THREAT: FAILURE TO UNDERSTAND THE LUSTS OF THE HEART (PART 1)

INTRO

- There are three enemies that threaten the believer's growth in holiness: the world, the flesh, and the devil
- This unholy trinity of spiritual enemies wage constant war against the believer's soul
- This triad of external pressures (world), internal corruption (flesh), and spiritual adversaries (the devil) aim to derail a believer's pursuit of holiness
- These enemies form three distinct fronts which war against believers: the social environment, the internal disposition, and the supernatural realm

- The world is comprised of the external system of ungodly values, philosophies, and priorities of a society resisting God's truth
- It is that fallen, social, and moral order that operates independently – and in hostility toward – God
- It normalizes sin, materialism, and compromise through the way the world thinks and operates
- It exerts social pressure to conform to ungodly values

- The flesh is that internal disposition toward self-worship and comfort which aims to satisfy sinful passions and cravings
- It acts from within the believer's own desires and it sabotages spiritual impulses

- The devil is the believer's adversary who accuses them before the Lord and disguises himself as an angel of light
- Along with his demonic cohort, he utilizes deception, lies, accusations, and direct temptations to derail a believer in the quest for godliness and righteousness
- He actively schemes, deceives, accuses, and tempts believers to lead them away from God's truth

Ephesians 2:2-3 ~ in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. 3 Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

- Understanding these enemies is critical because they do not operate in isolation
- They function together, acting as an integrated hostile system to trap the believer
- There is an interconnectedness between these three adversaries in which the devil exploits the corrupted desires of the flesh by utilizing the enticing allurements, philosophies, and pressures of the world
- Recognizing this cooperative strategy helps believers realize that true holiness is not just about avoiding bad environments or suppressing internal thoughts…it requires addressing all three layers of temptation simultaneously

- Thus, in our pursuit of holiness, believers must understand how these enemies operate and what strategies to employ in resisting them

- We begin with the attacks that come from our flesh and its corrupt desires

THE NATURE OF THE FLESH

- The word "flesh" (*sarx*) has a variety of meanings in Scripture

- First, it can be used in general to refer to our earthly existence

  Galatians 2:20 ~ I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me

  Philippians 1:22 ~ But if *I am* to live *on* in the flesh, this *will mean* fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose

- Second, it can refer simply to man's physical being…to our body…to our physicality

  John 1:14 ~ And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us

  1 John 4:2 ~ By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God;

- Third, it can also refer to mankind as a whole

  1 Peter 1:24 ~ For, "ALL FLESH IS LIKE GRASS, AND ALL ITS GLORY LIKE THE FLOWER OF GRASS.

- When "flesh" is used in these ways, it has no evil connotation…it carries the idea of our humanness, our finiteness, our limitedness…the weaknesses associated with life on earth

- Fourth, it refers to human nature as controlled and directed by sin…that "flesh" is unqualifiedly evil…it refers to man's unredeemed humanness…the part of us that is contrary to God…that is in opposition to him
- The sinful propensities that are intertwined with physical weaknesses and pleasures
- Our physical flesh is not intrinsically evil…matter is not inherently evil…sin does not arise from our physical bodies…but our physical flesh is weak….and physical weakness leads to moral weakness
- The very fact that the flesh is weak means that it is open to temptations of various kinds
- Before coming to Christ, all people operate in the sphere of their flesh…i.e. they are dominated by it

  Romans 7:5 ~ For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death.

