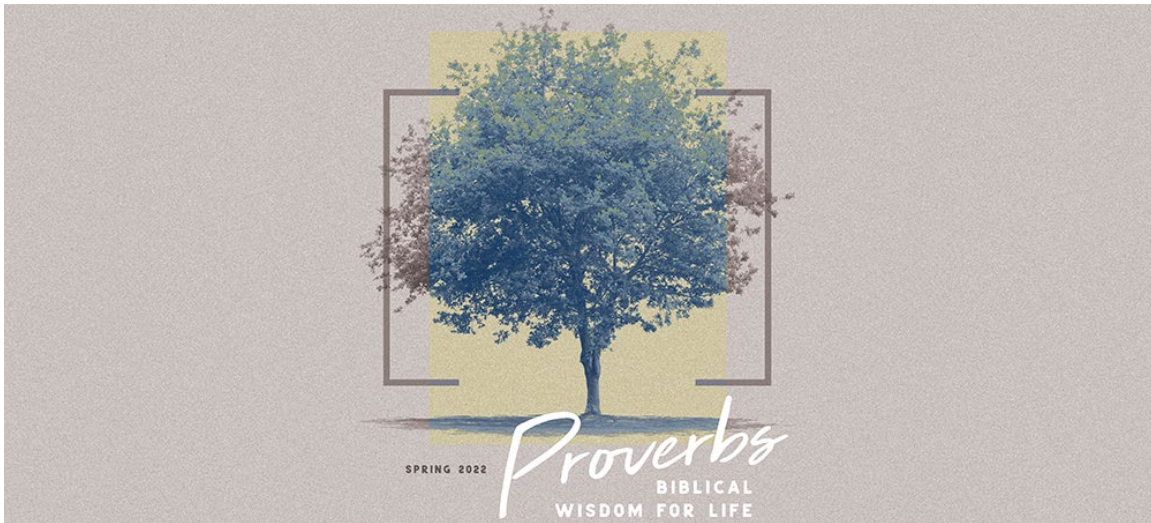


Week 19: Proverbs: The Heart

Hook



Main Point: God sees down to the deepest parts of our innermost being.

Wilhelm Conrad Roentgen discovered the x-ray in 1895, an innovation that allowed scientific photographers to see skeletons without making a single incision. Within months, DIY x-ray kits hit the market. People were x-raying all sorts of things just to see what they looked like on the inside.¹

The polygraph (lie detector) machine was invented in 1921 by a police officer named John Larson in Berkley, California. The police chief in Berkley was motivated to use the machine in efforts to get reliable information during interrogations. However, from its inception, the credibility of the polygraph has been questioned.²

Q: Imagine seeing an x-ray of your hand for the first time. Why might this have captured the imagination of the public in the late 1800s?

Q: Would you describe yourself as a discerning person, someone who can generally determine if someone is being honest or not? What has helped you develop this skill?

Transition: While x-rays are reliable, lie-detector machines are not. Polygraph machines are limited; they use physiological indicators to make to deduce if the subject is being honest or not. However, this test is beatable.³ It may be simple enough to see inside someone's body, but not their motivations, desires or thoughts. Today we will explore the Lord's ability to see our innermost being.

Week 19: Proverbs: The Heart

Book

Main Point: God sees down to the deepest parts of our innermost being.

Proverbs 3:3–8; 4:20–23; 6:20–22; 7:1–4; 22:17; 23:19, 26 [Read]

Talking Point 1: Wisdom and fear of the Lord are matters of the inner person.

Q: How does Proverbs describe what will happen when we focus our hearts on God?

The Bible often talks about the heart – loving God with all our hearts (Deuteronomy 6:4) and hiding His Word in our hearts (Psalm 119:11), telling us the Lord looks at our hearts instead of our external appearance (1 Samuel 6:7), that God can give us pure hearts (Psalm 51:10) and new hearts of flesh instead of stone (Ezekiel 36:26). But to fully understand these verses, we must understand that the ancient Hebrew concept of “the heart” was a little different than our modern one.

Ancient Israelites knew the heart was a life-sustaining organ in the body and that when your heart stopped, you died. But their figurative use of the heart included a broader meaning than ours. We typically think about the heart as the seat of our emotions, the place we experience feelings such as joy, sadness and love. We talk about our intellect, wisdom, knowledge or reasoning coming from the brain. But the ancient Hebrew world had no concept of the brain; they didn’t even have a word for it. They envisioned our emotions, thoughts and reasoning *all* coming from the heart. For this reason when Jesus quoted the *Shema* in the New Testament, He added “with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37), which didn’t appear in the original Hebrew Old Testament. Even though His primary audience was Jewish, Jesus was also speaking to a Roman/Greek culture, which did have a separate concept of the mind. He added “the mind” to give them a fuller picture of what the *Shema* was saying. “The mind” as we understand it is implied in the ancient Hebrew term “the heart,” covering both our thoughts (mind) and emotions (heart).⁴

