

## THE PLACE OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

### **INTRODUCTION:**

As we go back to our series on Spiritual Growth, I want to review what we have looked at so far. First, we noted that the **process** of change—specifically, spiritual growth—must begin with a **dissatisfaction** of where we are currently at. Some refer to it as a holy dissatisfaction. It is a recognition that we are not what we should be...or can be...or will be. We noted that attitude in Paul in **Phil 3:12-13**: “Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. <sup>13</sup> Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended...”

A number of things could be said about these two verses; I want to point out just two.

1) Paul had not “arrived” spiritually. He was not the finished product; he still needed to grow. We see that in the phrases “Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect” and “Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended...”

2) Paul not only admitted that he hadn’t attained, he also stated that he was following after—pursuing something. What was it? “...that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus.” What does that mean? *Apprehend* means “to lay hold of so as to make one’s own; to seize upon; to take possession of.”

The essence of what Paul is saying is this: --‘I want to grasp that for which Jesus grasped me’

--‘I want to lay hold of—and make for my own—what Jesus has laid hold on me for’

--‘I want to take possession of what Jesus has taken possession of me for’

Is that your attitude? Is that my attitude? If we are saved, Christ “took possession” of us to make us His child. Are we pursuing to become more and more what His child should be like—His Son, Jesus Christ?

Secondly, we looked at the **priority** of spiritual growth in Ephesians, Chapter 4. We noted here several reasons spiritual growth should be a priority in our lives. The first one we looked at was because of the **design** of God’s gifts to the church. In verses 11-12, we see that God gave to the church men—specifically pastors and teachers—for the equipping and training of saints—His children—for the work of the ministry. I mentioned this once before but I believe it bears repeating—my job is **not** to grow the church. Instead, my job is to equip **you**—and to help you grow—so that collectively we all “grow” the church. Although it is somewhat cliché, it is nonetheless true—*Healthy sheep produce lambs!*

In verse 13, we see God has a desire for us **all**—“Till we all...” What is that desire? For us to “come in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God” with the end result that we will become “a perfect man”—meaning mature; grown up (not sinless).

In verse 14, we see growth as a priority because there are **dangers in remaining spiritual children**—“That we henceforth be no more children...” Why is that a bad thing? Because the spiritually immature are unstable in their faith—they bounce up and down like a little boat in rough water—and they can be carried away by “every wind of doctrine”—which is false doctrine because it comes from cunning and deceitful men.

And in verses 15-16, growth should be a priority for us as individuals because when we grow, it **develops growth within the whole**. Just as joints in a body need every part to do its part—the cartilage, ligaments, muscles, and tendons and not just the bones—the church won’t function or grow properly if some part fails to do their part. Every one of us has a role—and each of us needs to perform our role and grow into new roles. Please don’t miss this—roles within the church are not always highly visible. Encouraging someone at church—or making a visitor feel welcome—is just as important as leading songs or playing the piano!

With that as a rather lengthy review, please turn to Proverbs 4:20-27. Although we are going to touch only briefly on some of these verses, our main focus today will be on verse 23. What we see here is an emphasis on the heart as the *place* of spiritual growth.

### **1. What is the heart?**

The English word “heart” appears in our KJV Bible in an astounding 884 verses—724 in the OT and 160 in the NT! So where do I begin—and even more difficult than that, where do I end—in trying to give you a Bible definition of the word “heart?” First, it is pretty safe to say that in most cases it does *not* refer to the organ in your chest comprised of 4 chambers that pumps blood throughout your body. I say “most” because I did not take the time to check each of the 884 verses to see if one of them did or not!

I found it interesting to learn that next to Psalms—which has the word “heart” in 130 verses—Proverbs is the book where “heart” is used the second-most—in 82 verses! Neither one should surprise us, though. Why? Because the majority of the Psalms were written by David—whom God calls “a man after His own heart” (I Sam 13:14)—and wisdom is the theme of Proverbs—which also deals with the heart.

So if “heart” is not referring to the muscular organ in your chest, what is the heart? A concise definition is simply this: “the spiritual part of us where our emotions and desires dwell.” (GotQuestions.Org)

I’ve provided on your sheet a more in-depth quote from **Owen**: “The heart in Scripture is variously used, sometimes for the mind and understanding [Mt 13:15; Rom 1:21], sometimes for the will [Rom 6:17; II Cor 9:7], sometimes for the affections [Lk 24:32; Acts 21:13], sometimes for the conscience [Acts 2:37; Rom 2:15], sometimes for the whole soul [Prov 4:23; Lk 6:45; I Pet 3:4,15]. Generally, it denotes the whole soul of man and all the faculties of it...” Although we’re not going to take the time to look up each of those references, they do show “heart” being used in each of those ways and I would encourage you to look them up later.

