

Living from Your Heart

Part 1: Your Heart Matters to God

Based on Mark 7:1-8 and 14-23

January 7, 2007

INTRODUCTION → Play part of Dan Fogelberg's song "Along the Road." →

*Joy at the start / Fear in the journey / Joy in the coming home /
A part of the heart gets lost in the learning / Somewhere along the road.
Along the road / Your path may wander / A pilgrim's faith may fail /
Absence makes the heart grow stronger /
Darkness obscures the trail.*

I'm not sure if you remember Dan Fogelberg or if you've ever heard of him, but the song you just heard – "Along the Road" – expressed biblical truth. Your heart matters. Your heart is crucial to your journey through life. And for many of us, somewhere along the road of life, a part of our heart gets lost in the learning. So finding your heart, guarding your heart, and transforming your heart defines and sets the course of our lives.

Of course Dan Fogelberg wasn't the first person to discover the centrality of the heart. According to the Bible, your heart matters to God. The Bible has over a 1,000 references to the heart. For the next six months I invite you to join me on a journey along the road to rediscover our heart, to live from our hearts, and to allow Christ to change our hearts. And as we learn to live from our hearts, I believe and hope and pray that this will create a ripple effect in and through us. You know what happens when someone tosses a rock into a lake? From the center of the rock ripples move outward, creating waves. That's what we're praying for here at TVC: as God changes our hearts, it will ripple outward, creating waves of love and hope in our families, our church, our community and even around the world.

But this ripple-effect, these waves of compassion and hope, this shining of light into the world, must begin in our heart. Let me give you three examples from the Bible: (1) The words of Jesus in this passage (which we'll return to in a moment). (2) Proverbs 27:19- "As water reflects a man, so a man's heart reflects the man." That's a beautiful picture of the heart: when the water is still and calm you can see your own face. It reflects you. In the same way, when you look into your heart, it reflects the inner you. (3) Proverbs 4:23 – "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life." A wellspring is something that keeps flowing and overflowing. It's like the Christmas gift I received. (Demonstrate how the "Zen fountain" works). That's your heart. You can't turn it off or shut it up. You can't plug it or dam it. It just keeps flowing and leaking and running into your life. Your heart is a wellspring that keeps pumping whatever resides in the tank of your life. So guard it carefully.

In the Bible your heart is a rich and complex reality. In our world we often divide people into two camps: there are "heady" people (who think deeply but are also emotionally

repressed) and there are “heart” people (who feel deeply but live unreflective and intellectually shallow lives). The Bible never divides us that way. According to the Bible your heart is the center of everything you do. In the Bible we think with our hearts.¹ We also make decisions with our heart.² We serve God with our bodies and with our heart.³ We believe in Jesus with our heart (see Romans 10:9). And certainly we feel with our heart. In the Bible the heart can be glad, thrilled, thankful, angry, fearful, discouraged, weary, broken in grief, heavy, throb in pain and be filled with remorse.

But as the wellspring of our life, our heart doesn’t just pump out crystal clear water; it also pumps out putrid, dirty water. Notice Jesus’ words in Mark 7:21-23. In other words, where does lust come from? My heart. Where does rage come from? My heart. Where do envy and gossip come from? The heart. Where does deceit or the desire to shade the truth come from? The heart. In another passage Jesus put it this way: “For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.” (Matthew 12:34). Here’s the principle: your heart will reveal what’s inside of you. It can’t help but overflow into real life.

Think of it this way: consider these two glasses of water. One glass contains pure, crystal clear water; the other glass contains impure, putrid water. If I’m carrying the cup of pure water and you bump into me, what gets spilled? Pure water. If I’m carrying the other glass of water and you bump into me, what gets spilled? Dirty water. Jesus said, “For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.” Our heart is always overflowing. Something – our circumstances, our jobs, our health, the people in our life – is continually bumping into my heart and when I get bumped I overflow. So when life bumps us and anger or lust or impatience or anxiety or gossip or pride it’s tempting to blame someone or something else. *Why, if it wasn’t for the politicians my children or my parents or my co-workers or my spouse or my friends or my school or the incompetent management, I wouldn’t have this anger or anxiety or impatience or hatred or disgust. I would be filled with joy and peace and goodness.* No, Jesus said, the bumping revealed what was already in your heart. This is the ultimate reality show: Jesus is the Host and it’s called “You’ve Been Bumped.” Only it’s not a show; it’s called life.