The Old Testament says that we “know” and “understand” things with our hearts. Proverbs 14:33 tells us that “wisdom rests in the heart of a man of understanding.” Proverbs describes the heart (not the mind) as what you use to discern between truth and falsehood and acquire knowledge (Proverbs 18:15). At the same time, the heart is also where your desires lie (Proverbs 37:4). To the ancient Hebrew mind, the heart is all these things. Which is why Proverbs says, “Keep your hearts with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life” (4:23), or in the NIV, “everything you do flows from it.” The ESV

is a more literal translation, but the NIV gives us the meaning of the imagery – the heart is the source of everything we do, think, and feel.⁵

With this concept of the heart, these Proverbs read a bit differently. When you trust in the Lord with “all your heart” (3:5), that means with everything – not just your feelings but also your intellect. When you write God’s steadfast love and faithfulness on your heart (3:3), that doesn’t just mean warm, fuzzy feelings. It means a decision to remain loyal and faithful in steadfast love and commitment no matter how you feel at the time.

When Proverbs says to keep God’s Word in your heart (4:20; 6:21; 7:3), it doesn’t just mean to let His words touch you emotionally. It means to ponder them, wrestle with them, memorize them, and discuss them. When Proverbs says to give your heart, it means to give all that you are to following God (23:26). Solomon emphasized this by not only using heart, the source of the inner man, but also the eyes and the ears, the external parts of the body (4:20–21). Solomon was exhorting the whole person to receive these proverbs and keep them with his whole heart, with everything in him.⁶

These proverbs tell us that the father’s teaching – God’s wisdom – will lead us, watch over us, and “talk with” us or speak to us (6:22). It will teach us and guide us in the way we should go. This is why we should “bind them on our heart always” (6:21). This phrase and similar ones repeated throughout Proverbs refer to learning and memorizing Scripture so that when we are in a moment of temptation or decision, we will be able to immediately recall God’s Word and know exactly what to do. This is one of the many ways the Old Testament refers to the heart as the place we store up wisdom and knowledge, things we think of more as the brain’s department. To apply our hearts to knowledge (22:17) or direct our hearts in the ways of the proverbs (23:26) is to learn them so well that they sink deeply into our hearts and minds so that knowing them is like knowing how to walk and talk, and living them out is like breathing. We live it out naturally when God’s Word becomes such a deeply intimate part of who we are that we don’t really have to think about it. This is what Proverbs encourages the people of God to do.⁷

Q: How have you experienced God’s Word teaching, guiding, and speaking to you?

Q: What practical steps can you take to “bind [the proverbs] to your heart”?

Proverbs 6:23–29; 10:20; 14:14, 30–33; 15:7; 17:20; 18:15; 23:17; and 28:14 [Read]

Talking Point 2: Fools desire evil in their hearts, but the wise fill their hearts with wisdom.

Q: According to these proverbs, what is the result of desiring evil in your heart?

Q: What is the heart of a fool like, according to these proverbs?

These proverbs compare the heart of the wise to the heart of the foolish, and they tell us we will reap what we sow. “The backslider in heart will be filled with the fruit of his ways” (14:14). If our hearts are “crooked,” we will fall into calamity (17:20). If our hearts are filled with envy, it will make our “bones rot.” But if our hearts are filled with peace, it will give life to our flesh (14:30). God’s commandments and these proverbs and teachings are the way of life that keep us safe from the trappings of “the adulteress” (6:23–24). Remember, “the adulteress” is an image used to talk about the temptation to sin (folly). It doesn’t just mean literally committing adultery; it means the temptation to any sin. When we “desire” the beauty of that sin in our hearts (6:25), we can become “captured” by it. And we will get burned (6:27).

Proverbs 6 describes this in a very practical yet impactful way. “Can a man carry fire next to his chest and his clothes not be burned?” (6:27). Of course not! A modern proverb says something similar – “If you play with fire, you will get burned.” Don’t mess with it. Don’t even try. Just stay away! But how do you do that when the temptations are so strong? You can’t just try harder to have more self-control. It doesn’t work that way. If you want to make real change, you must get to the root of the problem. You have to change what you fill your heart with. That will change your desires (6:25), which will change the “fruit,” the results (14:14). If you fill your heart with God’s Word and pray for the Holy Spirit to change the desires of your heart, your desires will start to change.

The only thing that can really change us is the power of the Holy Spirit. You’ll begin to want what is good instead of what is evil. It’s kind of like changing your eating habits. If you start filling your body with healthy foods, after a while, those greasy and fatty foods won’t taste good to you anymore. You won’t want them. It’s the same when your heart is filled with God’s Spirit. Psalm 37:4 tells us, “Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.” This doesn’t guarantee that following Jesus will get us what we want. It means that when our delight is in the Lord, our desires change. They become what He would desire for us.