- When Paul speaks of having been "in the flesh," he is referring to that period when sin exercised dominion
- To be "in the flesh" is to be enveloped in it and controlled by it
- It is equivalent to saying "when we were in sin"
- "in the flesh" describes a person who is able to operate only in the sphere of fallen mankind…an unredeemed, unregenerate person
- Paul is describing the basic direction of our lives (prior to Christ) that is determined and dominated by moral corruption
- We were under the domination of sin's power…when our humanness was being controlled and directed by sinful desires
- Our sinful flesh represents a cauldron of passions seeking to rebel against everything that is righteous

- "Man's nature, so to speak, is a perpetual factory of idols"[1]

[1] John Calvin

- The sinful passions and fleshly desires that raged within us prior to Christ manifested themselves through the "members of our body"…they were the instrument through which our moral, corrupt desires operated
- The members of our body were the organ through which sin showed itself

- Thus, a person who is "in the flesh" is someone who still lives in the realm of the flesh
- Such a person cannot belong to God…believers are not "in the flesh"

Romans 8:5-9 ~ For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. 6 For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, 7 because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able *to do so*, 8 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. 9 However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him

- The flesh and the Spirit are in opposition to each other…so the person who lives "in the flesh" is not a believer…it is someone totally dominated and controlled by their sinful passions prior to coming to Christ

- As believers, we were delivered from being "in the flesh"

- However, believers can still be "of the flesh"…we can at times fall back into fleshly ways
- We are not dominated by the flesh…not controlled by the flesh…not under its power and tyranny anymore
- However, we can still be influenced by the flesh…still affected by the remnant of our unredeemed humanness that will remain until we are glorified
- Although salvation pardons guilt, the remainders or lingering power of indwelling sin stay active in Christians until final glorification
- For believers, the flesh refers to the corrupted Adamic nature and moral weakness that remain inside believers even after spiritual regeneration…it acts like an occupying force or a resident adversary that opposes the new nature given by the Holy Spirit
- It uses deceit, exploits weaknesses, checks good works, and constantly tries to regain control of the heart's motivations

Romans 7:14 ~ For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.

Romans 7:17 ~ So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.

Romans 7:18 ~ For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good *is* not

Romans 7:25 ~ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin

- True, believers are not dominated by the flesh anymore, but the remnants of the flesh still exist which provides a beachhead for sin to launch its attacks
- Paul still finds a remnant of sinfulness in him…he still contends with sinful desires
- This flesh still frustrates our desire to obey God…still tempts us and trips us up…still lingers in our unredeemed humanness
- Our battle with sin is strenuous and life-long because sin still hangs on…it contaminates and frustrates our desire to obey God and live holy

- The flesh actually wages war against us

1 Peter 1:11 ~ Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts, which wage war against the soul.

- "wage war" (*strateugo*) is a military term that means "to carry on a military campaign against someone"
- The figure is not that of hand-to-hand fighting but of a planned military operation against an enemy target for the purpose of destroying it
- The present tense of this verb indicates that this battle never ends for the believer this side of heaven…we are engaged in a constant battle and continual warfare

- The object of this war is our very own soul…our fleshly lusts intend to capture the soul to enslave it and destroy it, making the believer useless for God

- "Thus, the war between flesh and spirit depicted in Scripture is not a war between body and soul but rather a war within ourselves — a war of our desires. We have new life from the Spirit, and our remaining sin, that part of our Adamic heritage that we have not yet fully cast aside, hates this new life (John 3:1–8; Rom. 7:7–25; Eph. 4:17–24). Of course, having trusted in Christ alone, we have been set free from enslavement to sin and enabled to live according to His commandments. Our sinful flesh, however, remains present until we are glorified, and until then it rises up and strives to quench and grieve the Holy Spirit's influence (Eph. 4:30; 1 John 1:8–9)."[2]

THE NATURE OF THE HEART

The Centrality of the Heart in Human Behavior

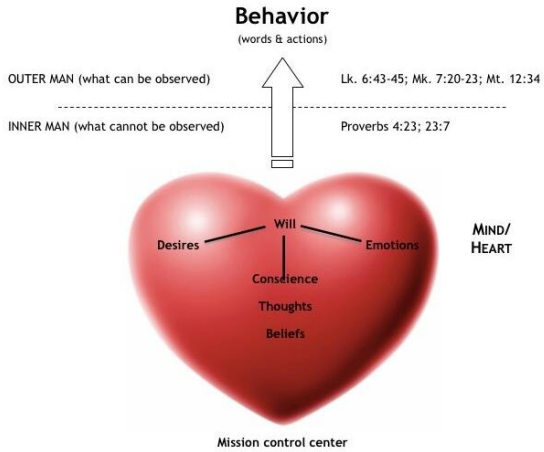
- We all function out of the overflow of the heart…we are all directed by our heart and mind
- We have both an inner man and an outer man…our outward choices and actions flow from the heart
- It is the inner person that makes us who we are…the root always produces the fruit