We live in a whole culture bent on blaming others. Yes, people do make mistakes; people are negligent; people hurt and wound us – and all of this must be confronted and dealt with (next week we’ll see Jesus confronting these issues). But let’s begin by taking responsibility for the condition of our own hearts. That’s the only way to let the ripple effect begin to work in us and through us.

How do we live from our heart? How do we rediscover the amazing depth and passion and potential and sin of our hearts? If a part of our heart gets lost along the road of life, how do we get it back? Again, we’re going to explore this for the most of the next six months, but for now let me answer that question with a few more questions.

¹ For instance, after Jesus was born his mother Mary “pondered these things in her heart” (Luke 2:20).

² “Setting the heart” is a biblical phrase that means to decide (see I Chronicles 22:19).

³ “Whatever you do, work with all your heart” (see Colossians 3:23).

(1) Why should I engage my heart? For many of us, the human heart looks like frightening, unknown territory so it's much easier to choose the opposite of living from our hearts: denial. Denial is the path of heart disengagement. Denial is the path of unreality. The writer Thomas Merton once said, "There is no greater disaster in the spiritual life than to be immersed in unreality."⁴ We like unreality. Unreality keeps our hearts numb. For most of us, we'd rather live in our addictions than face the wild terrain of our own heart. Numbness feels safe. Better to plod through life, doing our duty for God and others, disengaging our heart, anesthetizing it with addictions and busyness and noise, than to engage our hearts.

God wants to jolt us out of our denial. That's why the Bible has over 1,000 verses that deal with the human heart. Clearly, God wants us to engage with life, grapple with life, weep with life, dance with life, grieve over life and love others through life from a heart-level. Every time we choose the path of unreality or numbness, every time we choose the addictions that numb our heart, we are choosing a path away from God. The Bible is a whole-hearted book that calls us to live life from the depths of our heart.

Jesus wanted us to live on a heart level too. In the Gospel story you heard, Jesus was confronted by a group of religious people – good people, by the way – who thought they could they could engineer an external spirituality of righteousness. The Older Testament was always about a spirituality of the heart, loving God from our heart, trusting God with our heart, seeking God with our heart, turning away from the wickedness in our heart. But somewhere along the road they lost their heart. So when you lose your heart, you always rely on externals: try harder, pray longer, act nicer and live better. That was Jesus' beef with the religious leaders of his day. Read Mark 7. Jesus would say the same thing in another context (see Matthew 23:25-26). True spirituality, authentic faith begins and continues from the inside out. It's about a heart change that begins to have a ripple effect all around us.

As a specific example, let's imagine a family that has a problem. It's a secret problem: their 17 year old daughter is cutting herself. They're not alone: cutting is a growing problem in our heart-disconnected culture. Now the traditional Christian solution might go like this: cutting, embarrassing and scary – so just stop it right now! Unfortunately, cutting and other behavioral issues are often driven by heart-issues like feeling unloved, unheard, sad and lonely. And for this 17 year old daughter, rather than turning to Christ to fill her with his living water, she chooses to turn elsewhere for healing. And the parents, rather than turning to God in brokenness and repentance, try to manage the outward behaviors. It doesn't excuse the sin issue; it just moves it deeper, below the surface, into the regions of the heart. So even if you could stop the behavior, if you don't address the underlying heart issues, the heart will continue to overflow and leak into other destructive behaviors. That's why Jesus kept saying that we have to go after the heart, engage the heart, wrestling with life in a heart level. (See Gospel reading from Mark).

⁴ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, page 3.

(2) What is in your heart? If you've decided to plunge into the heart, the next question is this: what is in your heart? The Bible gives hundreds of examples of different heart conditions:

- Our hearts can be hardened by pride (Exodus 4:21)
- We can hate our brothers or sisters in our heart (Leviticus 19:17)
- We can run after the lusts in our heart (Numbers 15:39)
- We can lose heart (Deuteronomy 1:28)
- We can love God with our whole heart (Deuteronomy 6:5).
- We can have a grudging heart (Deuteronomy 15:10) – so we may perform our Christian duty but our heart is cold and angry and distant.
- Our hearts can wander away from God (Deuteronomy 29:18).
- Our hearts can melt with fear (Joshua 14:18).
- We can harbor resentment in our hearts (Job 36:13).
- My heart can leap for joy (Psalm 28:7).

