constant struggle, it is something we will struggle with for the rest of our lives, but it must be a struggle we maintain a vigilant hard look at daily. It is the daily “putting off” of sin, the “renewing” of the heart/mind and the final “putting on” of the “new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” *Ephesians 4:22 to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, 23 and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, 24 and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.*

According to the following verses, what should be our desires in every circumstance?

1 Corinthians 10:31

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Colossians 3:23.

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2 Corinthians 5:9.

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What should you do now? If you need help on this, consider passages like 1 John 1:9, Ephesians 4:22-24, and Philippians 2:4.

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Putting It All Together

‣ Now that you have had a chance to read through and study about the human heart, idols, cravings, and how God wants us to respond and live, it’s time to apply what you’ve learned. *What about your own situation?*  Write below or use a separate sheet of paper for your answers.

1. What is my situation?

2. How am I responding?

3. What do I want/desire?

4. What has God revealed about my situation?

5. What should I want/desire?

When your Focus/Desires of the heart become more important than God’s focus and desires, this sets you up to sin against God and others in order to fulfill those desires.

Looking at the chart on the left top corner, “MY FOCUS/DESIRES. Here we are reflecting upon what I want, I need, I deserve, I must have. We are asking this because generally and usually we don’t see that we are focused more upon what I want, need, deserve or must have, rather than upon God or others. In a given circumstance we may not be thinking about these dynamics circling around in our hearts because we are deceived, *Jerimiah 17:9.* But if we look at the circumstances, issue, or what have you, we find that our focus is reinforcing what I think, I want, I need, I deserve or must have. This leads to my desires being more important than God’s goal and God’s desires, pleasing self becomes the focus and we don’t even know it.

Looking at the heart below, GODWARD FOCUS/DESIRES. When our focus is to please God by bringing Him ultimate glory by becoming like His Son in our every experience in life, our focus and desires change, our focus and desires are in tune with God’s focus and desires. Then God is pleased and glorified. Take time to discuss this chart with the person you are working with through this study.