Proverbs 4:23 ~ Watch over your heart with all diligence, For from it flow the springs of life.

Proverbs 23:7 ~ For as he thinks within himself, so he is. He says to you, "Eat and drink!" But his heart is not with you.

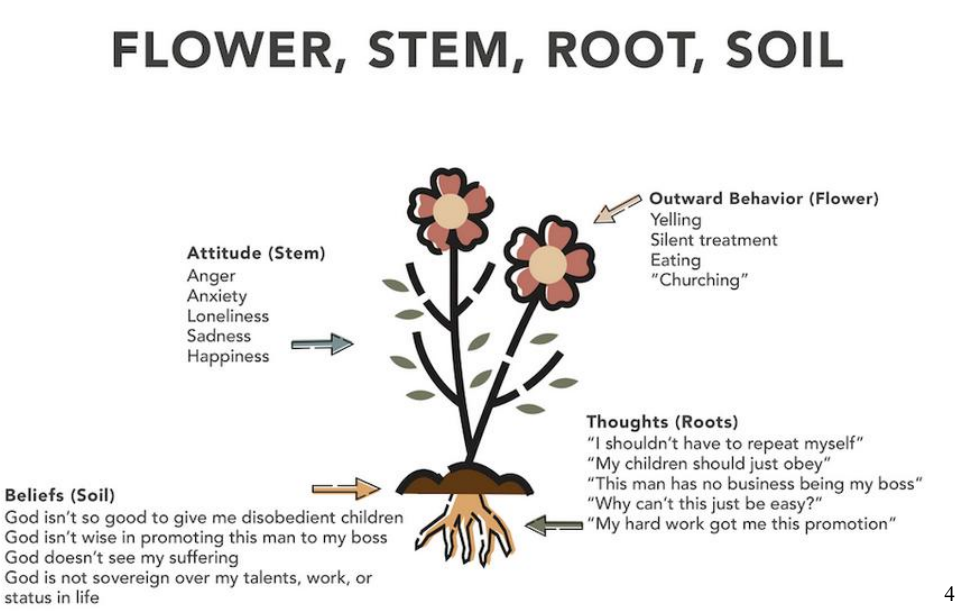
Matthew 12:34 ~ For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.

Matthew 15:17-20 ~ Do you not understand that everything that goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and is eliminated? 18 But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. 19 For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. 20 These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man."



[3]

[2] https://learn.ligonier.org/devotionals/the-flesh
[3] https://thecbcd.org/resources/anthropology-a-theology-of-biblical-counseling



- "The Bible teaches that the heart is the primary 'control center' of life. But popular secular concepts, especially in Western culture, have perpetuated a false view of the heart. For many, it is merely the seat of romance and emotion. Greeting cards and candy boxes in the shape of hearts are common expressions of what is in the heart. However, the biblical idea of the heart has little to do with emotion or romance; instead, it is the dwelling place of your thought life…the heart's chief function is to think, intend, and lust. Therefore, it is important to conclude that the biblical view of the heart is different from society's emotional/romantic view. It involves intentions, lusts, cravings, purposes, plans, and thoughts. Out of the outgrowth of these, your heart then determines your behavior."[5]

  Proverbs 20:5 ~ A plan in the heart of a man is like deep water, But a man of understanding draws it out.

  Mark 7:20-23 ~ And He was saying, "That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. 21 For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, 22 deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. 23 All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man."