To borrow from a Capitol One commercial – What's in your heart? Unfortunately, our hearts are complex. I love how the author Walker Percy framed it: “Why is that of all the billions and billions of strange objects in the Cosmos – novas, quasars, pulsars, black holes – you are beyond doubt the strangest? Why is possible to learn more in ten minutes about the Crab Nebula, which is 6,000 light years away, than you presently know about yourself, even though you've been stuck with yourself all your life?⁵” Actually, the Bible would say that God alone knows our own heart. (Which is a good reason to not judge your neighbor's heart – you don't even know your own heart that you've been stuck with all your life; how could you possibly be an expert and a judge on someone else's heart?).

So although we can't know our own hearts, we can ask God to reveal our hearts to us. Listen to this ancient prayer from the Psalms: “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there be any wicked way in my and lead me in your ways” (Psalm 139:23-24). I would highly recommend silence and solitude so you can actually hear what God may be saying to your heart. But as we listen to God, we gradually identify the condition of our heart and we say, “Yes, I don't like it, I'm ashamed or afraid to admit it, but my heart is hard or cold or bitter. Somewhere along the road of life, I've lost a part of my heart.” Perhaps you're like the people Jesus described in Mark 7:1-8 – they scrupulously tended to the outward rules and regulations of faith, but their hearts were far from God. So Jesus said, “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” And then Jesus gives the punch line: “They worship me in vain.” All that time and energy and money and hoopla and hype – and it means squat to God.

So let me ask you once again: What's in your heart this morning? As you traveled down the road of life last year, did your heart become softer or harder? Is it filled with bitterness? Is something in life causing you to lose heart? Have you been following the lusts of your heart rather than the good voice of your heavenly Father? Do you have a grudging heart? You may find a hundred ways to justify your heart condition. So you say, “You're darn right I'm angry or unloving or bitter or negative or unfriendly. You're

⁵ Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos: the Last Self-Help Book*, page 7.

darn right I'm not going to lift a finger to serve God; you're darn right I'm not going to give or sing or love; you're darn right I'm going to lick my wounds – and it's not my fault. It's their/her/his fault!" Remember the words of Jesus: you just got bumped. "Out of the overflow of your heart..." Ultimately, we're responsible for our hearts.

As we struggle with the reality of our hearts, let me close by bringing us back to the Good News of the Gospel. What Christians call the Gospel or the Good News draws us back to this simple reality: we don't walk down the road of life alone. Jesus joins us on the road – or rather we join him. And because he is with us our whole life becomes a lifelong journey of heart transformation.

The best thing you can do for your heart is this: let God change your heart, soften your heart and reignite a fire in your heart. How? "The love of Christ compels us." In other words, there is only one power that is great enough to crack into our hardened and weary hearts: the love and grace of Jesus. (Example from my own life – Romans 8:1-4).

Do you see yourself this way? You are loved. You are forgiven. Your heart has been set free. Romans 5:5.

And the best thing you can do for your brother or sister in Christ is to encourage one another and fight for each other on a heart level. Christian community is the place to deal with life on a heart level. It's the place where it's safe – especially with a small group of people – to deal with my heart. Notice Mark 7:2-4 – community was the place where you clean and wash the outside of your life. So everyone looks pretty. Verse 5- they were surprised and offended that Jesus didn't go along with this program. Christian community – especially in our small groups and small bands of friendship – is the place to deal honestly with the reality of our heart. We don't just deal with the surface. We don't just wash the outside of our cup.

So as you travel down the road of life, some of you this morning may need to allow God to change your heart. Engage your heart. Ask the Holy Spirit to search your heart: Where is your heart this morning? What is the prayer, or the cry from your heart, that the Holy Spirit is placing in you this morning? Is the fire of Christ's burning brightly in your heart this morning?