The way to combat evil desires is to fill your heart (and mind) with God’s Word and His wisdom. The only way to change our hearts is through the power of the Holy Spirit, by God’s giving us new hearts (Ezekiel 36:26). It’s not something we can just try harder to

do better. It's a heart-change that can only come from Him. If we want a new heart, we must ask God for one (Psalm 51). If we want to be wise, we must ask Him for wisdom (James 1:5). And we must keep asking, every day, over and over again. The Christian life is one of continual repentance and faith. True change only comes from God, but we can choose what to fill our hearts and minds with. We can choose to read our Bibles or we can choose trashy magazines. We can choose to listen to worship music or we can choose explicit lyrics. Paul tells us when we "think on" things that are true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent and praiseworthy (Philippians 4:8), we will have peace. We will have joy. And we will have wisdom. Wisdom taught by the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2).

Q: How have you experienced a change in your desires as you have grown in Christ?

Q: How have you seen a difference in your heart and mind when you fill them with the things of God versus the things of the world?

Proverbs 10:20; 16:2–6; 17:3; 21:2–4; 24:12; and 27:19 [Read]

Talking Point 3: The Lord weighs our hearts.

Q: Think about what it means to "weigh" something. What is the meaning of this metaphor?

In the ancient world, people weighed silver, gold and jewels, and even grain, vegetables and meat to determine their value. This is why Proverbs talks so often about having "just weights and measures." Some businesspeople tried to cheat others at the marketplace with "unjust" scales that made an item seem heavier than it was so they could charge more than it was worth.⁸ When Proverbs says God "weighs" our hearts, it means that He looks into our deepest parts to "measure" us. He doesn't look at the externals the way the world does. He doesn't pay attention to our looks, bank accounts or social media likes. He looks at the heart (1 Samuel 16:7). Only the Lord can truly know whether our faith is real because only He can see past what we say and do to who we really are in our innermost being. Some people may believe they are pure in their own eyes (16:2), but only God really knows our hearts. Not even we know our hearts as well as God does.

This isn't something that should scare us, as if God knows our deepest and darkest secrets, so we "better watch out," like we sing about Santa Claus. God does know the deepest, darkest parts of us, and yet He loves us still. He still calls us His precious children. His value of us is immeasurable; He thinks we are worth giving His only Son for.

God's evaluation of our hearts is not something to fear. Its purpose is refining. Just as silver and gold are purified in the fire, God "tests" our hearts (17:3).⁹ The point of this testing isn't to hurt us, it's to purify us. This is what the wisdom of the proverbs does – it purifies us and makes us more like Jesus, which does improve the value of our lives. Instead of being afraid of God's being able to see who we really are, we should be thankful for a God who knows us deeply and intimately and still loves us, a God we can be completely vulnerable with because we know He only wants to make us more like Jesus.

Q: How can we become more vulnerable and open with God?

Q: In what ways is God trying to change and purify us to make us more like Jesus?

Week 19: Proverbs: The Heart

Took

Main Point: God sees down to the deepest parts of our innermost being.

Have you ever held up a leaf toward the sun? Although it's no x-ray, the sun pierces through the blade of the leaf to illuminate the veins. Scripture tells us in John 8:12 "Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'" Light exposes what's in the darkness. Prayerfully ask the Lord to bring to light and forgive you of sin. Perhaps these are sins that you've kept in the dark; maybe these are sins that you aren't even aware of. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, repent and uproot anything that is counter to Jesus.

CHALLENGES

THINK: Take time to reflect on who you are in your heart and who God has called you to be. Note any contrast. Dwell on what God says in His word about how His people act.

PRAY: For God to weigh your heart, to evaluate who you really are behind your masks and what you say and do. To show you ways you have been hiding from others and even from yourself. To show you ways your heart needs to change. To show you things deep down inside that are not of Him, things that desire this world instead. Really bare it all before the Lord and ask Him to change your heart, to purify your heart, to create in you a clean heart. Consider praying Psalm 51 aloud as a prayer for Him to change your heart.

ACT: Fill Your Heart. Take some time to memorize a few of your favorite proverbs we have read so far, either from this week's lesson or past lessons. Fill your heart with God's wisdom so that the next time you are faced with temptation or a difficult decision, you will know exactly what God wants you to do.

Editing by Adam Heaney

¹ <https://www.wired.com/2008/11/xrays/>

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-22467640>

³ <https://www.livescience.com/33512-pass-lie-detector-polygraph.html>

⁴ Vern S. Poythress, *Inerrancy and the Gospels: A God-Centered Approach to the Challenges of Harmonization* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

⁵ The Bible Project, “Lev/Heart” - <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/lev-heart/>

⁶ Allen P. Ross, “Proverbs,” Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, ed., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Proverbs–Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

⁷ P. W. Skehan, *Studies in Israelite Poetry and Wisdom: Proverbs 5:15–19 and 6:20–24* (Washington: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1971).

⁸ John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2000).

⁹ Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Proverbs of Solomon, 2 Volumes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970).