  Matthew 5:28 ~ but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

- The heart is "command central"

- "In truth, your heart directs everything you think and do. Whatever is the worship focus of your heart will ultimately determine your entire life. Moreover, your worship focus will determine what your greatest passion is. It will affect all your plans, all your intentions, all your cravings. This, in turn, will affect the choices you make in life…Your thought life reveals what you worship what controls your passions, thereby revealing what you love the most (Matt. 22:37-40). Your passions will consume your thinking, determine your plans, form your intentions, master your cravings, and focus your purpose."[6]

The Condition of the Human Heart

- The Scriptures repeatedly speak about the corruptness of the human heart

[4] https://www.biblicalcounselingresources.org/work/crystals-cczet-w6d5y
[5] John Street, *Passions of the Heart*, 31-32.
[6] Ibid., 32-33.

Genesis 6:5 ~ Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

Proverbs 6:12-14 ~ A worthless person, a wicked man, Is the one who walks with a perverse mouth, 13 Who winks with his eyes, who signals with his feet, Who points with his fingers; 14 Who with perversity in his heart continually devises evil, Who spreads strife.

Ecclesiastes 9:3 ~ This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that there is one fate for all men. Furthermore, the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil and insanity is in their hearts throughout their lives. Afterwards they go to the dead.

Jeremiah 17:9 ~ The heart is more deceitful than all else And is desperately sick; Who can understand it

Jeremiah 49:16 ~ As for the terror of you, The arrogance of your heart has deceived you

Obadiah 3 ~ The arrogance of your heart has deceived you, You who live in the clefts of the rock, In the loftiness of your dwelling place, Who say in your heart, 'Who will bring me down to earth?'

Ephesians 2:3 ~ Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

Colossians 1:21 ~ And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds,

- The heart is not a reliable moral guide

The Relationship Between the Flesh and the Heart

- It is a reciprocal loop…the fallen flesh influences and corrupts the heart's natural desires, turning them toward self-centeredness
- Conversely, a heart that has not been renewed remains enslaved to the impulses of the flesh

- Desire itself is not sin…we strongly desire many things that God has given us to enjoy…including food, water, friendship, and sleep
- We also have a natural desire for sexual expression within marriage
- There can be many noble, good, proper, non-sinful forms of desire

Luke 22:15 ~ And He said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer

1 Timothy 3:1 ~ It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do.

- But as sinful human beings our desires can be distorted in two different ways:
  1. Direction – when we want things we should never want
  2. Degree – when we want good things more than we should want them

- This raises the question: Are our unholy desires sinful?
- Or put another way: Does God hold people guilty for illicit desires even if they don't act on them?

- To answer these questions, we must consider the concept of concupiscence…which refers to "strong desires…disordered inclinations…desires that are wrongly bent in any way, whether they be greedy, lustful, unfairly prejudiced, or selfishly biased"

- The word was used by the translators of the KJV in the following verses:

Romans 7:8 (KJV) ~ But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence. For without the law sin was dead.

1 Thessalonians 4:5 (KJV) ~ Not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God:

Colossians 3:5 (KJV) ~ Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry:

- The translators used the word "concupiscence" to translate the Greek word *epithumia*
- The word originates from the Latin verb *concupisco* which means "to ardently desire"

- Clearly, our thoughts and will are related to sin
- "Desire has an organic and necessary relation to our thoughts. The internal acts of our mind refer to, in the words of the Puritan Thomas Goodwin, "all those reasonings, consultations, purposes, resolutions, intents, ends, desires, and cares of the mind of man, as opposed to our external words and actions." These thoughts, far from being neutral, are judged by God (Heb 4:12). Our thoughts can receive forgiveness (Acts 8:22), be repented of (Isa 55:7), defile us (Matt 15:18–19), and reveal hypocrisy (Isa 29:13). Therefore, thoughts, not just actions, can be sinful. Our thoughts are the acting of our will, and these thoughts, whether sinful or non-sinful, reveal our different types of desires."[7]

- This concept also informs our understanding of temptation…and demonstrates that even desires can be idolatrous at the core

James 1:14-15 ~ But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. 15 Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.

