

The Problem of the Heart

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“For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do” (Romans 7:15). Opinions vary regarding this passage: Was Paul relating his pre-conversion experience—or his continuing struggle as a believer in Christ? Regardless, his anguish stemmed from his failure to obey God, though he wanted to obey so badly. And his victory over sin came not from self-effort, but from Christ: ***“O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!”*** (Romans 7:24-25a).

What genuine follower of Jesus hasn't wanted righteousness, yet repeatedly done something despised? What believer hasn't tearfully asked, “What's wrong with me? Why do I keep doing this?”

There's an answer. The heart of every problem is the problem of the heart. That's where sin resides.

Jeremiah diagnosed the issue in 17:9-10: ***“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it? I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings.”*** David, likewise, prayed: ***“Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting”*** (Psalm 139:23-24). In this psalm, David has marveled at God's omniscience and omnipresence—and then vehemently denounced the wicked. Seemingly surprised by his own hostility, David pleads with God to work deep within, checking whether his heart is right.

Both Jeremiah and David prompt us to view our hearts as the root of our moral struggles. Tragically, we often deal with symptoms rather than roots. When grieved by anger, lust, envy, or another besetting sin, we focus on changing the behavior—but to little avail. Or after a season of freedom, we think we've finally overcome. Then we fall again and are tempted to despair. We

thought we were “past that.” We conclude, “I might as well stop trying.”

Most likely, we never addressed the real cause of our sin. We clipped the leaves off the noxious weed but left the roots. Those roots lie in our hearts, and they are often related to how we view ourselves or God.

Personally, I used to have a serious anger problem. I said unkind words and punched walls. Though I never physically abused others, things I said caused holes in souls. My anger grieved me, and I knew it grieved God. I wanted desperately to change. I prayed, fasted, and studied anger in the Bible. At times, I'd do better for a while, but then I'd fall again.

One morning while asking God to help me overcome my outbursts, I sensed His Spirit ask if I really wanted victory. Of course I did. Then He immediately showed me that my anger was rooted to something deep within, that anger was merely a symptom of something worse. Overcoming my anger would obviously mean taking an honest look at the condition of my heart. I also sensed the Lord reveal that if He showed me the cause then, it would crush me with despair. So I prayed that God would make me able, in time, to handle it.

During the next few months, God reshaped my understanding of His mercy and grace. I began to catch a glimpse of who His Spirit was making me into, that image of Christ which Paul speaks of in Romans 8:29. Then six months later, God showed me the truth about my anger: I was positioning myself as God in my relationships at home and work. I'd mentally assumed control, setting myself up as the deity over these realms. But since, unlike God, I don't actually have sovereignty over others, I was using anger to try to enforce control. When things happened that I didn't like, blowing up made people listen to me—out of fear. Anger seemed to work!

When the Spirit showed me I'd set myself in God's place, essentially putting myself on His throne, I was devastated. But there was also another interesting feeling. As difficult as the truth was to face, it brought deep relief and freedom. Knowing the root of my anger, I saw how foolish it was. Surrendering control to Jesus was obviously the right response—and brought immediate peace and joy. It's much easier living without the delusion that you are, or need to be, in charge.

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My behavior changed immediately. The angry outbursts nearly disappeared. When I did forget and lose control of myself, the path back was short.

Many sin struggles persist because we treat only the symptoms. Many sins flow from some desire or false belief deep in our hearts. Victory comes from replacing the old thinking patterns with the truth of who we are, as new creatures in Christ, and Who the Lord is. It's the renewing of the mind Paul speaks about in Romans 12:2.

If you struggle with some habitual sin, ask the Holy Spirit to reveal the root cause. Ask Him to bring you to the place where you can see the truth. ***“Search me, O God, and know my heart ... see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting”*** (Psalm 139:23-24). ↻

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