The heart refers to the invisible part of you. It is not your **outer** body that can be seen; it is the inner part that only God can see. **I Samuel 16:7** reminds us that “man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.” The real you is not your body; your body is just the “clothing”—the “tent—that your heart—the real you—dwells in. The heart is the real **you** and is what makes you, you!

### Next, let’s consider...**2. What does it mean to keep our heart?**

When we think of the word “keep,” we usually think of *hanging onto something* and not letting go of it. Here it means to “guard” or “protect.” Charles Bridges uses military language and wrote that our heart should be “closely garrisoned” and that “the sentinel be never sleeping on his post.”

A number of us have been in the military and at various times had to perform guard duty. For some of us it was *fire-guard* duty. While at Fort Jackson for BCT in 1979, we slept in barracks that were built during WWII. To impress upon us how important it was to stay awake during fire guard duty, they would give us this solemn warning—‘If the barracks start on fire and you are not out in 15 seconds, you will not be getting out at all!’ Needless to say, we did not sleep when we were on fire-guard!

Not only could we not sleep, there was a certain part of the barracks we were supposed to patrol. For instance, if you had the first floor, you remained on the first floor. If you had the second floor, you remained on the second floor. And while you were on patrol, your eyes and ears were open and you were watching for any sort of danger.

That is the picture here: guard your heart; protect your spiritual well-being; be on the look-out for things that will affect you in the wrong way and of course avoid them. Don’t be overly enamored with the outer man and how you *look*—be concerned about the *real* you, your heart!

### 3. Why should we guard our heart?

#### A. Because it is commanded by God

“Keep/guard thy heart with all diligence” is not a suggestion—it is a **command!** It is not just a good idea—it is our **duty** to guard our heart. And it is a command that we are not to take lightly or do haphazardly—we are to do it will **all diligence**. Jay Adams writes that we are to “guard it above all that we guard;” Charles Bridges states “Above all keeping...keep thine heart.” Notice some similar commands from Proverbs on your sheet:

**Prov 2:2b** “...**apply** thine heart to understanding.”

**Prov 23:19** “Hear thou, my son, and be wise, and **guide** thine heart in the way.”

Proverbs, of course, is not the only place in the Bible where God warns us about guarding our hearts. Jesus Himself tells us to guard our hearts in **Luke 21:34** “And take heed to yourselves, lest at any time **your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting [excesses]**, and drunkenness, and cares of this life, and so that day come upon you unawares.”

There are many others to look at; here is one more. Notice the very solemn warning to all of us from **Hebrews 3:12** “Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an **evil heart of unbelief**, in departing from the living God.” You and I as Christians—“brethren”—can have an evil heart of unbelief and the writer of Hebrews warns us to “Take heed” so as to not let it happen to us!

God commands us to keep our hearts. Do we really need any other reason? God in His goodness tells us *why*, though. What’s the reason—besides that God tells us to? Notice the second half of verse 23: “...for out of it are the issues of life.”

#### B. Because the contents of our heart come out

What our heart is like determines what our life is like for “out of it are the issues of life.” “Issues” means “the place from which any person or thing goes forth, hence a fountain.”

Instead of a fountain, Spurgeon compares the heart to a *reservoir*. What is a reservoir? A reservoir is a natural or artificial lake that is created using a dam to hold back the water. While on vacation in Yosemite National Park last summer, my wife and I hiked around part of the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir that was created by a 430-foot-high dam. What we didn’t realize prior to going there was that this reservoir supplies drinking water to roughly 2.4 million people that live in the San Francisco Bay area—160 miles away!

Let’s think for a moment about how our heart is like a reservoir.

##### i. What is already there comes out

Where does the Hetch Hetchy reservoir get its water from? Primarily from the Tuolumne (too-all-oh-me) River. If you built another dam upstream so that the river could no longer fill up the reservoir, it would still have water in it—for a while. In other words, water would still come out of the dam because of what was already there.

What comes out of our heart? The things that are **already there!** Jesus taught that, didn’t He? Notice Mark 7:21-13.

--v 21 “For from within, out of the **heart of man**” (doesn’t get much plainer than that), proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders,”

--v 22 “Thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness [sensual; sex-driven], an evil eye [envy], blasphemy, pride, foolishness:”

--v 23 “All these evil things come **from within**, and defile the man.”