- Some have argued that being lured and enticed by one's own desire is not necessarily sinful…i.e. that is is possible to possess a desire toward some evil inclination without it being sinful
- However, James is clear that the lustful desire is sin…sin produces in us many forms of illicit desire

- "This corrupt principle, a result of original sin, means that the enticements arise from a disordered desire that we are responsible for. This (evil) desire brings forth actings of sin. To suggest that concupiscence (evil desire) is not a sin unless there is consent or a formal acting out of the desire is to make the tenth commandment no commandment at all. However, the tenth commandment includes the illicit desires of the other nine commandments. Thoughts and desires are morally evil when, according to Stephen Charnock, they 'have a bad principle, [lack] a [proper] end, and converse with the object in a wrong manner.'"[8]

Exodus 20:17 ~ You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

- "Concupiscence, understood as inordinate desire, is a form of temptation. Sin is the source of all temptation, but inordinate desire is still a temptation. When it comes to sin, there are several stages one should carefully note. Each leads to heightened aggravations of sinning.
  1. The inclination and propensity toward evil: This involves an act of the will either broadly or narrowly considered. This includes both involuntary and voluntary sins.
  2. Deliberation: We allow the temptation "time" as we think about it.
  3. The resolution to commit the act that we are deliberating.
  4. The act itself.
  5. Enjoying the act.
  6. Boasting about the act.
  7. Deliberately repeating the act.
  8. Eternal judgment, due to unrepentant sin, whereby the sinner exists as ungodly.

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[7] Mark Jones, *Concupiscence: Are Our Unholy Desires Sinful?*
[8] Ibid.

At every stage of sin, we are culpable. But as the stages take place, we aggravate the sin(s) in question. However, not all stages are required for sin to take place. The very inclination toward evil makes us culpable before God."[9]

THE IMPLICATIONS

- In understanding how to battle against the fleshly lusts that wage war against us, we must understand the nature of the heart and its passions
- Should we trust our heart at all as believers?
- How much *do* we trust our own plans, purposes, intentions, and motivations?

- We must understand that the heart's chief sinful characteristic is its capacity for self-deception
- "It is commonplace for the heart to assume that it is better than it really is; it is customary for the heart to believe its own innocence and to presume the goodness of its own motivations. A self-imposed form of blindness is endemic to the heart because of the effect of original sin. The heart of man labors to hide its wicked intentions from being acknowledged and exposed."[10]
- "Well-meaning voices can be heard telling you to 'trust your heart' or 'follow your heart,' words you have likely heard or read since you were a child. The latest societal push toward this dangerous advice asserts that you cannot be truly authentic or genuine *until* you trust your own heart. Trusting your feelings and allowing them to dictate your choices is the dogma of the day. Further, this culture says you must self-identify – because surely your own heart would not mislead you! A self-determined reality is the only trustworthy reality, according to the philosophical trendsetters. This social construction of reality theory declares that you cannot rely on anything external to yourself – you can trust only self. It is not difficult to see how the push for the 'self-defining self' ideology is fueling a culture of self-indulgence and self-gratification. This is the heart turned in on itself, leaving havoc in its wake."[11]

- Scripture makes it clear that self-assessment tends to be intensely self-favoring
- The proud heart has not problem portraying itself in favorable ways

Proverbs 16:2 ~ All the ways of a man are clean in his own sight, But the LORD weighs the motives.

Proverbs 21:2 ~ Every man's way is right in his own eyes, But the LORD weighs the hearts.

