

## PRE-WORK

### UNDERSTANDING THE HEART

#### **Excerpt from *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands***

Read this Excerpt from Chapter 4 of *Instruments in Redeemer's Hands* by Paul Tripp

I grew up in Toledo, Ohio, and our family usually went east for our vacations. But when I was sixteen years old, my dad decided to take our family on the Great Trip West. That year, Dad loaded my mother, my brother Mark, and me into a Ford Falcon and we headed out. Although we were to see many things (Yellowstone, the Rockies, etc.), the highlight of the trip for my father was seeing the Grand Canyon. For Dad, everything else we did was but a prelude to this experience.

As background, I should note that Dad approached vacations as a contract between the family and himself. His part of the bargain was to plan and finance the trip. Our part was to have a good time. Thus whenever he would ask us if we were having fun, the prudent answer was a hearty "yes." Otherwise, he would launch into a well-rehearsed speech about how much money he was spending and how much time he had invested in planning our trip. He would conclude by saying that if he had known we were not going to have fun, we would have stayed home where we could do it for free!

Finally, the "Day of the Grand Canyon" came. Dad had never been more excited—an emotion that was obviously not shared by my mother. He awakened us early and we soon were on our way. When we reached the Grand Canyon, Dad refused to see it at a location that was "all fences and tourist traps." He began to explore, and we ended up driving down a dirt road and then over open ground until we parked 200 feet from the rim.

Mark and I immediately ran for the edge. We pretended to push each other over the rim and sat dangling our feet over the mile-high wall of rock. We threw stone after stone over the edge, oblivious to anyone who might have been hiking and camping below us. It was amazing to witness stones silently disappearing without ever hearing or seeing them hit. We were having a blast, totally unencumbered by fear.

Meanwhile, Mom hadn't even gotten out of the car. She had one foot on the ground, tapping to make sure that the turf was solid. She had visions that the rim would crumble and we would all fall to the bottom of the Canyon with the car on top of us.

My dad knew she was struggling so he had placed himself near the car. But then Mom would say, "Bob, the boys, the boys!" and Dad would run toward us to make sure we were okay. At that point, Mom would get queasy and call him back. In short, I don't think my dad saw much of the canyon that day; he was too busy running back and forth, ensuring that everyone was having fun according to the plan. All of us were in the very same place at the very same moment, interacting with the very same natural phenomenon, but each was of us having a very different experience.

I tell this story because it gets to the heart of what personal ministry is about. Effective personal ministry takes the Kingdom promise of lasting change to the place where it is needed — the heart. In my vacation story, the heart of each member of our family was revealed in our behavior that day. Why did each of us experience such a different day when we were in the same location at the same time? Why did each of us act so differently? The answer goes back to our hearts.

My dad's heart was filled with a desire for his family to have a great time. Everything he said and did was controlled by that desire. Mom's heart was gripped by a powerful fear of heights and her concern for her sons, and this was reflected in her words and actions. Mark and I approached the scene with the fearlessness,

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invincibility, and immaturity of teenage boys. We just wanted to have fun. Each of us brought a different heart to the situation and so our experiences and actions differed. Our hearts directed our behavior.

## WHY DO PEOPLE DO THE THINGS THEY DO?

If you want to be part of what God is doing in the lives of others, you need to understand how God designed human beings to function. Why do people do the things they do?

Why can your toddler be so contrary? Why did your friend get upset in the middle of the conversation? Why is your teenager so angry? Why is Amy swallowed up by depression and despair? Why would a man risk his family for twenty minutes of sexual pleasure? Why do you get angry in traffic? Why is that once-romantic couple now engaged in guerilla warfare? Why is Bill driven in his career? Why is Sue so critical and controlling? Why does George speak so bluntly and unkindly? Why is your daughter afraid of what her friends will think? Why does Pete refuse to talk? Why do people do the things they do? The simplest, most biblical answer is the heart.

Even though the heart is one of the Bible's most dominant themes, there is much confusion about the term. In western culture the term is relegated to the fields of romance (Valentine's Day) and sports ("he plays with a lot of heart"). In the Bible, however, the heart is an essential category. You cannot understand the human being without understanding the heart. So, what does this term describe?

The Bible uses "heart" to describe the inner person. Scripture divides the human being into two parts, the inner and outer being. The outer person is your physical self; the inner person is your spiritual self (Eph. 3:16). The synonym the Bible most often uses for the inner being is the heart. It encompasses all the other terms and functions used to describe the inner person (spirit, soul, mind, emotions, will, etc). These other terms do not describe something different from the heart. Rather, they are aspects of it, parts or functions of the inner person.