Not very flattery, is it? Needless to say, if it was literal **water**, it would look bad, smell bad, and taste so bad you wouldn’t want to drink it! That is the picture—straight from the words of Jesus Himself—of what our hearts are like. No wonder **Jeremiah 17:9**—“The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked”—is in the Bible!

How is our heart like a reservoir? First, because what is already there comes out. Second, because...

### ii. What is added in also comes out

I mentioned earlier that the main source of the water for the reservoir comes from a river, but that is not the **only** source. It also gets water from melting snow that runs off the nearby mountains. That water gets mixed in with the rest and again comes out in the stream below and makes its way to San Francisco.

The same is true for our heart, isn't it? What we *add* to our heart eventually comes out. It comes out in our actions...and affections...and attitudes. It comes out in what we think about...and what we talk about...and how we spend our time. Do we guard what we allow into our heart? Do we examine it and think about it and determine whether it will help—or hurt—our heart?

It was interesting to observe the restrictions that were put in place to protect what went into the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir. Of course, there was no dumping allowed; there were no trucks backing up to the edge of the lake and unloading their garbage. No boating was allowed in the reservoir—not even canoes or kayaks—and swimming wasn't allowed either. Why? Because they didn't want to add any impurities to the water.

Are we careful about what we allow to affect our heart? Flip back to Proverbs 4 again; notice verse 24.

--Although it is true that our heart affects our mouth, we are to put away a forward (deceitful) mouth.

Why? Because how we speak will affect our heart. The same can be said for each of these things.

--v 25 Our heart affects our eyes and what we choose to look at—but what we choose to look at also affects our heart

--vss 26-27 Our heart affects where we decide to go—but where we allow ourselves to go also affects our heart. There is a two-way street between what comes out of our heart—and what we allow back into our heart. Are we careful? We should be, shouldn't we?

I'm sure there are others, but one more comparison between our heart and the reservoir is this...

### iii. Trying to clean up what comes out doesn't fix the source

If the people in charge of checking the quality of the water coming from the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir found impurities in it, they would trace it back to the source. It is possible, of course, that impurities were added to the water after it left the reservoir. But if they traced it back to the reservoir itself and found out that that was the **source** of the problem, that is what they would try to fix. To not go to the source and try to clean that up would be foolish.

How many people try to do that with their heart, though? They work on cleaning up their language...and what they look at on the computer...or watch on TV...or what they read...but they never consider their **heart**. I'm stealing what one man wrote and sharing it with you: *The heart of the matter is the matter of the heart.*

Many people will readily admit that they are sinners and realize that their sin will keep them out of heaven. So what do they do? They attempt to **clean up** their lives and "turn over a new leaf." They try to stop drinking...or lying...or looking at porn...or stealing...or swearing...and some of them are actually able to do that.

In fact, they actually look quite nice on the outside. But looking nice on the outside doesn't change their heart! Jesus said as much in **Matthew 23:25-26** "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye **make clean the outside of the cup** and of the platter, **but within** they are full of extortion and excess. <sup>26</sup> Thou blind Pharisee, **cleanse first that which is within** the cup and platter, that the **outside of them may be clean also.**"

What Jesus is saying is that you can be clean on the **outside**—but still have an unclean heart. If you cleanse first that which is **within**—the heart—then the outside will be clean also. So how can we get a clean heart? From Jesus! Jesus is the only one who had a clean, perfect, sinless heart.

**II Cor 5:17** “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.”

The way to have a clean heart is to have a **new** heart—and only God can give us a new heart. How does God do that? First, we need to cease from trying to clean ourselves up and admit that we can't.

Second, we need to believe what God says about Jesus' death on the cross for us. God is satisfied with Jesus shedding His blood to pay for our sin—and is only satisfied with what Jesus did. Are you?

Third, we need to put our faith and trust in Jesus as our substitute and Savior. When we do that, God gives us a new heart. Notice the promise there on your sheet:

**Ezekiel 36:26** “A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh.”

Have you done that? Have you come to God for a new heart? If not, I'd encourage you to do that today!

### ***CONCLUDING THOUGHTS/QUESTIONS:***

1. First and foremost, do you have a new heart? You can't have a clean heart if you don't have a new heart and only Jesus can give you a new heart.

2. Child of God, how serious are you about **guarding** your heart? Have you become lax in that area? Are you indulging in things you know you ought not? Conversely, are you failing to add good things to the reservoir of your heart? If so, don't be surprised when bad comes out!