- "Pride is the mask that the heart puts on. It keeps *true* self-knowledge hidden – the knowledge that is deceitful, that it is wrong when it wants to appear right. Because it actually believes itself to be truly good, the self-deceived heart tends to be cavalier and crafty about the unsavory aspects of its plans, purposes, intentions, and motivations by highlighting the more respectable and honorable ones."[12]

- Thus, we must let the Lord weigh the heart…rather than allowing the heart's natural inclination to judge itself favorably

- This is what Paul did…he doubted that he could accurately assess his own heart…and he knew that doing so could be misleading and potentially destructive

1 Corinthians 4:4 ~ For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord.

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[9] Ibid.
[10] Street, *Passions of the Heart*, 4.
[11] Ibid., 4. (emphasis original)
[12] Ibid., 5. (emphasis original)

- Paul knew his own evaluation of his ministry was ultimately unreliable
- His own views about himself were as irrelevant as are those of anyone else
- Granted…he did not know of any sin in his life or ministry…he was not aware of any compromise…his conscience was clear
- But even that did not matter because he knew he could be wrong about his heart
- So, his own evaluation of himself, either favorable or unfavorable, made no difference
- What he means is that he does not put any stock in his own evaluation of himself…he distrusted his own heart
- He knew the human heart is full of self-justification and self-righteousness

- Paul also warned Timothy about the dangers of the sinful propensities of his heart

  2 Timothy 2:22 ~ Now flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.

- The writer of Hebrews also warned against the dangers of following the heart

  Hebrews 3:12 ~ Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God.

- The writer of Hebrews is describing a deadly process…unbelief is not inconsequential…it is not insignificant…it is not a small thing
- It starts with unbelief…a little doubt…a little mistrust in the Lord…a little inkling that God is not reliable or faithful or good
- Such unbelief leads to neglect…disregard…inattention to matters of trust
- Eventually that leads to disobedience…and hardening to spiritual things
- And that leads to apostasy…and a falling away from the living God
- Such serious consequences start with the seed of unbelief…and when that seed germinates and matures and becomes full grown…it manifests as full blown apostasy and falling away from the Lord

- "You cannot trust your heart! Its self-diagnostic capability is hopelessly corrupted by the deceitfulness of sin (Prov. 20:9). The righteousness of Christ is the sole standard of what is pure."[13]

- Dangerous assumptions about self-trust lead to major moral failures

- Examples:
  - David's life shows that he trusted his own heart, even though its sinful cravings were hidden under several layers of pride and self-righteous justifications
  - Uzzah's attempt to save the ark from falling off the cart shows that his own good intentions betrayed him (2 Sam 6)

- "How is it that a Christian comes to blindly trust his unreliable heart – even above the authority and perfection of Christ? The person who trusts his heart assumes that he truly *knows* his heart. That leads us to our next question: How well do you know your own heart? Since the character and desires of your heart lead you in every important endeavor in life, this is a critical question. For example, it would be foolish to entrust someone with the care of young children whom you did not know well; it would not be wise to turn your life savings over to someone you did not know; it's not likely that you would eat, drink, or medicate

[13] Ibid., 14.

yourself with substances from an unknown source. So when it comes to issues of the heart, why do you assume you know your heart well enough to entrust it with weighty matters vital to your very life and well-being? This assumption is particularly dangerous, given that Scripture demonstrates that your heart will not provide you with the most reliable information about yourself; it will even lie to you so that you are self-deceived."[14]

- "He is a fool who believes in the goodness of his own heart. He is a fool who believes that the heart is a reliable guide for life. The biblical doctrine of total depravity means that every intention, plan, and purpose of the heart, no matter how good it may seem, is tainted by sin. This does not mean that the heart is as bad as it could be. Every heart has the capacity to become even worse. But it does mean that the heart is known as being unreliable and untrustworthy because of its sinful mind-set against God in every aspect of its desires. Even the heart of the Christian cannot be fully trusted."[15]

- "'Follow your heart' has ended more marriages, mutilated more bodies, destroyed more souls, and ended more lives than the devil could have ever imagined. It is hell's most effective slogan yet."[16]

[14] Ibid., 7. (emphasis original)
[15] Ibid., 16.
[16] Nate Pickowiez