The heart is the "real" you. It is the essential core of who you are. Though we put a tremendous amount of emphasis on the outer person, we all recognize that the true person is the person within. For example, when you say that you are getting to know someone, you are not saying that you have a deeper knowledge of his ears or nose! You are talking about the inner person, the heart. You know how the person thinks, what he wants, what makes him happy or sad. You can predict what he is feeling at any given moment. Because the Bible says your heart is the essential you, any ministry of change must target the heart. This perspective is explained in several Scripture passages.

## FRUIT, ROOTS, AND THE HEART

One of the most important word pictures in the New Testament reveals Christ's perspective on how people function. It is Christ's answer to the age-old question, "Why do people do the things they do?"

*No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.* (Luke 6:43-45)

Christ used ordinary physical things to explain unfamiliar truths. Here he likens the way people function to a tree. If you plant apple seeds and they take root, you don't expect to see peaches or oranges growing. You expect apple seeds to become apple trees that produce apples. There is an organic relationship between the roots of the plant and the fruit it produces. Christ is saying that the same is true with people.

In Christ's metaphor, fruit equals behavior. The particular fruit (behavior) this passage discusses is our words. Christ says that our words are literally our heart overflowing. People and situations don't make us say what we say, though we tend to blame them. ("He made me so angry!" "If you had been there, you would have said the same thing!" "These kids simply make me insane!") Rather, this passage says that our words are controlled by our hearts. A tree produces fruit, and our hearts produce behavior. We recognize a tree by the fruit it produces, and, in the same way, the Bible says people are known by their fruit.

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In my early pastoral days we lived in a twin home, with our elderly landlady living in the other side of the house. In exchange for reduced rent, I agreed to do all of the yard work. In the busyness of ministry and family life, it was sometimes hard to find time to mow, rake, or shovel, but I tried to be prompt and faithful. However, no matter how disciplined I tried to be, my work never seemed timely enough for our landlady. To get me to work on her schedule, she would go out and start shoveling or raking, knowing full well that I would rush out and complete the job. I was unaware of how irritated I had become over her manipulation until one afternoon when I heard the leaves rustling outside. I looked out the window to see my landlady, in her housedress and slippers, raking the leaves. In my anger, with my hands on my hips, I said aloud, "If she thinks I'm going to rush out there and rake for her, she's nuts! I'm going to rake on my time or not at all!"

What I didn't realize was that one of my sons had been standing beside me. In a split second, to my horror, I saw him in the front yard, hands on his hips, yelling at my landlady, "My dad says if you think he is going to rush out here and rake for you, you're nuts!" I couldn't believe it. I was mortified. I wanted to back away from my words and rush out to tell my landlady that I had said no such thing—or at least that my son had misunderstood what I'd said. But I had to face the fact that the words *had* come out of me, that I *had* said what I'd meant, and that the words were the fruit of anger I had carried for quite a while. There was an organic connection between my words and my heart. You would not solve my heart problem by removing my son or teaching me to be more judicious with my words (though you would save me a lot of embarrassment!). The problem with my words was directly tied to the problem with my heart, which is where a comprehensive solution needed to be applied. This leads us to the second half of Christ's illustration.

In Christ's example, the roots of the tree equal the heart. They are underground and therefore not as easily seen or understood. But Jesus' point is that a tree has the kind of fruit it does because of the kind of roots it has: we speak and act the way we do because of what is in our hearts.

There may be no more important thing to say about how people function, yet this seems to be hard for us to accept. In many ways we deny this connection and blame people and circumstances for our actions and words. Here Christ calls us to humbly accept responsibility for our behavior. He calls us to humbly admit that relationships and circumstances are only the occasions in which our hearts reveal themselves.

If my heart is the source of my sin problem, then lasting change must always travel through the pathway of my heart. It is not enough to alter my behavior or to change my circumstances. Christ transforms people by radically changing their hearts. If the heart doesn't change, the person's words and behavior may change temporarily because of an external pressure or incentive. But when the pressure or incentive is removed, the changes will disappear.

This is the spiritual truth Christ accused the Pharisees of missing in Matthew 23:25-26: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside will also be clean."

Christ looked at the externalism of the Pharisees and said, "You guys just don't get it. You pride yourselves on your right behavior, yet your hearts are a mess! Start with your hearts and right behavior will follow." To make his point, Christ pushes his illustration to the limit. He says, "Clean the inside of the dish and the outside will also be clean." You can't really do this with your dishes at home—washing the inside of a dirty pan will not automatically clean the outside. Yet this is what Christ is advising; that's how powerful the heart is. Do we really believe what Christ is teaching here?

Many of our attempts to change behavior ignore the heart behind the actions. We threaten ("You don't want to even think about what I will do if you do that again!"), we manipulate ("Would you like a car of your own? All you have to do is . . ."), instill guilt ("I do and do for you and this is the thanks I get?"), raise our voices, and do a host of other things to change behavior, but change never lasts. The moment the outside pressure wanes, the behavior reverts to what it was before. The body always goes where the heart leads.

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## PERSONAL MINISTRY AND FRUIT STAPLING

Christ's word picture helps set the direction for personal ministry, as we can see when we expand and apply it. Let's say I have an apple tree in my backyard. Each year its apples are dry, wrinkled, brown, and pulpy. After several seasons my wife says, "It doesn't make any sense to have this huge tree and never be able to eat any apples. Can't you do something?" One day my wife looks out the window to see me in the yard, carrying branch cutters, an industrial grade staple gun, a ladder, and two bushels of apples.

I climb the ladder, cut off all the pulpy apples, and staple shiny, red apples onto every branch of the tree. From a distance our tree looks like it is full of a beautiful harvest. But if you were my wife, what would you be thinking of me at this moment?

If a tree produces bad apples year after year, there is something drastically wrong with its system, down to its very roots. I won't solve the problem by stapling new apples onto the branches. They also will rot because they are not attached to a life-giving root system. And next spring, I will have the same problem again. I will not see a new crop of healthy apples because my solution has not gone to the heart of the problem. If the tree's roots remain unchanged, it will never produce good apples.

The point is that, in personal ministry, much of what we do to produce growth and change in ourselves and others is little more than "fruit stapling." It attempts to exchange apples for apples without examining the heart, the root behind the behavior. This is the very thing for which Christ criticized the Pharisees. Change that ignores the heart will seldom transform the life. For a while, it may seem like the real thing, but it will prove temporary and cosmetic.

This often happens in personal ministry. From a distance it looks as if the person has really changed. When held accountable the person does and says different things. The husband seems to be gentle and attentive to his wife. The teenager seems to treat his parents with new respect. The depressed person is up and out of the house. The broken relationship seems to have been restored. But the changes don't last and in six weeks or six months, the person is right back where he started. Why? Because the change did not penetrate the heart, so changes in behavior were doomed to be temporary.

This is what happens to the teenager who goes through the teen years fairly well under the careful love, instruction, and oversight of Christian parents, only to go off to college and completely forsake his faith. I would suggest that in most cases he has not forsaken his faith. In reality, his faith was the faith of his parents; he simply lived within its limits while he was still at home. When he went away to school and those restraints were removed, his true heart was revealed. He had not internalized the faith. He had not entrusted himself to Christ in a life-transforming way. He did the "Christian" things he was required to do at home, but his actions did not flow from a heart of worship. In the college culture, he had nothing to anchor him, and the true thoughts and motives of his heart led him away from God. College was not the cause of his problem. It was simply the place where his true heart was revealed. The real problem was that faith never took root in his heart. As a result, his words, choices, and actions did not reveal a heart for God. Good behavior lasted for a while, but it proved to be temporary because it was not rooted in the heart.

Christ's illustration establishes three principles that guide our efforts to serve as God's instruments of change in the lives of others.

1. There is an undeniable root and fruit connection between our heart and our behavior. People and situations do not determine our behavior; they provide the occasion where our behavior reveals our hearts.
2. Lasting change always takes place through the pathway of the heart. Fruit change is the result of root change. Similarly, in Matthew 23, Christ says, "Clean the inside of the cup and dish and the outside will become clean." Any agenda for change must focus on the thoughts and desires of the heart.
3. Therefore, the heart is our target in personal growth and ministry. Our prayer is that God will work heart change in us and use us to produce heart change in others that results in new words, choices, and actions.

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## REFLECTION

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*Q: What does it mean to target the heart when shepherding others?*

*Q: Why do we target the heart when shepherding others?*

*Q: What are some ways we fall into "fruit stapling" ...seeking behavior change as opposed to heart change?*